



THE
BILLIONAIRE
MAFIA

Claimed
BY THE
MAFIA

AVA GRAY

CLAIMED BY THE MAFIA

THE BILLIONAIRE MAFIA

BOOK THREE

AVA GRAY

Copyright © 2023 by Ava Gray

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

ALSO BY AVA GRAY

C ONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

The Billionaire Mafia Series

[Knocked Up by the Mafia](#)

[Stolen by the Mafia](#)

Alpha Billionaire Series

[Secret Baby with Brother's Best Friend](#)

[Just Pretending](#)

[Loving The One I Should Hate](#)

[Billionaire and the Barista](#)

[Coming Home](#)

[Doctor Daddy](#)

[Baby Surprise](#)

[A Fake Fiancée for Christmas](#)

Hot Mess

Love to Hate You - The Beckett Billionaires

Just Another Chance - The Beckett Billionaires

Valentine's Day Proposal

The Wrong Choice - Difficult Choices

The Right Choice - Difficult Choices

SEALed by a Kiss

The Boss's Unexpected Surprise

Twins for the Playboy

When We Meet Again

The Rules We Break

Secret Baby with my Boss's Brother

Playing with Trouble Series:

Chasing What's Mine

Claiming What's Mine

Protecting What's Mine

Saving What's Mine

The Beckett Billionaires Series:

Love to Hate You

Just Another Chance

Standalone's:

[Ruthless Love](#)

[The Best Friend Affair](#)

PARANORMAL ROMANCE

Maple Lake Shifters Series:

[Omega Vanished](#)

[Omega Exiled](#)

[Omega Coveted](#)

[Omega Bonded](#)

Everton Falls Mated Love Series:

[The Alpha's Mate](#)

[The Wolf's Wild Mate](#)

[Saving His Mate](#)

[Fighting For His Mate](#)

Dragons of Las Vegas Series:

[Thin Ice](#)

[Silver Lining](#)

[A Spark in the Dark](#)

[Fire & Ice](#)

Dragons of Las Vegas Boxed Set (The Complete Series)

Standalone's:

Fiery Kiss

Wild Fate

CONTENTS

Also by Ava Gray

Blurb

1. Emma
 2. Conor
 3. Emma
 4. Conor
 5. Emma
 6. Conor
 7. Emma
 8. Conor
 9. Emma
 10. Conor
 11. Emma
 12. Conor
 13. Emma
 14. Conor
 15. Emma
 16. Conor
 17. Emma
 18. Conor
 19. Emma
 20. Conor
 21. Emma
 22. Conor
 23. Emma
 24. Conor
 25. Epilogue
 26. Excerpt: Stolen by the Mafia
- Subscribe to my Mailing List

BLURB

I'm being forced to pay my father's debt after his death... And my only hope is the nephew of the man who kidnapped me.

I threw my life away to take care of my father. All I was left with were debts I could never repay. When a cruel mobster kidnaps me, it's clear he doesn't have good intentions with me...

But when I lock eyes with a strong, handsome fighter and beg for his help, he actually listens...

His name is Conor O'Shea, and he's wrapped up in my father's debt, too. But he doesn't want to hurt me, and ends up saving me from his horrible uncle.

Suddenly we're forced to be in close proximity and the tension between us grows and grows. One of us will break... But there will be no going back from this.

After all, I'm still so... *innocent*.

***Claimed by the Mafia* is the third full-length novel in The Billionaire Mafia dark romance series. Borrow now if you want more spicy mafia billionaires!**

EMMA

The rumble of the vacuum cleaner fills the air as I run it back and forth over the worn carpet. My dad and I might not live in the nicest apartment or best neighborhood, but I keep our place neat and clean. It's not that I'm a clean freak or anything, but I like making sure it's dusted and swept. Of course, if I didn't do it, it would be a grimy disaster.

"Up!" I yell over the loud motor, and my dad lifts his feet so I can vacuum beneath them and around his recliner. As I move by, I swipe up the two empty beer cans on the side table, tuck them under my arm and send him a stern look. It's not even noon yet and he's already on his third beer.

But he pretends not to notice and instead turns the volume up on the television set. Rolling my eyes, I finish up, turn the vacuum off and throw the cans in the garbage can. My dad hasn't worked in almost a year because of an injury—which healed about eight months ago. But he's milking it and still claiming his back hurts. And maybe it does. Who am I to say? Either way, it's fallen on me to take care of the bills. Glancing down at the slim watch on my wrist, I realize I have to leave in twenty minutes to go to work.

As a cashier down at the corner grocery store, I don't make a lot of money, but I'm stuck in a position where I have to work full time in order to take care of the rent, bills and, of course, my dad. Plus, I don't have enough money right now to go to school and get a degree. Maybe one day. But the good thing is we're pretty much caught up on the utility bills and doctor bills from when my dad hurt his back. Unfortunately, it happened at home and not on the job, so his work isn't covering anything. They simply laid him off

indefinitely without pay.

That's why everything has fallen on me. But I'm used to it. I've been running the household for as long as I can remember.

Bending over, I grab a rag and bottle of cleaner from beneath the kitchen sink then stand upright and swipe a loose strand of blonde hair off my face. I've had to grow up fast because my mom died when I was only five and ever since then, my dad has declined a little more every year.

I can't be bitter about it or blame him because the truth is, he loved Elizabeth Shepherd more than anything. She was, and still is, the love of his life. For years, he would drive over to the cemetery every single day and sit by her grave for an hour or two. It broke my heart when he was still doing it fifteen years after her death. But ever since he hurt his back, he stopped driving.

And he started drinking more and more.

It seems like a little piece of him dies each day and that makes me so very sad. I'm not sure what to do anymore. I've had to grow up fast and take on so much responsibility. I may only be twenty-one years old, but some days I feel forty-one.

I just want to grab my dad's shoulders, shake him out of his funk and tell him it hasn't been easy for me either, growing up without a mother. But then I feel bad and I just try to shoulder more responsibilities around the house. His sadness sometimes turns into a deep depression and then I get so worried about him that I don't want to leave the house.

With a sigh, I spray the cleaner on the wooden table and wipe the dust away. Once the scuffed wood shines, I move over to the old credenza which has sat in this corner for as long as I can remember. It used to belong to my mother and there are still pieces of mail addressed to her in the drawers. My dad can't bear to part with anything that was hers, so I'm the one who had to go through her clothes and personal belongings. And that was when I was ten. For five years, all of her things basically went untouched. And if it weren't for me, they'd still be in the exact same place they were on the day she died.

After wiping down the top and the front of the drawers, I pull one open and do the edge. For whatever reason, I reach in and remove a stack of letters,

looking for the ones addressed to Elizabeth Shepherd. I easily find one and run my finger over my mother's name. I understand why we keep things like this—so we can still feel and remember her—but, at the same time, it's so damn hard.

I'm sad to say my memories of my mother are fleeting. Since I was only five when she passed away after a short and vicious fight with cancer, I don't remember a lot. But there are certain vivid memories of her that I hold dear, locked up in my mind and heart. We had the same blonde hair, the shade of the summer sun my dad used to say, and she had green eyes while I have unusual golden amber eyes. What I'd like to think is the perfect combination of her green ones and my dad's brown ones.

Sometimes I look at old pictures of her and the resemblance between us is striking and a little uncanny. I'm her mini-me in almost every way and I know it must pain my dad. I've caught him looking at me a few times and the depth of sadness in his eyes is overwhelming. He must see her and I hate that my appearance pains him.

There's nothing I can do, though. Except maybe dye my hair and if I did, I know he'd be upset.

As I'm flipping through the mail, I come across a plain white envelope with my dad's name scrawled across the front. Jonathan Shepherd. Curious, I look over where he sits and I'm about to ask him what it is when he cracks open a fresh beer. Clearly, he's getting drunk today and I won't be getting a clear answer, so I decide to look for myself. Sliding a finger beneath the flap, I reach inside and pull out a piece of paper.

My gaze scans down the sheet and I gasp, mouth dropping open in shock. It states that my dad owes Nolan O'Shea \$25,000.

Nolan O'Shea? My heart freezes inside my chest, its beats becoming erratic. Although the infamous Irish mobster is dead—he was shot down well over a year ago—I can't help but be a little frightened. I know there's no way my dad ever had the funds to pay this off which means one thing.

He still owes the O'Shea family a ridiculous amount of money.

My eyes slide shut because that means I'm going to have to find a way to pay

it back to them.

“Dad?” I wander over to his ratty recliner and hold the letter up so he can see it. “What is this?”

He squints his dark eyes then shrugs. “Just some money I owed, but it’s all taken care of so don’t worry about it.”

“What do you mean it’s taken care of? Did you pay it?”

“No, of course not.” He laughs and takes a swig of beer. “But Nolan O’Shea was gunned down a while ago and no one ever came to collect. Don’t worry, we’re in the clear.”

Somehow his lack of concern doesn’t comfort me.

“How did you blow through so much money?” I ask, brow crinkling. “Twenty-five grand is a fortune!”

He hesitates, then sets the TV remote down on the arm of his chair. “I started out with good inventions. I swear, honey.”

“Dad—”

“I wanted to send you to college. Like any good father. And then I hurt my back and figured I could use that money for doctor bills and to live off until I got better and was able to return to work.”

Crossing my arms, I have a feeling I know where this conversation is going and I feel sick. “Well, I didn’t go to college and I’m the one who paid your medical bills.”

“I know, honey, but I got really depressed one night over your mom being gone and...” His voice trails off. “I messed up. I went up to the casino and gambled and drank it all away.”

“Twenty-five thousand dollars?” I ask in disbelief. “Dad, how did you ever expect to be able to pay that kind of money back? And to Nolan O’Shea? You’re lucky he didn’t send one of his goons here to break your legs or something even worse.”

“I know,” he murmurs, looking contrite. “But, hey, the good news is he’s

gone and the debt died with him.”

There is no comfort in his words and I mull over the situation. “No one ever came to collect this money?”

“Never. I swear it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive,” he assures me. “Believe me, honey, no one ever came and I think it’s been long-forgotten.”

Maybe he’s right and I’m worrying over nothing. Still though, that’s what I do—worry. Sometimes my anxiety gets the best of me since I had to basically take on the role of an adult so early. While other kids my age are celebrating turning twenty-one and out drinking and partying, I work forty or more hours a week, make sure the apartment is taken care of, dinner is on the table every night and the bills are paid in a timely manner.

Between that stress and worrying about my dad, it takes up all of my time. I don’t have any friends and I certainly don’t have time to meet anyone special or go on dates. A relationship with a man isn’t going to happen any time soon. Maybe not ever. My plate is full, and, unfortunately, dinner and a movie with someone just isn’t in the cards. Not when I have so much on my plate.

And now this, I think, and press a couple of fingers to my temple. A gambling debt hanging over our heads and owed to an infamous crime family. My head starts to throb.

“You’re worrying,” my dad says and I frown.

“How can I not? It’s so much money and—”

“Nolan O’Shea is dead and has been six feet under for over a year now. Wherever he is now, he doesn’t need money.”

“But what if someone decides to come looking for it? He has family and if they look through his records then we’re in big trouble.”

But my dad waves a hand through the air and dismisses my concerns. “If that were the case, they would’ve come looking a long time ago. Trust me, honey.

Your old man is in the clear.”

I wish I could be as confident as he is, but I’m not. In fact, I start to obsess over the idea that some big, scary-looking enforcer is going to show up on our doorstep and demand immediate payment. It’s a significant sum and one that would take me a long time to pay off.

With a sigh, I finish cleaning up and do my best not to overthink and worry about the situation. Then I grab my purse and press a quick kiss to my dad’s cheek. “I work until seven,” I tell him. “And I’ll bring some groceries home with me. How’s spaghetti and garlic bread sound?”

“Delicious,” he responds. I study him a moment before I leave and try not to be disappointed in the person he’s become. I know he can’t get over losing my mom and that he really does try. In his own way. As I turn, he grabs my hand and squeezes. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, honey.”

I force a smile and say goodbye. When he says things like that, I feel bad. What if one day I do find someone special? Am I supposed to ask if my dad can move in with us? He’s so dependent on me and I can’t leave him alone for longer than a work shift without worrying he’s drinking too much or not eating healthy.

More often than not, it feels like I’m the parent and he’s the child. Stressing about it does nothing, though, except give me anxiety and make my stomach hurt. Doing my best to calm myself, I try to clear my mind and think zen thoughts.

But as I’m walking down the Chicago street, my mind inevitably wanders back to that plain white envelope and the enormous debt inside. I know he claims it’s old and no one ever came to collect, but that doesn’t mean it’s forgotten.

Nolan O’Shea has a big family who he left behind—a wife and kids. I know there are at least a few sons and if they’ve taken over the family business, it’s only a matter of time before someone comes knocking on our door and demands payment.

Crap.

There’s also the awful possibility that my dad didn’t tell me the entire truth.

Maybe someone already came for the money, but he dodged them. I hate to say it, but I wouldn't put it past my father to sneak out the back door if he thought he was in some kind of trouble.

Well, once again, I guess it's up to me to figure things out. To at least be somewhat prepared if someone eventually calls in my dad's debt.

That means I need to save every extra penny I make and work more. I'm not sure I can handle a second job, but I make a mental note to ask my boss if he can provide me with a few more hours each week.

At this point, I'm just going to cross my fingers and send up a silent prayer that my dad is right and I'm worrying over nothing. Best case scenario, his debt to the O'Shea family has been long forgotten.

If only we could be so lucky.

CONOR

My sparring partner, Danny, and I dance around each other in the ring at my club, simply called O'Shea's. I duck a blow and come back up, fists flying and hit him in the jaw. For whatever reason, I'm feeling a little on edge and need to work off the steam building up inside of me.

I have no idea why I'm feeling antsy and a little out of sorts. Maybe it's the humid weather or, more than likely, the fact that I haven't gotten laid in almost four months. Danny spins and kicks out, but I lift my hand and block the move. The club encourages every type of fighting from boxing to mixed martial arts. I've spent years learning all the different moves and techniques, honing my skills to perfection. But lately, something has been off and I can't quite place my finger on it.

Normally, I can lose myself at the club all day. My life revolves around training and fighting, and the Friday night fights held here are packed. Anyone worth his salt wants to participate in the Friday Night Fight at O'Shea's. I'm proud of the members who train here and a lot of them have become good friends of mine.

Since I spend so much time here, I have an apartment upstairs. My brothers have apartments in the city where they go to get away and mine is here, a stone's throw from the action. Liam, my twin, and Rafferty, my younger brother, and I also each have a house at the family compound which is about a thirty minute drive from the city. It's surrounded by a gate and we have private security strolling the grounds and monitoring the security cameras. Ever since things with Matteo Marino escalated, we've learned to be vigilant.

My mother and little sister Finley live in the large main house. After our father died, Liam stepped up and took charge. Raff and I help out and Fin, too sometimes, but the majority of the business has fallen on him. We decided to clean house and Liam let go of all the enforcers and hired a private security team instead.

After looking over the books, it quickly became clear that good ol' Da was involved in some seriously shady shit. Maybe we all knew it on some level, but we chose to ignore it while he was alive. But after getting shot down by Marino scum, Dad's dirty connections were buried with him. Liam has done an excellent job of cutting ties and stopping payments to the corrupt cops and shady enforcers who used to be on the payroll. He even canned Sean Flannigan, the weasley lawyer who our dad kept on retainer and who always was lurking around, watching.

"Where's your better half?" Danny asks and sidesteps my fist.

My swing goes wide and I launch a kick instead, catching Danny in the shin. He grunts and takes a step back. "Liam and Rory went on a much-needed vacation to the mountains," I say.

"You babysitting the little one?"

"Hell no. He's with my mom." Danny gets me hard in the chest and I stifle a pained oomph and swing back. "As much as I love my nephew, what would I do with a baby? Keep him up here beside me in the ring?"

Danny chuckles. "One day, O'Shea, you're gonna fall ass over heels for some young lady and not know what hit you."

"Don't hold your breath, Danny Boy."

"I'm telling you. One day, she's going to appear out of nowhere and TKO, baby."

"You're insane," I grumble. "I am completely immune to that shit. You know me—I keep things light."

"How are your brothers liking married life?" he asks pointedly.

I get what he's trying to say. That if they fell, so can I. But that's not the case.

I'm cut from a different cloth as my brothers. I don't know how to have a relationship with a woman. "Nice try, but it ain't gonna happen," I promise and hit him in the side. "I'm too independent to get tied down."

Danny laughs. "Mark my words, O'Shea. Some pretty young thing is going to make your thick head spin so hard and so fast, you're not going to know what hit you."

"Bullshit," I counter and throw another punch.

We continue sparring for a little while longer then call it quits. Breathing hard and sweating, I grab a towel and swipe it over my face and down my bare chest. It's hot as hell in here since there's no air conditioning. Just fans blowing everywhere and right now they're not cool enough. Grabbing my water bottle, I step right in front of a giant, oscillating fan and gulp down the entire thing.

The wind blows over my face and it feels good. I have an ice bath set up in the corner and I'm about to drop myself in it, right up to my chin, and soak for as long as I can stand it. Danny walks over and we slap hands.

"I gotta take off. The missus left a message and I'm off to grab some steaks."

"What're you celebrating? Being whipped?"

"It's called love, you ignorant, pathetic fool," he taunts. "And let's just say we're celebrating a very personal anniversary that only we know about."

I roll my eyes, not about to ask anymore questions. The less I know about that, the better.

"Have fun in your ice bath with your shriveled dick. I'm getting laid tonight." Danny throws me a triumphant smirk then turns to saunter out.

"Bastard!" I call after him, my tone playful. With a shake of my head, I head straight for the tub in the corner and flip the lid. Ice cubes float on the surface and even though it's hotter than hell, the freezing ice is going to sting a bit. But it's a good sting.

I'm already barefoot and shirtless, so I unwrap the tape from my knuckles, toss it into the nearby trash can and gingerly step into the freezing tub. As I

lower myself down into the icy water, I tense up at the temperature. Settling in, arms resting on the sides, I lean my head back to rest on the ledge.

Going from one extreme to the other is a bit of a shock and I take a moment to adjust, breathing deeply and slowly. I'll spend 15 minutes in my cold water plunge which I always like to do after a strenuous workout. Ice baths reduce inflammation, boost your mood and relieve pain after pushing my body to its limits. That's my experience, anyway.

Letting my eyes shut and my thoughts drift, I inevitably think about my brothers. Their level of happiness right now is stupid. Stupid happy. Ever since Liam fell in love with Rory and Rafferty fell in love with Sofia, it's been like one giant love fest filled with sappy expressions of feelings, public displays of affection and babies. I have one nephew already, Griffin, and another on the way.

I may have no desire to commit and jump into marriage and fatherhood, but those two knuckleheads have embraced it wholeheartedly. And, I can't deny it—they're thriving and I've never seen them happier. Liam used to walk this dark line, but Rory has pulled him back from the edge. And Raff was always the moody and sarcastic one, but Sofia seems to bring out his inner sunshine.

I think my brothers have gone soft.

Right now, Liam and Rory are vacationing somewhere in the mountains near Denver because the moment he found out she'd never seen them or been skiing, he spirited her away. He's such a sucker for her. And Raff isn't much different when it comes to his woman.

The ironic thing is Rory and Sofia are sisters and Marino's. The Marino family was always our family's biggest rival when it came to running shit in this town. The rivalry hails all the way back to Prohibition when our families sided with opposing gangsters.

So the fact that my brothers fell head over heels for Marino women leaves me scratching my head. I joke around and ask if there's a third sister I'm not aware of because they're obviously pretty special to snag Liam and Rafferty who were two eternal bachelors the same as me. Well, they were until those two women came along and knocked them off their feet.

It's great and I'm really happy for them and all, but a part of me is still a little surprised by how fast it all happened. I mean do they have magical pussies or what? Seriously, I wonder sometimes because the way they fawn over their wives makes me think something is happening that I might not be aware of. I made the mistake of asking that vulgar question once and my brothers didn't exactly appreciate it.

I'm slowly growing accustomed to the chill of the water and, I guess, to my brothers not being around as much and constantly with their significant others. As the last bachelor standing, I'm again sitting here and wondering if I'm missing out.

Here's the thing, though—I've never had a serious relationship. In fact, I have a pretty solid rule that I don't fuck the same woman twice. I don't wear my emotions on my sleeve and I don't like to get too involved. Call it self-preservation, if you want. But I've seen friends fall hard and inevitably get their hearts broken. And when I say broken, I mean the lovestruck fools had their hearts ripped out and stomped all over.

No, thank you. I'm quite content with keeping my fighting and fucking fast, hard and free with no longterm commitments.

The MMA approached me and wanted to offer me a contract to fight for them. I declined. When I fight, I fight for myself and no one else. I'm not sure why it's so important to me to maintain that control, but I don't want anyone, much less some corporate giant, telling me how, when and where to fight. Plus, who knows if that shit's rigged? I'm nobody's puppet and I don't care how much money they waved under my nose.

The O'Shea family has enough billions stashed away that money will never be a problem. Even though we're no longer getting a constant stream of income from drugs, gambling and prostitution, we have plenty of other extremely lucrative businesses that are aboveboard. Matteo Marino can have all the underground shit. And maybe since we won't be in constant competition when it comes to that illegal revenue, tensions between our families will ease.

I don't know, though. Even though I love Rory and Sofia like my own sisters, Matteo has disinherited them both, as far as I know. He refuses to

acknowledge or accept their marriages and wants nothing to do with his new son-in-laws and grandkid.

Matteo Marino is a cold, heartless bastard. Not that my father was much better, but we were all sort of hoping that after we buried Da, the rivalry would die with him. No such luck. Truth be told, I think Matteo is even more furious now that he's lost both of his daughters to some good O'Shea men.

Oh, well. As far as I'm concerned, Matteo can go fuck himself. I'm sick of this ancient feud that began a hundred years ago. It's fucking stupid and I don't care enough to keep it going. Why would I? It doesn't affect my life. I'm not some lowly bootlegger running booze for a prominent gangster. The only ones who have my loyalty are my brothers, sister and Ma.

After fifteen minutes, I pull myself up out of the ice bath, shake like a dog and grab a towel to pat myself down. There are a few people working out and a couple of guys sparring in the ring, and I give them a nod as I walk by and head for the stairs that will take me up to my private apartment.

Even after working out and some fighting with Danny, I'm not fully satisfied. Something is missing and I'm not sure if it's because I haven't seen my brothers in over a week or what. Opening the door to my bachelor pad, I step inside and look around. A strange sense of loneliness washes over me and, after slipping on a clean t-shirt and shorts, I walk into the small kitchen and start gathering things to make a protein shake: a handful of greens, scoop of peanut butter, a frozen banana, protein powder, flaxseed oil, chia seeds, unsweetened almond milk and a handful of ice cubes.

After tossing it all into the fancy blender, I hit the button and it roars to life, combining everything into the perfect post-workout smoothie. Liam always used to tease me about how I'm constantly drinking these things, but they're nutritious and replenish my fluid levels. Plus, I could tease him right back about needing some more protein. Even though we're twins, I'm bigger, broader and have more muscles.

Neither Liam nor Rafferty are fighters. They can hold their own, sure, but Liam is the smart one and great with numbers and running the businesses. Rafferty is the broody, handsome one who the girls all drool over. But me? I'm the physical one who can kick someone's ass in less than three seconds.

That's where I shine.

It's weird because normally after a great day of sparring, I'm happier than a pig in shit. I'd settle down in my oversized leather recliner with my protein shake and maybe watch a fight or catch up on a show. Simple stuff like that was always enough. But, for whatever reason, it's not cutting it anymore. I've been feeling a little off the past few weeks—more like unsatisfied, really—and I can't seem to shake it. My normal routine isn't giving me the joy it once did.

The only thing I can chalk it up to is the fact that I haven't hooked up with anyone in a while and my poor, lonely dick is screaming for some attention.

Is it because I see how happy Liam and Rafferty are with their women? Am I missing out?

With a scoff, I drop down in my recliner and turn to one of the twenty sports channels on my television. Thinking those thoughts only leads to dangerous territory and I immediately shut them down. I am perfectly content right where I am. I've got my club, plenty of money, my smoothie and my TV. What the hell else do I need? Other than a willing woman down on her knees and sucking my—

The vibrating of my phone snaps me back to the present and I give my head a shake. Beside me, the air conditioning unit in the window kicks on and a cold breeze hits my arm as I reach over and swipe my phone off the side table.

It's Sully, one of the few and original enforcers that we decided to keep around. He's a good man, loyal and trustworthy.

"Hi Sully," I say. "Everything okay?" Since Liam is out of town and unable to be reached by cell because he's currently surrounded by mountains which equals limited cell service, I'm apparently the one in charge. Scary thought, but I'll roll with it.

"We have a big problem, Conor," he states right off the bat.

I sit up straighter. "What's wrong?"

"Word on the street is that your uncle is in town from Ireland and he's not happy."

“Desmond?” I frown and wonder if it’s true. Ever since my dad died, a lot of rumors have started circulating that just have no truth to them. “Has anyone actually seen him?”

Desmond O’Shea was always a hothead and he left for Ireland five years ago to handle our family interests there. He and my father, Nolan, used to run this town together, but they decided things needed his attention back in Dublin. I don’t know my Uncle Desmond well, but from what I do remember, he was a cruel man who liked to flaunt his power over others.

“The intel comes from a very reliable source,” Sully informs me. “Desmond claims he’s going to take over and return things to how they were before Nolan died.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen,” I say confidently. There’s no fucking way my uncle can just reappear and strongarm us into letting him run things again. “My brothers and I won’t let that happen.”

“Keep your eyes and ears open, Conor.”

“Will do. And thanks for the heads-up.” After disconnecting the call, I lean back in my chair and the leather squeaks softly. If my uncle is really back in Chicago and thinks he can just take over, he has another thing coming. There’s no way in hell Liam, Rafferty and I will allow it to happen.

We will go down fighting and boot his sorry ass straight back to Ireland.

EMMA

I wake up early the next morning, make some tea and settle down at the kitchen table. My dad is still in bed, sleeping off his hangover, and probably won't get up for at least a few more hours. But I couldn't sleep.

In the back of my mind, I keep thinking about the letter I found. Twenty-five thousand dollars is so much money. I mean, I know it isn't for some people, but for me, it's a bloody fortune. As someone who lives paycheck to paycheck and is the sole breadwinner, there's a lot I could do with twenty-five grand. But I certainly don't want to owe it.

After blowing on my tea, I take a careful sip. I suppose there's no sense in worrying about it. Like my dad said, no one has come asking for payment and the more time that passes, the better. It's a little hard for me to believe the O'Shea family let everyone's debts die along with their father, though. I have this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that we're on borrowed time and, one of these days, someone representing Nolan O'Shea will come calling.

A shiver runs through me and I take another sip of hot tea. Why am I cold? It's going to be another scorcher today and the air conditioning unit in the wall is on its last legs. For the past three summers, I hold my breath every time I turn it on and send up a silent prayer that it won't conk out on us. So far, so good. But, I swear, each year the air that comes out is a little less cool and I don't put it on the highest speed any longer because I'm scared it's going to catch on fire. Especially after it started smoking last year.

Shaking my head, I wonder if this is how my life is always going to be. Endless problems and trying to constantly make ends meet without any help. It's weighing on me heavily, a little more every single day, and I'm getting tired. Even though I'm only twenty-one, some days I wake up, roll out of bed and feel sixty-one.

So many responsibilities hang over my head and it wouldn't be so overwhelming if my dad helped out. But he's too lost in his depression and never ending grief over losing my mom. And I get it. I really do. She was the love of his life. But, at some point, shouldn't he want to start living again?

The whole situation stresses me out and it's only getting worse, especially now that I know about this debt. I've suggested that my dad try to get a new job, but then his back will start hurting again. I'm not sure if he's just using that as an excuse or what. But I still pick up his pain pills every month from the pharmacy and he hasn't abused them like he does with the alcohol.

Of course, it's not all the time. He's not a stumbling drunk, swigging vodka straight from the bottle. He's more of a sad sack who settles down in his recliner and something will spark the depression and heartache. Maybe a commercial on TV or if he hears a certain song or once he just started crying silent tears and when I asked what was wrong, he told me the lilac bushes were in bloom.

My mother always smelled like lilacs.

I wish I could say time heals all wounds, but that certainly hasn't been the case. If anything, his grief has grown, becoming a deeper pit of despair. And I have no idea what I can do to make it better. Short of bringing my mom back, I don't think there is anything I can do.

After finishing my tea, I wash my mug then tidy up the living room. Empty beer cans litter the side table and I toss them out. A framed picture of my mom when she was younger sits propped beside the recliner and I lift it up and stare at her smiling face. Again, it occurs to me how very much we look alike and I know that can't be easy for my dad. Maybe I should color my hair a dark brown or something. There's nothing sadder than seeing someone you love caught in the vicious cycle of unrelenting grief. And I certainly don't want to be the cause of any of it.

The trash is full and I pull the bag out and tie it. After replacing the old garbage bag with a new one, I'm halfway to the front door to take it outside when I hear a loud knock. It scares the crap out of me and I jump a mile. It's still fairly early and I'm not expecting anyone.

Moving up to the door, I keep the security chain engaged, unlock the bolt, but don't open the door yet. "Who is it?" I call through the flimsy barrier.

"Heath Donovan, miss. I have some important business to discuss with Jonathan Shepherd."

The voice is deep and my skin prickles. "Concerning what?"

"Open the door," he growls in a menacing tone.

No way. "I don't think so," I answer and just as I'm about to turn the bolt back, there's a loud crack and I cry out as the door flies inward. The chain snaps and I barely have time to jump out of the way before it slams open and nearly breaks off its hinges.

Two big, very muscled men push through the door and step into the apartment. They're mean-looking and scowling fiercely. My heart thunders and I look around for something to use as a weapon. I'm still clutching the bag of garbage and I swing it hard, hitting the first thug. He curses and shoves it away. Of course, the flimsy plastic breaks and trash scatters everywhere.

"Watch it, little girl. Behave or you're going to get hurt," he threatens, beady eyes narrowing. "Now where's your old man?"

I'm about to lie and say he isn't here when, of course, my dad appears, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and still looking half-tipsy.

"What's going on out here? What was that—" He abruptly stops speaking and looks at the two hulking men hovering near me. "Who the hell are you?"

"We represent the O'Shea family and you owe an overdue debt. We're here to collect."

My heart sinks and panic makes my gut churn. My worst nightmare is coming true and my dad is at a loss for words.

“Well, you’re going to have to come back later,” he says, voice a little uneven and slightly shaky.

The first hulk stomps over and small knick-knacks throughout the room vibrate with each heavy step he takes. “That’s not how this works,” he snaps and grabs my dad’s t-shirt, lifting him up onto his toes.

“Stop!” I yell and run over. I grab the man’s arm and tug. “Leave him alone!”

He flicks me away like a bothersome gnat and I go flying backwards and slam into the wall, hitting my head. Ouch. For a moment, I see stars.

“Do you have the twenty-five grand or not?” the thug demands.

My poor dad is sputtering nonsense, not making an ounce of sense, and I push off the wall and search for something, anything, I can use to hit the thug. My gaze lands on the cane propped in the corner that my dad refuses to use because he has too much pride and would rather limp on rainy days.

Darting over, I swipe it up and spin, bringing the cane around and striking the brute along his thick side. He grunts and slants a glare in my direction.

“You better knock that shit off,” he warns me, then looks over at his partner. “Subdue her, will ‘ya?”

The moment the other hulk moves toward me, I lift the cane and prepare to knock him upside his thick skull. “Get out!” I yell, getting into a warrior’s stance. I am not going down without a fight.

“Little girl, you have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“You better get the hell out of here right now or you’ll be dealing with the cops when I call 9-1-1, you asshole!”

Despite being angry, something that almost looks like respect flickers through his dark eyes.

“The little lass has a bigger set of balls than her Da,” he states and they both chuckle. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to pay the money you owe right now, old man, or we’ll have to resort to more persuasive methods.”

I’m waving the cane back and forth, ready to fight, but no one seems to be

paying any attention to me. Guess they don't think I'm much of a threat, but they shouldn't underestimate me. Just because I'm smaller doesn't mean I can't kick some ass.

Running forward, I lift the cane and slam it down on the giant's back who's still holding my father's shirt in his meaty fist. The other thug moves up behind me, rips the cane from my hands and wraps his arms around me in a tight hold.

"Let me go!" I yell, kicking and squirming, trying to break loose. But his grip is firm and I end up biting down hard on his hand. With a howl, he releases me and I face off with the jerk holding my dad. He throws his head back and laughs which irks me to no end.

"What a feisty lass, you are," he murmurs. "I think Desmond would like her. Don't you think so, Ryan?"

The other brute named Ryan shrugs a shoulder. "Maybe we should keep her for ourselves instead."

Suddenly, Hercules Heath releases my dad who drops to the floor and turns his full attention on me. "You don't have the twenty-five grand, do you?"

I swallow hard and squeeze my hands into fists. "Not at present, but I'm willing to pay back every dime my father borrowed. I would need to make arrangements, though. Maybe set up a payment plan with the O'Shea family." Yeah, a payment plan over the next fifty years, I think.

Heath smirks. "That might be a possibility," he says slowly. "But you need to come and talk to Desmond O'Shea."

Who is Desmond O'Shea? I wonder. I suppose he's the one who's taken over since Nolan died and somehow he discovered my dad's debt. Without much of an option, I look down at my dad. He's crumpled up on the floor and looks so broken and defeated. He lifts his disheveled head and says, "Don't go."

"You have a choice, of course," Heath says. "Either come with us and work out the payment or we break his legs and return tomorrow to break his arms."

Fear pours through me and I don't want to leave with these scary men, but what choice do I really have? With a small nod, I know I have to go talk to

this Desmond O'Shea and end this nightmare.

"Emma, honey..."

I look down at my dad and sigh. "I'll work something out with the O'Shea family. Don't worry."

He nods and I straighten my shoulders and put on my fiercest face. "Let's go."

Heath and Ryan exchange an amused look. "You're a lucky piece of shit," Heath says and then lands a kick in my dad's side.

"No! Don't!" I yell and launch myself at the mean brute. "I said I was coming! Don't hurt him!"

I'm hanging on his muscled arm like I weigh no more than a sack of sugar. He grabs my upper arm, yanks me away and squeezes. "Behave yourself, lass, or I'll clock you upside the head."

I instantly settle down and glance over my shoulder at my dad who's curled up on the floor and groaning. "I'll be back," I promise. Even though he's a screw-up, he is still my father, the only thing I have left in this world, and I love him.

The men guide me roughly over the threshold of the broken door and down to their SUV waiting at the curb. The windows are dark and panic curls in my gut.

"Get in," Heath orders and shoves me into the back seat. I go sprawling forward and scurry up into a sitting position.

At least I've lured them away from my dad. His poor old bones would snap with minimal effort. And then what? They said they would return tomorrow and break his arms. It would be a never ending cycle that wouldn't stop until I addressed the issue.

The engine roars to life and I look out the window as the city streets pass by. I have no idea where we're going or where exactly this Desmond lives, but we leave Chicago and start down a country road.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trying not to sound as terrified as I feel.

“The O’Shea compound,” Ryan tells me.

“Great,” I murmur under my breath. Straight into the lion’s den. I reach down and try to open the door but, of course, it’s locked. My heart beats out a jagged rhythm and there’s nothing I can do at this point except sit back and wait.

Once we arrive at the O’Shea compound and I can talk to Desmond, I’m going to have to come up with a good offer. Get him to agree to the payment plan I have in mind. I just hope he’s in a bargaining kind of mood.

I also hope he’s a better man than Nolan O’Shea. Over the years, I’ve heard plenty of stories about how cold and ruthless he was. So maybe it’s better that I’m going to be dealing with Desmond.

At least, I hope so.

CONOR

Sully's news has me concerned. If my uncle returned from Ireland to try to take over, I need to get back to the family compound and try to get in touch with Liam. That might be pretty difficult, though, since he and Rory are staying in some remote cabin off the grid.

We were never overly close to our Uncle Desmond. From what I've heard, he and my father ran things together for a while, but then started butting heads. They had a falling out and Desmond left to run the family business over in Ireland.

That's the rumor, anyway. I was only twenty-three at the time and too busy training and fighting to care about a power struggle between my dad and his brother. The last thing on my mind was what my dad did for a living because I never wanted to take over. As the older twin, that was always Liam's future responsibility. Then Desmond left and I never gave it a second thought. But now it's my business and I need to figure out what's going on.

I grab my keys and wallet and head downstairs. As I weave my way through the club, I notice there are a few more people working out and sparring, and they all acknowledge me with some type of greeting as I pass by. There's a good crowd that hangs out here and we've become a little like a family.

There are a thousand places in Chicago for people to work out and I have a steady and supportive crew that comes to O'Shea's and that makes me happy. It also pays my bills which is nice. But it's never been about the money. I enjoy teaching others how to defend themselves and I live for the thrill of the

fight.

I hop into my Jeep and it doesn't take more than thirty minutes to reach the country road that leads to the large wrought iron gates of my family's estate. The place is situated on a lot of land and it's enormous, but cozy at the same time, if that makes any sense. I love that my brothers and I each have our own little place, and Mom and Finley live in the main house which is close so we can keep an eye on them.

A remote control hangs on the visor and I click the button to open the gates, but nothing happens. With a frown, I hit it again. Nothing. Dammit. Assuming the battery died, I pull up along the front entrance and slip out. As I'm walking over, a man I've never seen before steps out of the small gatehouse which we never really use. He stalks up to the main gate and glares at me.

"Who the hell are you?" I ask. My gaze dips and I immediately notice the holstered gun hanging at his side.

"New security. Who the hell are you?"

His attitude sucks and I instantly don't like the idiot. "I'm Conor O'Shea and I live here, so open the fucking gate."

"Sorry, not gonna happen."

For a moment, I think I hear him wrong. Who is this clown? And who hired new security? "I said open the damn gate. Now." I lower my voice and add a slight menacing "don't fuck with me" to my tone.

But this guy doesn't seem to get it because he shakes his head then lifts his phone. Maybe he feels secure because there's a gate separating us, but not for long, if I have any say about it.

"Mr. O'Shea, we have a trespasser at the gate."

"Trespasser?" I balk. This is fucking ridiculous and I ball my hands into fists. The urge to punch this guy is getting stronger.

"Yes, that's right. He says his name is Conor." The idiot security guard listens for a moment then hangs up. "Desmond is on his way out."

Desmond. Why the hell is Desmond on the property and why have I been locked out? My mind instantly goes to my mom and Finley who should be in the main house right now. If Desmond threatened them in any way, there's going to be hell to pay.

When my uncle finally appears, he's riding in the back of a black Range Rover with tinted windows. The moment he steps out, I get my first good look at my father's younger brother who left five years ago.

His hair is a little more gray than I remember, but his gait is steady and his ice blue eyes are sharp, predatory and focused on me.

"Well, if it isn't my nephew the fighter," Desmond says and halts on the opposite side of the gate. "What're you doing here, Conor? I thought the family business never interested you? I have to say I was expecting Liam, so this is a surprise."

"Liam is out of town right now," I tell him. "Why are you back in town and what the hell do you think you're doing here?"

"I'm taking back the reins of the family business which Liam and you have clearly run straight into the ground since Nolan died. I always warned him that Liam wasn't strong enough to take over, but he disagreed. And now look at things. Everything is a mess thanks to you two. You've certainly given me a lot of work to do."

"Everything is exactly how we want it," I growl. I notice several more enforcers arriving in a separate vehicle. They pull up and step out, armed and angry-looking.

"I don't care what you want," Desmond snaps. "You've fucked everything up and I'm here to make things right again. Liam had his chance and what did he do? Try to go legit?"

My uncle's laughter fills the air.

"Why not? We don't need to be dealing in illegal bullshit."

"You have no idea what it takes to run a successful family business and keep it profitable for hundreds of years. If you don't expand your horizons with various ventures, it'll inevitably stop making money."

“We make plenty of money,” I insist.

“Maybe today. But what about tomorrow? Those tech companies are a cover for where we really make our profit. If one of them loses too much money because the Market crashes, it doesn’t matter. The real money has always been in the illegal game. It started with booze during Prohibition and then we changed with the times. Prostitution made a pretty penny followed by drugs. And then you idiots shut it all down.”

Desmond shakes his head in disgust.

“Clearly, there’s no business sense in any of you and, luckily, I was made aware of what’s happening over here.”

Before I can ask by who, a sedan pulls up and Sean Flannigan steps out. Motherfucker. That spineless bastard is the one who went running off to tattle on us after Liam kicked his sorry ass to the curb. I am absolutely fuming as our family’s former lawyer walks up behind my uncle and has the balls to grin at me. There’s nothing I’d like to do more than punch the suit-wearing bastard in his smug face.

“Hello, Conor,” Sean says. “I have to say, it’s nice to be back...under new ownership.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Liam fired you.”

“And I re-hired him after he told me what was happening.” Desmond crosses his arms, eyeing me closely. Challenging me.

And I don’t like it.

“You can’t just come in here and take over. Liam is in charge now and—”

“No, he’s not,” Desmond interrupts, a very self-satisfied gleam in his blue eyes. “Sean, please show Conor who is truly in charge now.”

I watch as Sean pulls out an official-looking stack of papers and starts spewing out a bunch of legal mumbo jumbo. Contracts and similar such nonsense aren’t where my strengths lie, so I don’t have much to say after Sean finishes his spiel. Liam is the brains of this operation while I’m the brawn. Rafferty is pretty damn slick, too, though, and he might better

understand what's going on. Why Desmond thinks he can steamroll his way back into our lives and take everything over is beyond me.

I do catch on to a couple of things, though, and commit them to memory so I can tell my brothers. First, according to Sean, it seems our father's will had a clause which states no drastic changes to the business operations could occur within two years of his death.

Well, so much for that. We changed everything.

Second, if said changes took place then Liam could be removed and Desmond would take his place. I'm questioning how legit all this is, but right now I don't have much to go on and need my brothers' backup.

"Whatever," I respond and wave my hand dismissively at the pile of paperwork Sean flaunts triumphantly in my face. "Liam will have our current lawyer comb through that with a fine-toothed comb. If one thing is fishy, he will rake your ass over the coals."

My attention moves past them and focuses on the large house in the distance. I know Rafferty and Sofia are at his apartment in the city, but I'm worried about my mom, Finley and Griffin who they're babysitting.

"Let me in," I demand sharply. "I want to see my mother and sister."

"They are no longer here," Desmond states.

"What're you talking about? They live here."

"Not anymore," Sean adds with a weasley smile. "They decided to amicably vacate the premises instead of being physically kicked off of Mr. O'Shea's property."

A rage fills me and I fling myself against the gate and reach between the iron bars. The need to wrap my fingers around Sean Flannigan's neck is so overwhelming I can't see straight. He jumps back like the coward he is and I growl and stretch, trying to grab him.

"I'm going to choke the shit out of you, you sonofabitch!"

"I see you're still a hothead who likes to fight," Desmond murmurs, watching me closely.

I pull back, but still keep my fingers wrapped around the bars, my knuckles turning white from squeezing so hard. “And I see you’re still an asshole.”

The edge of Desmond’s mouth lifts. “Oh, you have no idea what I’m capable of. This is just the beginning.”

My jaw tightens as I think about him kicking my mother and Finley out of their home. “Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“It’s a promise, Conor. Things are going to return to their previous glory and then some. Wait until you see what I have planned for the family business. It’s going to be epic.”

Before I can comment, an SUV pulls up and two brutes step out. My hackles instantly raise and I’m wishing I would’ve brought my gun. Looks like everyone else here is armed but me, so I have to play this carefully.

One of the thugs opens the rear door and the next thing I know, he’s dragging a gorgeous blonde out.

“Let go of me!” she shouts, trying to free her upper arm from his too-tight hold. But she’s a slip of a thing and no match for the muscled man.

What the hell is going on?

Frozen, I watch the enforcer drag her over to the gate which is now cracked open. After he maneuvers her inside, I hear Desmond say, “Well, this is a nice surprise.” There’s a salacious tone in his voice that puts me on edge. He ogles her for a long moment and I take a step closer.

“Who is that?” I ask. “What the hell is going on?”

“Now that I’m back, I’m making sure debts are paid.”

“There are no more debts,” I tell him.

“There were always debts, but you and your soft-hearted brother forgave them. Sorry, but that isn’t how you run a profitable business. And if the money owed can’t be paid off, I can always figure out another form of payment.”

For the first time, the girl looks my way and I’m struck by her amazing shade

of golden amber eyes. I can also see the fear in their depths. I have no idea what my uncle is up to, but it can't be anything good and my stomach curdles at the thought of this young beauty being caught in his nefarious web.

"Take her upstairs to my room—the master suite," Desmond directs his muscle.

"That isn't your room," I snap. "It belongs to my mother."

"This whole place is mine," he says triumphantly and lifts his arms. Then his gaze slides over to the girl again. "And since her father can't return the money he borrowed then she'll serve as payment."

"What?" she exclaims, voice full of disbelief. "I came here to work out a payment plan."

"I'm not interested in your money anymore," Desmond tells her. "You had your chance this past year for that. But I am very curious about other assets you may possess."

There's no mistaking the sexual undertone in his words and disgust fills me. For a brief moment, our gazes meet and lock—cobalt blue and liquid gold. There's a desperate plea in her eyes for help, but I'm on the other side of the gate which they just re-locked.

There's nothing I can do to help her. Plus, every single one of these men is armed. If I make a move to step in, I have a pretty good feeling I'll wind up with a bullet in my gut.

Helpless, I watch the two enforcers drag her over to the sedan and toss her in the back. This is wrong on so many levels and I glare at my uncle.

"I'm calling Liam and you'll be hearing from our new attorney," I practically spit.

"Bring it on, nephew," Desmond taunts. "I have an iron-clad legal document that gives me full control of the O'Shea empire. There's nothing you can do to oust me."

Wanna bet? If Desmond were no longer breathing, he wouldn't be in control of anything. But as much as I want to say it, I keep my mouth shut.

I need to play this carefully and I need my brothers. With a narrowed look of loathing, I turn on my heel and get back into my Jeep. If Desmond wants to play hardball then fine. There's nothing I love more than a good fight.

But as I turn my car on, spin the wheel and squeal away, I can't help but picture the young girl they dragged away. Against her will. And right now they're taking her up to the bedroom that Desmond claimed as his own.

This can't be good.

Shit.

A part of me wants to turn around and help her. But how?

I need to get a hold of Liam, make sure my mom and Finley are okay and return to my apartment above the fight club. Because if I'm coming back here, I'm going to need my gun.

EMMA

A cold fear slithers through me as the enforcers drag me into a big, beautiful home and up the staircase. They toss me into a large suite and close the door. A lock clicks and I turn around, taking in everything I see.

There are a few suitcases in the corner, presumably belonging to Desmond O'Shea, but the rest of the room has a woman's touch. The floral bedspread and scented candles are decidedly feminine as well as the pastel artwork of a watering can with lilies and roses strewn around it. Whoever had this room before Desmond was obviously a woman and I'm thinking it may have been Nolan O'Shea's widow.

But would he really kick his brother's wife out of her home?

Sadly, from what I saw, I have a feeling her would. Desmond O'Shea is a callous bastard and something strange is going on here.

"That isn't your room. It belongs to my mother."

I remember the man with the bright cobalt blue eyes mentioning his mother. That would make this Maeve O'Shea's room and that means the big, attractive man had been one of her sons. I'm not sure which one and, to be honest, I don't even know their names.

Even though we barely interacted with each other—just one long, intense look—I can't deny how attractive he was with that dark hair and striking blue gaze. He was also so very tall with broad shoulders and a chest that pulled

against his t-shirt. Strength and power rippled through his fit body and he definitely caught my interest. But I have more important things to worry about right now. Like how I'm going to get out of this situation.

Right now, I need to figure out a way to strike up a bargain with Desmond. I didn't like the way he looked at me. It was disturbing and made me think of an animal who is on the verge of taking its prey down. He looked...hungry.

And not hungry to come to an agreement when it comes to paying off my dad's debt. He said he wasn't interested in money and what else do I have to offer? Nothing. Yet his suggestive look, borderline crude, said otherwise.

"I'm not interested in your money anymore. You had your chance this past year for that. But I am very curious about other assets you may possess."

Shit. The thought of Desmond O'Shea touching me makes me want to vomit. He has to be at least twenty-five years older than me and there's nothing attractive about him. There's a cruelty that lays just below his surface and I have a feeling he's a cold-hearted bastard.

How the hell am I going to get out of this mess? I wonder.

I start looking around, exploring the suite for some type of weapon, when the door unlocks and swings inward. Desmond walks inside, closing the door behind him, and eyes me like a piece of meat. Doing my best not to squirm under his penetrating gaze, I lift my chin and meet his icy-blue eyes.

Be brave, I tell myself.

"I'd like to talk to you about an extension regarding the money my father owes you," I say, getting straight to business. I don't want this conversation going off-topic or getting personal in any way. "I understand the sum is twenty-five thousand dollars and I'm prepared to pay every cent back, but I'm going to need to set up some kind of payment plan."

Desmond looks at me with an amused expression that makes me nervously twist my hands. If he doesn't accept my offer, I have no idea what I'm going to do.

His gaze rakes down my body and I automatically cross my arms over my chest, covering myself. "I have a better idea," he says slowly, finally

dragging his eyes back up to meet mine.

Oh, no. I have a feeling I don't want to hear what he's about to say.

When he moves closer, I step back. "Don't be scared, Emma. At least not yet," he adds and chuckles.

I've never been so uncomfortable in my life and I swallow back my nerves and try to put on a brave face. But he's backing me into the corner and my back hits the wall. My heart starts racing in my chest like a hunted jack rabbit and my fast breaths are making my chest rise and fall hard. When his gaze dips to my heaving breasts, I wedge myself into the corner further.

"I can pay you—"

"I don't want your money, Emma. That time for that has passed." He lays a hand against my cheek and when I move it away, he curves his hand around my neck, squeezes hard, and drags me forward until I'm pressed against his body. The paunch of his belly is soft like playdough and his breath smells like rotten meat.

Trying not to gag, I grimace, and when I push a hand against his chest, trying to twist away, his fingers tighten on my neck so hard it makes me yelp.

"You're hurting me!"

"Then stop trying to pull away." His lips press hard against mine and I clamp my mouth shut. He tries to push his tongue between my flattened lips, but I keep my jaw shut tight. There's no way I'm letting him kiss me like that.

Then I make the mistake of gagging and he jerks back like I burned him.

"What's wrong with you?" he hisses. "You're a cold fish."

"I have no interest in kissing you," I declare. Maybe my words come out a little too haughty because he steps back and glares daggers at me.

"That's just too bad, you little hoity-toity bitch. Because we're going to do more than just kiss. You're so keen to pay back your father's debt? Well, you can do it on your back with your legs spread because I'm going to fuck you senseless."

My worst nightmare is coming true. I've never been on a real date with a man much less had sex. And now this monster is going to steal my virginity? No way. I refuse to let it happen. "I'll pay you—"

"I don't want your money!" he screams and backhands me so hard my head whips sideways and my entire body spins. With a cry, my forehead hits the wall, but I keep it pressed there, not wanting to turn back around and see whatever horrible thing Desmond has planned for me next.

I don't even have time to turn around, though, because he steps right up against me, cornering me, and slides his hand over my rear end, squeezing it hard. Too hard. When he roughly shoves his hands between my thighs, I let out a soft whimper and try to clamp them shut.

He's going to rape me. The horrible thought has tears pricking my eyes.

"Emma, this is what's going to happen—you're going to spread these stubborn legs and I'm going to fuck you hard. Your body is going to be payment for the debt you owe, and you'll be my plaything until I grow tired of you. Understand?"

I don't respond and he pulls his hand back and slaps me hard on my ass. It stings, but I try not to cry out. I just press my lips together and pray he leaves.

"Do...you...understand?" he repeats, voice cold.

Everything in me wants to tell him to go to hell, but I'm scared he'll either hit me again or follow through with forcing himself on me. So I reluctantly nod my head against the wall.

"I can't hear you," he states and pinches my ass so hard, I yelp and spin. Slowly, I slide down the wall and crumple into a hopeless pile at his feet, pulling my legs to my chest.

His low, awful chuckle fills the air.

"Get used to being down there because you're going to be on your knees an awful lot." He leans down, grabs my chin and yanks it up, forcing me to look at him. His eyes glow with a darkness I've never seen before. He's getting off on torturing me like this and a simmering hate begins to burn in my veins. "How many dicks have you sucked, Emma? Hmm? Tell me."

My heart slams hard against my chest and my eyes dart to the door, wondering if I can push past him and escape. He's a dirty, disgusting, old man and I hate being down on the floor, at his mercy. He's waiting for my answer and I momentarily squeeze my eyes shut. "None," I force out.

Opening my eyes again, I see him nod in approval. "Good. Then this will be fun. There's so much I'm going to teach you. But fair warning, I don't have a lot of patience, so you better be a fast learner."

When he reaches for his belt and begins to unbuckle it, I taste bile in the back of my throat and it's rising fast. If he forces me to give him a blow job, I'm going to end up puking all over him.

"After I'm done with you, Emma, I'm not sure what's going to be more raw—those knees of yours or that hot, little cunt. Guess we shall see." His mouth curls up in a sneer and panic fills me.

God. This is not how I imagined my first time to be. Granted, I'm always so busy that I never fantasized overly much, but I always hoped it would be with someone I cared about. Maybe even a man who I was falling in love with. Not this disgusting excuse for a human being who is getting off on my fear.

Desmond lowers his zipper and, I swear to God, if he forces me to take him into my mouth, I'm going to bite it off. There's no way I'm going to be submissive and do whatever twisted things he wants. I can't. It goes against my grain and I vow to go down fighting.

There's a knock at the door and we both jump. With a low curse, Desmond pulls his zipper back up and re-buckles his belt. "We'll finish this later," he tells me and turns around.

A sigh of relief pours from my lungs and I send up a silent prayer to whoever just saved me. Or at least provided a temporary reprieve and more time to plot my escape.

Desmond opens the door and the little mouse of a man who I saw earlier when we were down by the gate stands there. He's wearing a suit and a pair of polished loafers.

"What do you want, Sean?" Desmond asks in an annoyed voice, straightening his suit jacket. "I was busy."

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Desmond, but we have a lot of things to discuss. Starting with how you want to handle the rest of the O’Shea family. Once Liam gets home—”

“Fuck Liam. Do you think I’m scared of that little twit? I’m going to crush him. No one is going to stand in my way and if they try, they’re going to die. This organization and all its businesses belong to me and I will see that they’re run properly.”

“More of the old enforcers showed up today, looking to get their old jobs back.”

“Hire them all. I want eyes and ears back on the streets again. And if they happen to see a Marino, tell them to shoot. I want everyone to know I’m back in town and Desmond O’Shea is running shit. And I will not bow down to anyone whether it be Matteo Marino or my own family.”

“Yes, sir,” Sean replies with a wide smile. “I must say, it’s good to have you back, sir.”

“It’s good to be back,” Desmond states. “Give me one more minute and I’ll meet you down in the office. I want to continue going through the books and fix all of Liam’s fuck-ups.”

Sean looks over at me and I narrow my eyes. The little weasel is happy Desmond is here? Then that makes him just as bad. After Sean slips away, Desmond stalks back over and I swallow hard, making myself look up at him. He’s a monster and I’d always heard the stories of how cruel the O’Shea family is. And now I’ve experienced it firsthand.

“Unfortunately, I have business to attend to, but I’ll return later.”

Dread pours through me and then he slides his hand along my face, into my hair and pulls hard.

“And I expect you to be naked and waiting. Make sure you’re nice and wet and ready to take me because I won’t.” He gives me an evil grin then roughly shoves my head to the side, turns and walks out.

A tear slides free, but I press my palms to my eyes and immediately shut it down. I can’t afford to waste one moment feeling sorry for myself or being

scared. My only goal right now is to get out of here. To somehow escape the monster who locked me in here.

A part of me is scared that he'll go after my dad once I escape, but there's no way I can just sit here and wait for him to return tonight. I'll go crazy. And my body isn't some kind of payment or something I'm willing to sacrifice.

Pushing myself up off the floor, I swipe a hand across my dripping nose and march over to the nearest window, shoving the curtains open. I'm up on the second floor and it's a decent drop to the grass below. Pressing my forehead to the glass, I look to the right then to the left, hoping for a trellis or drain or something to cling to and climb down.

To my dismay, there's nothing.

So, now what? Forcing myself to pull in a deep breath and remain calm, I turn around and let my gaze wander over the room. There's an attached bathroom and I head over and step inside. From the looks of it, Maeve O'Shea left quickly because the counter is still covered with personal belongings like makeup, face creams and even her toothbrush still sits in its holder.

Every minute that passes, I'm realizing just how big of a bastard Desmond O'Shea is and it's more reason for me to escape.

There's a small window and I go over and look out. But much like the other one, there isn't anywhere to go except straight down. And the last thing I need to do is jump two stories and break an ankle, or worse a leg, when I hit the ground. If there were bushes to land in, I'd probably chance it.

With a frustrated groan, I hurry over to the door and jiggle the handle. The lock feels pretty sturdy and the idea of picking it crosses my mind, so I hurry back into the bathroom and search for something I can use. In the top drawer, I find a container of bobby pins. Score. I grab a couple and jog back over.

Dropping down to my knees, I straighten the hair pin and shove it inside the keyhole and begin twisting it around with no rhyme or reason and certainly no technique. They always make it look so easy in the movies and I'm just hoping to hear a pop and then, ta-da! But, I quickly find out that isn't the case.

Sweating, I swipe the back of my hand across my forehead and redouble my efforts to pick this damn lock. But all that happens is I get the bobby pin jammed in there good and when I try to pull it out, the stupid thing snaps in half.

With a frustrated curse, I lean back on my heels and rack my brain. There has to be a way out of here. Unfortunately, I'm not finding it. Once again, I think about how quickly Maeve left her home. How she left so many things behind.

Maybe she left something useful. Something I can use as a weapon. Because if I can't find a way out of here then maybe I can find something to use against Desmond when he returns.

Pushing up off the floor, I start opening drawers and searching for anything that would make a good weapon. After several minutes of scouring through her dresser and then under the bed, I blow out a frustrated breath.

But I still have a whole closet to search through so I wander over and step inside the large walk-in area. One whole wall is lined up with clothes hanging from a rod that spans the length of the closet and the other side is a huge rack filled with shoes. All useless against Desmond. Unless, of course, I want to bludgeon him to death with a high heel. Hell, at this point, that may be a possibility. But I'd rather find something better.

There are several hat boxes stacked in the corner and I'm not expecting to find anything except hats, but I still open the top one. Yep, a large hat with all the frills that looks like it would be worn at the Kentucky Derby. The second one holds a box of pictures which I set aside and when I lift the lid off the bottom box, I gasp.

Because I just hit pay dirt.

Inside is a revolver and a box of bullets. My heart races as I reach in and pick it up. The gun feels strange in my hand because I've never held one before, much less shot one. But this is an emergency and there must be an angel somewhere up there smiling down on me. I'd like to think it's my mom.

I inspect the weapon, turning it this way and that, and manage to open it up and peer inside. Not seeing any bullets, I realize it's going to be up to me to figure out how to load this thing. But how hard can it be?

Setting the gun on my lap, I open the box of bullets, gingerly lift one out and very carefully slide the bullet into the first chamber. After I insert it, I rotate the cylinder to expose another empty chamber and pop another bullet inside. Repeating this process until all the chambers are filled with a round, I realize I'm holding my breath. I'm not sure if I expect the gun to start shooting by itself or what, but I need to get a grip.

Six bullets total. That's all it'll hold and I hope to God that it's enough to get me out of here safely.

Thank you, Mom, I think, clutching the revolver in my grip. One way or another, I'm getting the hell out of here and if I have to shoot Desmond O'Shea or anyone else, then so be it.

I will not even feel bad.

CONOR

Livid doesn't even begin to describe how I'm feeling at this moment. I'm usually damn good at controlling my emotions, but right now I'm shaking, so I pull the Jeep over and take a moment to try to settle down.

Desmond just made a huge mistake and now we're going to come after him with a vengeance.

I grab my phone from the middle console and hit Liam's number. Of course, it instantly drops me in his voicemail and I curse. "Call me," I clip out. "We have a massive problem. Uncle Desmond is back and he kicked mom and Finley out. He claims he has a legal right to take the family business over and I'm on the verge of storming the compound and murdering him."

I hang up and dial Rafferty.

"Conor! Where the hell are you?" Rafferty answers, sounding nearly as frustrated and worked up as I am.

"I just left the compound after a showdown with Desmond," I grind out, the anger renewing all over again.

"We're at my place. Mom, Fin and Griff are fine and they're in the other room with Sofia. But, fuck, Con. What're we going to do? Desmond's on the warpath."

"I know. And that little slimeball Sean Flannigan is the one who got him to come back here and try to take things over. I've been calling Liam, but haven't been able to reach him."

“Yeah, same here. His phone isn’t working up in the mountains. I sent some texts, too, so maybe we’ll get lucky and one will get through.”

“There’s something else,” I say carefully and Rafferty waits while I clear my throat. Every time I think of the young blonde, it gets thick with inexplicable emotion. “A couple of enforcers arrived with a girl. From what I gathered, she wasn’t able to pay off a debt and was given to Desmond as payment.”

“Jesus.”

“She was really scared, and I can’t just sit here and let her be at Desmond’s mercy. He’s more sick and twisted than he ever was before. Or, maybe we just never saw that side of him. But I saw it earlier and there’s a darkness there, Raff. If I sit here and don’t do anything, he’s going to hurt her in more ways than I care to imagine.”

My brother seems to be mulling over my words then says, “You need me to help you break in and get her?”

“All I need is for you to keep your phone by you. I’ll call if I need help, but I think I can sneak in the back, through the woods.”

“What about the cameras?”

“I know where they all are and I can get past them. I’m not worried about that.”

“You can go in through the cellar.”

“Exactly.” The lock on the cellar window broke a couple of weeks ago and we’ve been meaning to fix it, but now I’m glad that we never did. It didn’t seem like a pressing issue since we have private security and cameras.

When it comes to breaking in, I have a huge advantage because I know where all the weak spots are in the security system plus I know the compound like the back of my hand.

“Who is this girl? Any idea?” Raff asks.

“No clue. But she seemed way too young and innocent. Like none of what was happening was her fault.” A slow grin splits my face when I remember the way she fought and tried to break free. “But she also had a fighting spirit

and you know I like that.”

“It’s probably not safe to return her back home.”

“No, definitely not. I’ll take her back to my place and see what information I can get from her.”

“Alright, sounds good. And, Con, if you need me, I’m here.”

“Thanks, bro.” After I hang up, I’m feeling much better because there’s a plan in place. I’m going to wait a little longer, until the sun starts going down, and then sneak in. Glancing at the clock on the dashboard, I realize it won’t be too long. Maybe half an hour at most?

I put the car in drive, head around the woods and maneuver the Jeep down a dirt road beside an old cornfield. I’m on the opposite side of the woods that face the backyard of the main house. Perfect. No one patrols those woods and we used to play in them as kids, so I know them well.

Hopping out of the car, I reach down, slip my hoodie over my head and zip it up. Luckily, it’s black and will help me blend into the shadows. Before I break into the main house and play hero, I’m going to sneak into my place first. My Glock 19 is locked up in a safe and I’m going to get it. Just in case. I don’t care for surprises and I like to be prepared. I’m also not stupid. Who knows what or who I might run up against? Going in without a weapon isn’t smart.

After slipping my car keys into my pocket, I step into the woods and follow one of the old trails. It’s already gloomy beneath the thick canopy of trees and the sun is disappearing fast on the horizon. Once it sets, it’s going to be really dark in here. But I have the flashlight on my phone in case I need it.

The overgrown trail leads me through what seems like an endless maze of trees and dead leaves crunch underfoot. It takes me a little less than ten minutes to reach the other side and I crouch down and look out across the expansive backyard. I don’t see any enforcers or patrolling security, so that’s good. The main house is lit up, but my house is dark, and I make my way past the old barn and stick to the edge of the edge of the treeline.

There are a few cameras pointed my way and they move back and forth, slowly sweeping the large area. I watch them for a minute, timing it just right,

then step out of the woods and haul ass across the grass. Staying low and crouched over as much as possible, I run over to my house and leap up onto the rear porch.

When no one yells out or tries to shoot at me, I breathe out a sigh of relief. So far, so good. Using my key, I unlock the back door and step inside my dark house. The silence tells me no one is in here, but I'm still careful and stay as quiet as possible, avoiding the windows.

Jogging up the steps, I hurry down to my bedroom and open my closet. The small safe sits on the floor and I lower myself down and punch in the code. The steel door swings open and I reach inside and pull out my Glock. After quickly loading it, I tuck it in the back of my pants and shut the safe's door.

Once I'm back downstairs, I move over to the window that faces the main house, staying out of sight, and peer through the blinds. My mom's house is lit up like a Christmas tree and it looks like that's where everyone is. My gaze drops and I study the cellar window where I'm going to slip through. Once I'm inside, that's when things are going to get tricky.

At least I know where the girl is because I remember Desmond telling his thugs to take her to the master suite. Letting the blinds fall back into place, I step back and head over to the front door which I unlock. Then I carefully open the door a crack and look out. All seems quiet.

I suppose it's now or never. Slipping out, I close the door behind me and make my way toward the main house. Liam's place is first and I use it as cover, avoiding the cameras and staying low. Once I circle his and Rory's house, I lean against the corner and wait. Once the camera's lens moves out of range, I jog across the lawn and hope I make it in time before the security cam can catch me.

Luckily, I'm fast and the cameras are slow. Something we're going to have to fix in the future. But for now, I thank my lucky stars and kneel down beside the basement window. It easily pushes open and I scoot myself through the opening. It's a tight squeeze because I'm a pretty big guy, but this is my best option. Dropping to the floor, my sneakers hit with a soft thud and the darkness is an inky black. But I don't need any light. I grew up in this house and know it well. Relying on my memory, I circle around boxes and old

things my mom stores down here. When I reach the stairs, I pause and pull my gun out.

With a firm grip around the Glock's handle, I start up the stairs, avoiding the ones that I know creak. At the top of the staircase is a door and I see light beneath it. A quick look through the keyhole doesn't reveal anyone and I hold my breath, turn the handle and slowly push it open.

The basement door opens into a hallway and I look up and down the deserted corridor. Although I don't see anyone, I can hear voices which sound like they're coming from the kitchen. A group of men, talking and laughing. Maybe eating some dinner and celebrating being back on the O'Shea payroll as enforcers. Assholes.

I need to get over to the main staircase that will lead up to the bedrooms. Normally, I'd turn left, but tonight I go right and take the long way around, sneaking down the hallway, past the library and through the deserted dining room.

Now that I have eyes on the staircase, I pause, waiting to see if anyone appears. After waiting a full two minutes, the coast seems clear and I race up the steps on silent feet, again avoiding any that I know will creak and alert someone to my presence.

At the top, I press against the wall, doing my best to blend in with the shadows, but I know I'll be seen if anyone comes around the corner. And to my utter annoyance, an enforcer turns the corner a moment later. His eyes go wide in surprise when he sees me, but I don't give him time to alert anyone else. Stepping forward, I use the butt of my gun to hit him hard upside the head and he drops like a sack of potatoes.

Pulling in a deep breath, I slip my gun in my waistband, grab him under the arms and drag him into the nearest dark room. Blood trickles down his temple and he should be out long enough for me to grab the girl and escape. At least, I hope so.

I'm going to try not to shoot anyone tonight, but we shall see.

My mom's room is at the end of the hall and I hurry down there. There's a key in the door's lock which tells me she's definitely in there. My mom never

locks the door. Reaching down, I twist the key and flinch as it clicks loudly.

Then I push the door open, step inside, and nearly get shot when a bullet whizzes past my head and slams into the wall. The loud POP! echoes through the space and probably just alerted everyone in the damn house.

Fuck.

My shocked gaze lands on the small blonde who holds a gun in her shaking hands. I raise my hands, hoping to placate her, and say, "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. Just put the gun down."

I recognize my mom's revolver and have to give the little girl credit for finding it. Bravo, sweetheart. Now please just don't kill me.

"Move aside and let me out of here. Now," she demands in a steely voice.

I quickly realize she's not only beautiful, but also brave. And that's a huge turn-on for me. There's also a big black and blue mark along her pretty face and I clench my jaw. If Desmond hit her, I'm going to murder the bastard.

"I came here to help you escape and you just announced my presence to the whole house. C'mon." Motioning for her to follow me, I turn and stalk back into the hallway. I hope turning my back on her isn't a huge mistake, but when she quickly runs over, I know she must trust me a little. Or, at least more than Desmond and his enforcers.

Still, I want that revolver. Especially after she almost shot me.

It only takes a moment before boots start pounding up the staircase and I shove her behind me, grab my Glock and fire off a couple of shots. Okay, so we're not getting out the way I came in. That much is clear.

"Go! In there!" I push her toward Finley's room. "Go out the sliding door!" There's a patio attached to the bedroom and we're going to have to climb down somehow. Thankfully, she does what I say without question and I fire off more shots, holding them off for a bit. Then I slam the door shut, lock it and wedge a chair beneath the handle. It won't hold for long, but it should buy us some time.

Racing across my sister's room, I step onto the balcony and the blonde turns

to me, hands on her curvy hips.

“Now what?” she demands. “Are we just supposed to fly away?”

So sassy. Even though we’re in a dangerous situation and a gunshot fires into the door behind us, my dick wants more of her sass. A whole lot more. She’s too young, I tell myself.

Stifling the sexy thoughts because now is not the fucking time, I grab the revolver out of her hand, tuck it in my pants and climb over the wrought-iron railing, lowering myself down until my hands are holding it at the very bottom.

“Climb down me,” I order.

“Climb down...” Her voice trails off. “Are you kidding me?”

A loud pounding shakes the door in its frame and she quickly climbs over the railing’s edge without further ado. When she hesitates, I say, “Just wrap your arms around me and slide down. I’m six-four. You’ll only fall a few feet.”

I hear her sigh then she grabs onto my shoulders, wraps her arms around my neck and lets her legs drop. With her front flush against my back, I can feel every curve of her body and I do my best to ignore the way her breasts press against my back.

“Okay, baby girl. Now slide down and drop.”

She loosens her grip, turns her head sideways and starts to slip down, her body dragging along mine. When she gets to my waist, her cheek is pressed to my ass and her hands are precariously close to my dick. I’m sweating, holding us both up, waiting for a bad guy to appear above us and start shooting.

And, yet somehow, I’m getting turned on because her hands are all over me. Gritting my jaw, mentally cursing, I urge her to keep going. She slides down the length of my long legs and is gripping onto my ankles for a moment before dropping down to the ground. Once she moves out of the way, I let go and land in a crouch beside her.

“Let’s go!” Popping up, I take off toward the dark woods ahead and she stays

by my side, keeping up like a champ despite how much shorter her legs are than mine. I hear a few shots behind us, but nothing remotely close.

We're safe.

At least for the moment.

EMMA

Feeling absolutely clueless, I run through the dark woods with the big, muscled stranger and have no idea where we're going or if I can even trust him. But I do know one thing and I'd rather be anywhere else than back in that room, waiting for Desmond to return.

I don't hear anyone running behind us and we keep racing along an overgrown trail to God-knows-where. Just when I'm about to ask, the woods open up and I see a Jeep parked on the dirt road by an old cornfield.

"Get in," he orders and unlocks the car.

Without much choice, I hurry over to the passenger side and slip inside, quickly buckling my seatbelt. Even though it's dark, I think his lips twitch, but I have no idea why he'd find that funny.

"You're one of Maeve O'Shea's sons aren't you?" I finally ask.

He nods then slants a look in my direction as he drives the Jeep up onto the main road. "I'm Conor. Who are you and why did my uncle take you?"

"I'm Emma Shepherd," I murmur and study his strong forearms. It's clear he must work out and I can't stop checking out all of his rippling muscles. The man oozes strength and I have a feeling he can take care of anything. Or anyone.

I'm so distracted by the way his arms flex in the passing streetlights that I forget the second part of his question and have to force myself to focus.

“And you owed him money or something?” Conor prompts.

“My dad owes your family money and I just recently found out about it. It’s an old debt to Nolan O’Shea. It’s a lot and I’ll pay it back, I promise. It’s just going to take me a while.”

“And my uncle didn’t like that answer,” Conor surmised.

“No. He sent two of his enforcers and they demanded immediate payment. When I said I didn’t have the money, they threatened my dad so I—”

“You what?” Conor asks, voice curious.

“Well, I hit them with my dad’s cane.”

Conor’s angular jaw drops and he turns to look at me. “You attacked two huge brutes all on your own?”

I nod and a huge smile curves his mouth. A mouth that I can’t seem to look away from. Actually, his whole face intrigues me. High cheekbones, an angular jaw covered in dark stubble, a nose with a small bump in the middle which makes me think he broke it at some point. And those eyes...

Don’t even get me started on his bright blue eyes. They’re striking and mysterious and unreadable. Such a deep and stunning shade of blue that threatens to pull me under. Matched with his thick, dark hair trimmed short and neat, he’s rather dreamy.

Older, too. At least, older than me. He has the softest feathering of lines at the edge of his eyes and it makes me think he squints a lot. Maybe in concentration. Or who knows? Maybe he just needs glasses.

“That’s impressive,” he finally says. “And very courageous.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say dismissively. “But I got the attention off my dad and onto me. And that’s what I wanted to do.”

Conor nods his approval.

“Why did you come get me?” I ask, studying his gorgeous profile. “I owe you money—well, my dad does—and it’s going to be a while until I can pay it back.”

“I don’t want your money,” Conor immediately says. “My uncle just returned to town and he’s causing all kinds of havoc. When I saw them drag you out of that car earlier...well, it’s clear Desmond’s intentions weren’t good.”

“He’s vile,” I can’t help myself from saying.

For a moment, Conor doesn’t say anything. Then, he asks, “Did he touch you?”

I shift in my seat and stare out the windshield. “He wanted to, but we were interrupted. But I did get this nice bruise courtesy of his fist. And the promise that he was returning to finish what he started.”

Conor curses under his breath. “This whole thing is turning into a disaster of epic proportions and I’ve been trying to contact Liam so we can come up with a game plan, but he’s out of reach right now.”

“So your uncle just took over? You never planned on recouping the money my dad owed your family?”

“Liam and I decided to forgive all the debts owed to my father by people like your dad. People with gambling problems and low income,” he clarifies.

“My dad doesn’t have a gambling problem,” I say, instantly coming to his defense and Conor cocks a brow. “His problem is depression.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since my mom died, he’s been slowly falling apart. Every year he gets a little worse and no matter what I do, I can’t seem to help him. The gambling spree happened during one of his low points when he spiraled. But I will pay the money back. It’s just going to take me some time.”

“Why should your father’s debt fall on you?”

“Because he doesn’t work anymore. He injured his back and there were a lot of medical bills and—can we talk about something else?” Thinking about the insane amount of bills my dad has accumulated is making it hard to breathe and I press a hand to my chest.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I force out. I’m not sure what’s going on, but I feel like an elephant is standing on my chest. Grasping for the button, I roll the window down and let the wind hit my face.

But it’s not helping and I’m gasping for air, struggling to breathe.

The Jeep pulls off to the side of the road and I hear Conor calling my name as though from a long distance away, but I’m looking out the window, chest heaving, unable to catch my breath, on the verge of passing out.

Strong hands force me to turn around and suddenly I’m looking into bright sapphire eyes. “Breathe, Emma,” he orders.

I feel his fingers digging into my upper arms and it helps me come back to the present. Suddenly, I’m able to suck in full lungfuls of air and my chest expands gratefully. The elephant is gone and relief pours through me.

“Are you okay?”

“I-I don’t know what happened. I couldn’t breathe.”

“You had a panic attack,” he tells me, hands easing up and lightly rubbing my arms. “You’re okay. I promise you, no one is going to hurt you.”

I nod and start to feel foolish. I’ve never fallen apart like that before and to do it in front of this big, strong man makes me appear weak and fragile. God, I’m so embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” I mumble and pull back. “I feel so stupid.”

Conor releases my arms and slides his hand up and cups my face. I automatically lean my face into his palm, soaking up the warmth there. His fingers are rough with callouses and I wonder what he does when he’s not rescuing foolish girls who owe his family money.

“Sweet girl, you are the bravest, sassiest, fiercest little thing I’ve ever seen. There’s nothing to feel stupid about. You should be so damn proud of yourself.”

“Proud?” I echo, not quite understanding what exactly he’s seeing.

“You have a fighting spirit like I’ve never seen. And I should know.” I tilt my head in question and he clarifies, “Because I’m a fighter.”

“You are?” Ahh, so that explains all the muscles.

Conor gently strokes his thumb along my cheekbone and I release a soft sigh. “How old are you?” he asks, voice low and husky.

A thrilling, little spark shoots through my body at his tone. His deep voice sounds so sexy and I swallow hard, pressing my legs tighter together. “Twenty-one. How old are you?”

His big hand immediately pulls away and he curses under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, instantly missing the warmth of his reassuring touch.

“Nothing,” he grumbles and puts the car back in drive, pulling us back up onto the road.

Does he think I’m too young? I wonder. “I’m twenty-one,” I say again, “but going on forty-one.”

He shifts in his seat and slants me a side-eyed look. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning I’ve had to grow up way too fast. Ever since my mom died, I’ve had to take care of everything because my dad sort of zoned out. He hasn’t been the same since she passed away and so I’m the one who has to take care of the bills and repairs and everything else.”

“When did your mom die?”

“When I was ten.”

“And you’ve been taking care of the household and your dad all this time? All by yourself?”

I nod. “I got my first job when I was fourteen. I lied about my age and since I seem older than I am, they didn’t ask too many questions.”

“What job?”

“I made pizzas five days a week. After school. I graduated high school a few years ago, but I’ve been too busy to look into college. Plus it’s crazy expensive so…” My voice trails off. Because, yeah, I can’t afford it.

“And what do you do now?” he asks.

“I’m a cashier at a grocery store near my house. Speaking of which, I should probably tell you where I live.”

“You’re not going home,” Conor states evenly.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re coming with me. It’s not safe and Desmond will just send more men to get you.”

“What about my dad?” I ask, fear making the hair on my arms stand up. “I can’t leave him there alone.”

For a long moment, Conor doesn’t say anything. “I know of a hotel in the city where he can stay. My family owns it and he’ll have a suite, access to room service and people watching over him. Don’t worry, it’ll all be comped. You won’t have to pay a dime.”

Tears prick my eyes. Is he serious? My dad is a complete stranger who owes his family a large sum of money. I basically just told him that I can barely afford to pay it back and now he’s offering to indefinitely foot the bill for my dad in his hotel?

Who exactly is this amazing, generous, kind, totally gorgeous man who swooped in and rescued me? Who rescued me and now my dad?

“Conor, that’s far too generous—”

“Don’t even try to turn it down. I’ll send my brother to pick him up right now, take him to the hotel and you’re coming with me so I can keep a close eye on you. I don’t think my uncle is after your dad as much as you.”

His voice takes on an ominous tone and I shiver. “I thought you said your brother was out of town?”

“Liam, my twin, is out west with his wife. My younger brother is Rafferty who I’m going to call right now. He’ll take care of your dad.”

“You have a twin?” God, it’s crazy that there’s one man who is as attractive as Conor, but two? I lift a hand and fan my face which is slightly overheated. Conor immediately notices and turns the vent in my direction.

Seriously, who is this incredible man and where has he been all my life?

“Hey, Raff, I need a favor,” Conor says after his brother answers.

Their voices are both deep, but Conor’s has a sexy edge to it that makes my toes curl. I listen while he fills Rafferty in on the situation and they talk for a minute then end the call. He just took care of everything and, for once, it wasn’t me who had to handle things.

And I can’t help but be grateful. It’s also a huge turn on since I always have to do everything myself. How nice would it be to have a partner to help pick up the slack and make sure things are taken care of?

Whoever ends up with Conor O’Shea is damn lucky. My luck isn’t that good and the more time I spend with him, the more I realize he must have a girlfriend. There’s no ring on his wedding finger, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t taken. Unless the women in Chicago are blind and dumb, they must pursue him relentlessly.

And I can’t blame them.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “For everything.”

“You’re welcome,” he replies. “Don’t worry. Everything is going to be fine.”

I shift in my seat and blink back the stupid tears threatening to fall. I owe this man so much that I don’t even know how to begin to pay him back. Gratitude overwhelms me and I clasp my hands in my lap and stare out the windshield at the dark road ahead.

We’re almost to the city and I ask Conor where exactly we’re going.

“My place,” he answers simply.

It doesn’t take long before he pulls up along a curb in front of a building with a sign above it that reads O’Shea’s. “You live here?” I ask as we walk up to the front door and he unlocks it. “It looks like a gym.”

“It’s a fight club.”

“Fight club?” I echo as we step inside and he flips a light on. Fluorescent lights blink to life and I see a large, raised ring in the center of the room

surrounded by ropes and workout equipment along the wall.

“C’mon. My apartment is upstairs.”

Conor guides me over to a small, private staircase and with a sweep of his hand, encourages me to go up first. And, he’s a gentleman, too. My heart starts thumping hard as I make my way up and, I swear, I can feel his gaze on my back. Or maybe it’s on my ass. I’m not quite sure, but I’m hoping for the latter.

“Oh, I have to tell you,” I say, spinning around, halfway up the steps. His gaze snaps up and I smother a smile. Yep, he was definitely checking out my ass and that pleases me immensely. “I overheard Desmond talking and he said he plans to eliminate anyone who gives him trouble—including his own blood.”

His gorgeous blue eyes narrow slightly. “My brothers and I will take care of Desmond.”

With a small nod, I turn and continue up. When we reach the top landing, he unlocks the door and pushes it open. I step inside and, as he’s turning the lights on, a man steps out of the shadowed hallway and charges us.

The attacker is brandishing a wicked-looking knife and I scream.

CONOR

My fight instincts immediately kick in and I shove Emma out of the way and grab the intruder's wrist which holds the knife. I give it a vicious twist, he yelps and the knife goes flying. It clatters to the floor somewhere, but there's no time to determine where because he launches himself at me and hits me with the force of a truck.

I'm six foot four inches and weigh two-hundred and ten pounds, so I'm no light weight. In fact, I'm a mountain of lean, ripped muscle. So for this asshole to take me down says a lot. The enforcer I'm assuming my uncle sent is a towering beast and I realize I might not outweigh him, but that means I'm probably quicker.

Using speed to my advantage, I hit him fast and hard then duck his massive fist. We roll and I stay low and aim for his midsection. After getting another quick punch in, he manages to catch me on the chin and my face snaps to the side. Ouch. Stars fill my vision, but I ignore them and shove away.

I'm going to need more than my fists to take this beast down and, as I scramble up, pulling my gun out of my waistband, he grabs my ankle, yanking me hard. I drop to my hands and knees, the gun goes flying, and Emma yells my name. Looking up, not wanting her anywhere near us, I realize she's handing me the lamp that was on the coffee table.

Good girl. I grab it, spin and smash it against the giant's head. With a roar, he goes down and I kick him in the face. Something crunches, probably his nose, and I roll away and hop up.

“Conor!”

Emma hurries over and shoves the knife into my hand. She must’ve found it on the floor and I give her a grin then turn my attention back down to the giant groaning on the floor. I’m done playing games with this jackass and if he tries anything else—

The thought is interrupted when he moves faster than I would’ve guessed possible and tackles me at the knees. I turn my body so my kneecaps don’t snap and bring the knife down, plunging the point into his back. A scream pierces the air and I yank the blade out and slam it down again.

There’s a brutality involved with killing someone with a knife and I don’t have time right now to stop and think about it. But I have a feeling I could be traumatizing the young girl witnessing this horrible act. When the brute finally drops to the floor and stops moving, I fall back on my ass, breathing hard, thankful that I’m still alive.

The knife is sticking out of the intruder’s back and I look down at my hand which is covered in blood splatters. Shit.

“Are you okay?” Emma asks, voice shaky.

“Yeah. I’m good.” I stand up and look over at the brave woman beside me. “Are you?”

She nods and I turn my attention back to the intruder, drop down beside him and press two fingers against his thick neck. No pulse. With a grimace, I stand back up, grab my gun, and walk into the kitchen to wash my hands.

Emma hurries after me. “I-is he dead?”

I give a sharp nod, scrubbing my hands under the hottest water I can stand. Thoughts of my mom, Finley and Griffin fill my head. As well as Rafferty and Sofia who are all here in the city. If Desmond already sent someone after me, what about them? I need to make sure they’re safe.

It’s clear Desmond is serious and gave the order to have us all terminated. My blood boils as I flip the water off, shake my hands and pull my cell phone out. Doing my best to remain calm, I hit Rafferty’s number.

“Con, what’s going on?”

“Well, we just walked into my apartment and got jumped by a ginormous goon. You guys all need to get somewhere safe where Desmond’s enforcers can’t get to you.”

“It’s already done. When I took Mr. Shepherd to the hotel, I also brought Mom, Sofia and Griff. We’re all up in a suite and I’m still trying to call Liam, but no luck.”

“Okay, good job, Raff. It’s not safe here, so we’re coming over, too.”

I know Rafferty must be especially concerned about Sofia since she’s pregnant and, of course, baby Griff. Liam is going to flip out when he finds out what’s going on.

“Be careful,” Rafferty says, and I promise we will.

After hanging up with Raff, I turn to Emma. “We’re going to go over to our hotel, The Manor House, where we can lay low for the time being. We’ll be safe there and can figure out a plan.”

Emma nods, gaze drifting down to the dead body bleeding out on my floor. “What about him?”

“I’ll deal with it. Don’t worry. C’mon.”

We leave my place, get back in the Jeep and drive over to The Manor House, a fancy boutique hotel my family owns. It’s not a huge place, but it’s secure and Rafferty already talked to security which they’re currently beefing up.

Once we arrive, I walk up to the front desk to let them know we’re here. I’m hoping there’s a suite open for me and I’m assuming Emma will bunk with her dad. But that’s not exactly how things go.

Apparently, the entire hotel is booked solid because of a nearby convention and we’re lucky Rafferty was able to get them in a suite. The girl at the desk informs me she has one room open and only because there was a last-minute cancellation.

Without much choice, I nod and she slips us a couple of keycards. It’s late, but I’m assuming Emma wants to see her dad and I want to talk to Rafferty

and make sure everyone is doing okay.

When we reach the suite, it's way more crowded than I anticipated. Sofia is asleep in the bedroom with Griffin and my mom is on the pullout couch in there. Emma's dad is on the couch in the living room, snoring softly, and Emma hurries over. I watch her kiss his cheek and when he wakes up, they hug and start talking softly.

Meanwhile, Rafferty motions for me to come out onto the balcony where we can talk freely.

"Not much room in there," I comment.

"Stupid convention is happening next door. A one-bedroom suite was all they had left, but we'll make do until more rooms open up."

"I managed to get a room on the third floor. It's nothing fancy, but I'll survive. Plus, there's a dead guy back in my apartment."

"Shit. I'll call Sully to take care of him."

"Thanks," I murmur.

Looking out over the dark city, I try to come to terms with the situation.

"Desmond just declared war," Rafferty states darkly, as if reading my thoughts.

"Yeah, and that was a very stupid move. We're stronger than he is."

"He's amassing an army, though. From what I've heard, he's hired back all the old enforcers and more."

"You should've seen him, Raff. Strutting around the place like he owned it. I wanted to punch him."

"Is there any way he could have a legit, legal claim? Is there something we don't know? Some kind of loophole?"

I shrug a shoulder, staring down at the light traffic below us. "Liam would know better. He's been through all of the paperwork."

"We just have to get a hold of him."

“Yeah. The timing for his mountain vacation wasn’t the best, was it?”

“He’ll check his messages when he can and then he and Rory will be on the first flight back. In the meantime, we may as well get some sleep.”

“Okay,” I agree and we step back into the room. My gaze goes straight to Emma who is standing up and looking over at me. There’s nowhere for her to sleep in here, so I hope she knows that she’s coming with me.

“See you in the morning,” I tell Rafferty then walk over to Emma, take her hand and pull her away from her father. “You can stay with me.”

She doesn’t comment, just lets me pull her toward the door, and I’m glad. For whatever reason, I need to keep her close and know that she’s safe.

When we reach our room, I unlock the door and push it open. And my gaze goes immediately to the bed. There’s just the one and it’s a king-size bed covered in crisp white sheets. Reaching around, I grab the back of my neck and squeeze. Guess I’ll be sleeping in the chair.

Now that the excitement has worn off, I’m not really tired. I’m hungry. As if in agreement, Emma’s stomach rumbles.

“You hungry, too?” I ask and she nods.

“Starving. I can’t remember the last time I ate.”

I glance over at the clock on the night stand and see it’s not quite 11 PM. “Room service delivers until midnight,” I tell her and grab the menu off the desk. Sitting down on the bed, I open it up and pat the space beside me. “What looks good?”

Emma walks over and sits, her thigh brushing mine, and it’s like a live wire touches my leg. I can’t ignore the jolt and I glance over, my eyes immediately zeroing in on the bruise on her delicate jaw.

“How’s your face?” I ask softly. “We should put some ice on that bruise.”

“It’s fine.” She looks over when I lift my hand and trail a finger lightly over the bruise.

“And he didn’t touch you? Hurt you in any other way?” The thought kills me,

but I need to know for sure.

She shakes her head. “No. We were interrupted and he had to leave. But he said he was coming back later for...payment. But you got there before him and saved me. Thank you, Conor.”

Relief fills me that he didn't get the chance to force himself on her. “I'm sorry about all of this, Emma. But I promise we'll take care of it.”

“I know you will.”

“So, what looks good?” I force my attention away from her and stare down at the menu. But it blurs and I'm having trouble focusing when we're this close and her soft scent tickles my nose. Vanilla and lemons. Mmm.

“Honestly, anything. I could eat an elephant.”

I laugh. “You're too tiny,” I say, gaze automatically dipping to her small frame. Compared to me, she's a wisp of a thing and my mouth lands on her cleavage and goes dry. Yet for being so petite, she sure possesses a lot of tempting curves.

“Okay, so how about a grilled cheese and fries instead?”

I nod then stand up, needing to put some space between us. My body is reacting to her on a primitive level and I can't have that. She's too sweet, too young, and I'm not the kind of man she needs. Besides, all I'd do is drag her further into my troubles and that's the last thing I want.

Swiping up the phone, I call downstairs and place an order for a cheeseburger for me and a grilled cheese for her. With extra french fries. I also add a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

“A whole plate of cookies?” she asks after I hang up.

“They're the best,” I tell her. “They always arrive hot and gooey. It's my mom's recipe and they bake them right here.”

“Oh, well I look forward to trying them.”

I nod then grab the ice bucket and tell her that I'll be right back. After quickly filling it at the machine, I go back to the room and wrap some cubes in a

washcloth.

“Here you go.” I hand it to her and she says thank you, then presses it gingerly to the bruise on her face.

For a moment, neither of us says anything and, once again, my attention moves to the bed. “I’ll sleep on the couch, of course,” I tell her. I don’t want her worrying about sleeping in the same bed with me.

“Thank you,” she murmurs softly. “You’ve been nothing but kind to me and...well, I owe your family so much money.”

“How much exactly again?” I ask. Hell, I don’t even remember.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars,” she says, looking ashamed. “I’m so embarrassed and I promise to pay you back.”

“Emma, I’m not worried about it.” That amount of money is a drop in the bucket. My family has billions and the last thing I’d ever do is make her work endless hours, endless years, to pay us back.

“That’s kind of you to say, but I know it’s a lot of money.”

“It’s really not.” She eyes me quizzically and I step closer, drawn to her amazing amber eyes. I’ve never seen eyes quite like hers. “My family has more than enough money, so please stop worrying.”

“That’s very nice of you, but—”

“Emma, please stop worrying,” I say in a firm voice.

She acquiesces with a little nod and before I know it, the food arrives. We sit on the bed, facing each other, and dive into the meal. I don’t remember ever having a cheeseburger that tasted this good and I devour it. Emma eats every bite, too, and then we tear into the chocolate chip cookies.

“Oh, my goodness, you weren’t even kidding,” she says, chewing slowly, savoring the chocolate goodness. “These are amazing.”

“Told you.” I eat half the cookie in one bite then pop the rest of it in my mouth, licking the melty chocolate off my fingers.

Emma takes another bite and moans. “Absolutely decadent.”

That moan goes straight to my dick and I try to ignore the way the lonely guy presses up against my zipper. He wants out to play, but now is not the time. Emma Shepherd is off the table. At least that's what I keep telling myself.

So I have no idea why I reach over and swipe some clinging chocolate away from the corner of her mouth. My hand lingers, fingers lightly touching her face. I guess I'm a glutton for punishment.

But it's her reaction that surprises me even more.

That small, pink tongue of hers darts out of her mouth and lightly licks. I don't know if she means to lick my finger or not, but my reaction is instantaneous. Heat sears through me and the need to kiss her makes me lean forward. Emma leans, too, meeting me halfway, and our lips touch.

Electricity sparks between us and I slide my hand around her neck, dragging her closer, deepening the kiss. When her sweet lips part in invitation, I thrust my tongue into the recesses of her mouth. Exploring, tasting, savoring. She tastes like chocolate and I drink deeply.

It takes my brain a moment to kick back on, but when it does, I pull away. Her eyes open and she blinks at me with those mesmerizing golden beauties.

"What color are your eyes?" I ask huskily, unable to look away.

"I guess you could say amber."

"They're stunning."

"Not nearly as stunning as yours," she says.

"Way better than mine," I whisper and drop another kiss to her lips. With a reluctant sigh, I move further back. I can't do this with her. Keep your distance, Con. She's way too good for you. Besides, I'm supposed to be protecting her, not taking advantage of her.

"Why don't you go ahead and use the bathroom?" I stand up, trying to focus my attention on anything but the memory of how sweet she tastes. Without another word, I grab a pillow off the bed and force myself to go over to the couch. It's hard and uncomfortable, but oh well.

Emma disappears into the bathroom for a bit and I listen to the soft splash of

water from the sink while she washes up, trying to get my body under control. When she reappears five or so minutes later, she hesitates before crawling into the large bed. “Conor?”

“Hmm?”

“I really don’t mind if you sleep in the bed. I trust you.”

Yeah, but I don’t trust myself. The temptation to pull her into my arms is way too strong and I can’t stop thinking about that insanely amazing kiss we shared. I’ve never felt like this about a woman before and my need to protect her, even from myself, is overwhelming.

Despite her invitation, I force myself to back off and remain on the couch.

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

“Oh, okay. Well, goodnight then.”

I swear, I hear disappointment in her voice, but then she turns the light off and the room falls into darkness.

Emma has already been hurt enough by my family. I don’t want to hurt her more. I’m not good with women and relationships like my brothers. Plus, I’m more rough around the edges and Emma is so delicate and feminine. We’re complete opposites.

I spend the next hour unable to fall asleep and try to convince myself that we’re all wrong for each other.

Yet, the moment I do finally sleep, my dreams are filled with the gorgeous blonde with the golden-amber eyes who sleeps within easy reach.

And we are so damn good together in every possible way.

EMMA

S pending the night all by myself in this huge bed, knowing that Conor is so close, yet just out of reach, doesn't feel right. He's been so kind to me. No one ever rescued me before or made sure I was taken care of. And he's done exactly that for both me and my father.

How can I ever repay him?

Several times, I made it clear that I will pay his family back for the debt my dad owes, but he brushed me off. I will pay every cent back, though, whether he believes me or not. I might have to work an extra job to do it, but it's only right.

As tired as I am from all of the action and adventure of the day, I can't seem to fall asleep. The bed is comfortable and I know that I'm safe yet sleep eludes me. Every so often I hear Conor shift on the couch, trying to get comfortable, and it reminds me of his presence.

And what a presence that man possesses. He's so big and strong, and it probably sounds like a cliché, but that is such a turn on. The way he fought off those enforcers earlier still has me a little worked up. Truthfully, no man has ever made me all hot and bothered. But Conor is a different animal. He has me thinking and feeling a lot of things that I never paid much attention to before.

The best part is I think the feeling must be mutual because he kissed me. Although I may not have much to compare it to—just a long ago sloppy kiss from my neighbor boy when I was sixteen—it made my toes curl in the best

possible way. I can still feel the slide of his tongue against mine and how he was so thorough yet also devastatingly tender.

Imagining what it would be like to experience more with him makes me sigh softly into my pillow. I've never been wanton or had enough interest in a man to pursue him much less seduce him. But Conor is a whole different ball game and has me contemplating things I never did before.

Like how I can get him to join me in this big, lonely bed.

Earlier, he asked me how old I was and I think when I said twenty-one it freaked him out. He didn't answer me when I asked his age. If I had to guess, he must be in his late twenties. Thirty at the very most. I suppose it's a bit of an age gap, but nothing too drastic.

I'm going to have to let him know that it's not a big deal. Somehow, I'm going to make him forget about my age.

When I finally fall asleep, my dreams are filled with bright blue eyes and a very broad chest.

Morning arrives soon enough and everything from the other day comes crashing back as I open my eyes. I immediately roll over and see the couch where Conor slept is now empty. Sitting up, shoving my mass of wild blond waves back, I look around the room, but he's gone.

Disappointment floods me until I hear the bathroom door open. Conor steps out, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, and my gaze soaks up every muscle, exposed and not exposed. God, the man is some kind of adonis and my heart flutters in my chest.

"You're up. Sorry," he says awkwardly. "I tried to be quiet."

"You were very quiet. I thought you'd left," I admitted, holding the sheet up under my arms.

Conor strides closer, eyes searching mine. "I wouldn't leave you alone. I said I'd protect you."

Not sure how to respond, I simply nod. Emotion tightens my chest. I'm always the one who takes care of everything, so to have this man step up and

vow to keep me safe is an entirely new experience. One that I could get used to very quickly.

“Actually, I was hoping to go to the gym. If you don’t want to join me, I’ll walk you up to the suite. I’m sure you probably want to see your dad, anyway.”

I’ve seen my dad for the last twenty-one years and, if I’m being honest, it’s depressed me more often than not.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll go with you.” I don’t want to sound too pushy or over-eager, so I add, “It’s early and he’s probably still sleeping, anyway.”

“Right. Well, whenever you’re ready, we can go down.”

“Sure. Give me ten minutes.” I hop out of bed, shoving my bunched-up t-shirt down, grab my leggings and disappear into the bathroom. After quickly using the toilet, I brush my teeth, wash my face and twist my hair back into a knot. If I’m going to be staying here indefinitely, I really need to either run home and pick some things up or buy new ones.

After pulling my leggings on, I step out of the bathroom and spot Conor standing in front of the large floor-to-ceiling window, large arms crossed over his chest. He looks pensive, lost in thought, and I clear my throat. He turns and his gaze skates down my body.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way I could pick up some things at home?” I ask hopefully.

“Absolutely not,” he grunts. My shoulders sag and he quickly adds, “But if you make a list of what you need, I can send someone over to pick it up. That okay?”

“That works. Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

Conor starts walking to the door and I jog to catch up. His legs are ridiculously long with thighs as thick as tree trunks. I can’t deny it—they make my mouth water and I wonder if they feel as hard as they look.

Giving my head a shake, I follow him to the elevator and after waiting a

minute, the door slides open. Conor motions for me to enter first and, again, I'm struck by how he's such a gentleman. It makes my heart speed up.

The elevator starts down and I shift, surreptitiously studying him from beneath my lashes. He looks so stoic and solid. Especially when he crosses his arms like he's doing. It's too quiet and I hate uncomfortable silences, so I do the only thing I can—try to fill it with meaningless conversation.

“So, your family owns this hotel?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

He nods.

“How long have you owned it?” Inwardly, I cringe at my own question. Really, Em, who cares?

Conor thinks for a minute then says, “For as long as I can remember.”

“Do you stay here a lot?” I regret the question before it even fully leaves my mouth. If he's staying here then it probably means he's bringing a woman to hook up with. The apartment over his fight club isn't that far away and the only reason he'd probably come here is because he doesn't want to take a lover home.

The idea of Conor bringing another woman here to spend the night with her—to kiss her and touch her and have sex with her—makes me feel ill.

I want to slap my palm against my forehead and backpedal, but he quickly saves me and in an easy voice says, “No. I haven't stayed here in years. And only then because the plumbing burst at the club.”

“Oh.” His answer fills me with relief and I instantly feel better. He doesn't use this place as his hook up joint and I'm glad.

The elevator reaches its stop on the second floor and we step out. There's a glass door and Conor leads me over, swinging it open. The gym is bigger than I expected and looks like it has all of the latest equipment on hand. There's even a smoothie bar in the corner.

“This is really nice,” I say, looking around.

“I like to work out, so I made sure this place was updated. It's not as nice as

my club, but it'll do in a pinch.”

Conor walks over to a machine and starts messing around with the weights. He's adding more and more, and my eyes must widen comically because the edge of his mouth lifts in a smirk.

“That's an awful lot,” I comment.

He shrugs a shoulder and moves around to stand between a couple of handles that he grips and then begins to pull on which, in turn, lift the weights. The muscles beneath his t-shirt strain, flexing deliciously, and I watch closely, unable to help myself.

God, I hope I'm not drooling, I think, and discreetly check the corner of my mouth.

“I didn't start with this much,” he admits modestly. “It's something that I had to build up to.”

It takes me a moment to realize I'm leaning against a piece of equipment, watching him like he's eye candy. Straightening up, my cheeks flush as I look around and wonder what I can do, other than stare at Conor.

There's a stationary bike not too far away and I wander over and hop up on it. I don't have time to exercise and I certainly don't have extra money to pay for a gym membership. But I am very active, always running around and on my feet. Truth is, I think I'm blessed with a fast metabolism and I try to cook instead of eating a lot of fast food.

So, basically, I don't know how long I'm going to be able to keep pedaling this damn bike. Already my legs are starting to burn and I look over to see Conor watching me. Trying not to notice, I pedal away and pretend this isn't the first time I've been on an exercise bike in probably ten years.

Conor finishes up his set and moves to another machine, making his way closer to me. This one has him sitting and ohmygod. Those thighs of his might be my undoing. They're massive and when he pushes the weights up, they bulge in the most stomach-fluttering way.

“Do you normally work out?” he asks.

Oh, Lord, it must be so obvious that I'm really out of shape compared to him. "Um, not really," I answer, being honest, and starting to huff and puff. "It's one of those things that I always want to do, but never have the time to keep up. Plus, gym memberships are pricey and, well, we just have too many, ah, bills."

Having a gym membership always seemed like a frivolous perk to me when I had more important things begging to be paid. If I wanted to start walking more, I could always do it outside. There's no need to be on a treadmill. And if I wanted to lift some weights, I could always just use something at home, like bags of sugar.

But watching Conor work out is rather priceless and my eyes are glued to him.

"Well, you're always more than welcome to use the machines at my club. Free of charge, of course."

I give him a small smile and it suddenly occurs to me that he might think I'm some sort of charity case. Or worse, a mooch. Ugh. Is that what this is about? He feels bad for the poor girl? My feet stop pedaling because, yeah, I'm tired, but I'm also unhappy by the idea that he might be taking pity on me.

"Tired already?" he asks with a teasing grin.

I slip off the bike and frown, trying to ignore the sweat on his ridiculously attractive face which makes his flawless skin look like it's glowing. I've never found a sweaty man attractive, but Conor has my stomach doing multiple somersaults. Somersaults that are working their way lower and lower. Their foreign flipping is now infiltrating my nether regions and it's definitely not sweat that's soaking my panties.

It's a need to feel all of that big, sweaty man pressed up against me. The desire to taste his kiss again. To explore his rugged body and touch all those hard muscles. He's just so utterly and completely masculine and it's calling out to my girly parts like a beacon in the night.

"Conor?" I ask. He's grunting through the final few reps and I press my thighs together.

Uh...uh...uh... followed by one final, low groan. "Yeah?" He looks over at

me and swipes a hand down his face.

The sounds he's making have my thoughts turning steamy and I can't help but wonder if that's what he sounds like when—

Stop it, I scold myself. Whatever sounds he makes when he's in the bedroom is none of my business.

My cheeks burn and I need to know the truth about why he's really helping me.

“Do you view me as, um...” I take a moment to search for the right words. “I guess what I mean is, I don't want your charity. I'm grateful for your help, but I don't want you to feel sorry for me or—”

“I don't,” he says and reaches a hand back to yank his shirt up and off.

As he tosses the shirt and reaches for a towel, wiping it over his face and chest, I think I just had my first orgasm from a man.

Grabbing onto the bike to hold myself up, trying to lock my wobbly knees, I watch him stalk over, quickly eating up the space between us, and stopping directly in front of me.

“Emma, my uncle hurt you and your father. I'm sorry for that and I want to make sure it doesn't happen again.”

My shoulders sag slightly at his answer. So he's doing this out of a sense of responsibility. I'd like to think the attraction I'm feeling is mutual, but apparently that kiss last night meant nothing to him. I'm being silly and imagining things that aren't really there.

“What's wrong?” he asks, searching my eyes.

I feel like such an idiot. “Nothing.” I turn my head and his hand shoots out, grabs my chin and turns it back. Forcing me to look up at him.

“Emma, I asked you what's wrong,” he repeats in a firm, yet gentle voice.

Swallowing down my nerves, I decide to go for broke and lay my cards on the table. “I just thought that maybe...maybe there might be more going on.” He arches a dark, thick brow. “Between us, I mean.”

Before I can say another word or have another doubt, Conor slams his mouth against mine and all coherent thought goes out the window.

CONOR

Holy hell, no one ever tasted this good. Like sunshine and lemons and my favorite dessert all rolled into one. Emma is so sweet, so eager, and she kisses me back with so much innocence. Offering herself up to the moment, to the kiss, to me and to whatever crazy thing is happening between us.

I love how responsive she is and I deepen the kiss, forcing her head back slightly, sliding my tongue along hers. She mimics whatever I do, and that only encourages me to keep kissing her. Usually, I'm more controlled, but Emma makes me come undone. It's wet and sloppy and so damn needy. My usual technique disappears and we're swept away in the passionate moment.

And that's never happened to me before. I've kissed plenty of women in my twenty-eight years, but this is a completely different level of desire pulsing through me. Yeah, sure, I've fucked my share of women, too. But I don't want to just fuck Emma. I want to make her reach the highest level of pleasure possible and then shatter in bliss with me. I want to hear my name on her lips as she comes so hard, she's writhing and screaming beneath me.

Not just beneath me. In front of me, beside me, above me. I want this beautiful angel in every way possible. I could happily die inside her.

Breaking the kiss, I lean my forehead against hers and I'm panting. My dick is painfully hard and I'm really glad we're the only ones in here right now. Sinking my hand into her hair, loosening the knot at the base of her neck, I start kissing along her neck. Licking, sucking, enjoying the silky texture of

her skin.

My tongue swirls and teases, and Emma presses into me. My mouth latches onto hers again, a deep desire driving me. The need to possess her is overwhelming and I shove my hands under her ass, lift her off the ground as if she weighs no more than a child, and spin around. Her legs wrap around my narrow hips and I push her up against the nearest wall, refusing to break the kiss.

Hell, I couldn't stop kissing her for anything in the world. Not even for a billion dollars. She's too sweet, too perfect. Utterly priceless.

I lay my palms flat against the wall, on either side of her head, and our tongues tangle wildly. Again, there's no technique involved in what's happening. Just pure, unadulterated need spiking through my blood, making my body burn with need. Actually, I think most of my blood has gone south and my dick is hard and ready. So goddamn ready to plunge into her sweet depths.

But I'd never fuck her up against a wall in the hotel gym. Emma Shepherd deserves so much more than that. She should have candlelight and music and satin sheets. Emma also deserves a man much better than myself but, at this moment, I don't care. I'm going to keep kissing her and enjoying the feelings that she's stirring up within me.

Protectiveness, lust, need, desire...the list is endless. This little wisp of a girl has big ol' me ready to fall to my knees and do whatever she commands. I'm at her mercy and I'd go to war for her.

A ringing fills the air and I know it's my phone. Reluctantly, I pull away and look into Emma's golden gaze. She looks a little dazed and my mouth edges up. "I have to get that," I murmur and drop another quick kiss on her full lips. "It might be Liam."

She nods and I loosen my hold, enjoying the feel of her sliding down my body. Turning, I follow the ringing sound because I can't remember where I left my phone. I'm too wound up and caught in a lust-filled fog from that epic kiss we just shared.

Spotting it on a bench, I walk over and swipe it up. It's Liam. Thank God.

“Liam!”

“What the hell is going on?” my twin asks. We’re identical, but anyone who knows us can tell us apart immediately. His voice is a little more gravely than mine, his body a bit leaner. My nose is slightly crooked from being broken three times and he’s missing the top portion of his baby finger from when Matteo Marino cut it off.

“Desmond is back from Dublin courtesy of that weasel, Sean Flannigan.”

My brother curses. “Yeah, I heard. When we finally got service and I saw the fifty missed calls and messages, I knew something was wrong.”

“We need you back here, Liam. All hell broke loose and Desmond kicked mom and Fin out of the compound. We’re all in the city right now at the hotel and he has enforcers everywhere. Emma said he’s out for all of us and won’t hesitate to take his own family out.”

“Wait a second. Who’s Emma?”

My gaze slides over to the gorgeous blonde and I turn away and adjust the hard-on in my gym shorts. “Is it possible I could call you right back?”

There’s a lot I want to talk to Liam about, but not necessarily in front of Emma.

“Sure. Rory and I are in town and my reception is good.”

“Gimme ten minutes,” I tell him and disconnect the call. Turning to Emma, I say, “Let’s head back upstairs. I’m going to take you up to see your dad and call Liam back. We’re gonna be a while.”

She nods, seeming a little shy after our hot kiss. Christ, there’s so much more I want to do with her. I haven’t even begun to explore that curvy, little body or pleasure her the way I want.

No. Not gonna happen, Con.

Fighting the internal struggle going on of wanting Emma and knowing she’s too good for me, I try to act normal as we get in the elevator and take it up to the suite. My gaze dips to her and she’s still flushed from our heated encounter. Unable to stop myself, I reach out and lay a hand along her jaw.

Our eyes lock.

No matter how much I know I shouldn't touch her, it's like a magnet trying to not cling to metal. I'm powerless to the pull she has over me.

"Everything is going to be okay. I promise." My voice is low, harsher than I intend. But I need her to know that I will keep her safe until everything is resolved.

She turns her soft cheek into my palm. "Thank you, Conor."

Emotion thickens my throat but before I can comment, the elevator door glides open and I pull my hand back. I instantly miss her warmth and softness. Touching her is starting to become a habit. And it's definitely a habit I don't want to break.

We head over to the suite and I knock. Finley opens the door with a big grin, hugs me then hugs Emma who looks a little surprised since the two have barely spoken to each other. But that's my little sister. She's a bouncing ball of exuberant energy and loves everyone and everything.

"Emma, your dad is so funny!" Finley exclaims and tugs her over where Jonathan Shepherd appears to be holding court with my mom, sister and Griffin.

"He is?" Emma asks, clearly surprised by Finley's words. With wide eyes, she looks over to her dad who waves at us. He's shuffling a deck of cards and it looks like he's entertaining the group with tricks because he asks my mom to pick one.

Walking closer, staying beside Emma, I watch the amazement wash over her face. First, I think she's surprised to see her father up and out of bed this early. And second, he appears to be happy and, from what she's told me, I don't think she's seen him smile much since her mother passed away.

I tilt my head, looking from my mom to Jonathan Shepherd who seem to be hitting it off. Interesting. My mom lost my dad almost two years ago and I never imagined her being with another man. But with hindsight, I know she wasn't happy with Nolan O'Shea. At least not in the end. Although they never fought in front of us kids, I could feel the tension between them. My mom is a sweet woman and my dad was a cruel, power hungry man.

Their match was probably doomed from the beginning.

“Hiya, honey,” Jonathan says with a quick wave to his daughter. Then he returns his attention to the sleight of hand trick and, in moments, my mom and Finley are oohing and ahing, and Griffin just gurgles because he’s too little to know what’s going on.

Glancing down at Emma makes my heart catch. Her golden eyes are shining with happiness and disbelief. It’s probably been a very long time since she’s seen her father smile, and seeing Emma happy makes me incredibly happy.

For a few minutes, we watch them. Then I give her arm a squeeze. “Be back in a little bit,” I tell Emma and she nods, wandering over to sit down with her dad and the others.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I leave the suite and head back down to my room. Once the door is shut, I call Liam and he answers on the first ring.

“Okay, bro, fill me in on everything you know and what I’ve missed,” Liam says.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I start telling Liam everything that has transpired since Sully warned me that Desmond was back in town and out to take over our family organization. He listens closely, asking a question here or there, and when I get to the part about Emma being used as payment for her father’s gambling debt, he makes a disgusted sound.

“I couldn’t let him hurt her,” I say. “Desmond is a bigger monster than ever before and I knew he was going to hurt her. Use her.”

“So you got her out?”

“Yeah. I snuck back into the compound and had to take down a couple of thugs, but I got her out safely. But when we got back to my place, an enforcer was waiting. I stabbed him with his own knife. Sully took care of the body.”

“Jesus,” Liam replies.

“We need to figure out a way to put the brakes on whatever it is Desmond is trying to do.”

“You guys need to stay put. For now, anyway. Rory and I are going to leave

as soon as we hang up and we'll take the jet back and meet you at the hotel. What about Raff and Sofia?"

"They're here. Raff wasn't taking any chances by staying at his place, especially not with Sofia being pregnant."

"Okay, good." My brother assures Rory that her younger sister is safe then says, "So what exactly is going on between you and Emma?"

"What?" I splutter, not expecting that question.

"You know, you and the woman you rescued. Don't even deny it. Every time you say her name, I hear the way your voice changes. Spill it, Con."

For a moment I don't know what to say, but I may as well be honest. Besides, no one knows me as well as Liam and if I lied, my twin would know. We've never been able to keep secrets from each other. We're too in tune.

"Emma is just a really special woman," I say carefully. "But she isn't for me."

"Why not?"

"First of all, she's too young," I insist.

"How old is she? At least eighteen?"

I frown. "Well, yeah, of course. She's twenty-one."

"Hell, Con, you made it sound like she's twelve. Okay, so you've got a few years between you. Big deal."

"Seven years," I state.

"Which is nothing. What's your next problem?"

"She's too good for me. That's the main problem."

"What do you mean?"

"She's like this ball of light and innocence and I'm...not. I'm the opposite of her. Hell, I killed someone right in front of her."

"In order to protect her," he clarifies.

“Well, yeah, but still. As much as I’m drawn to her, I feel like if I take too much, I’ll just end up sullyng her.. She’s just so tiny and innocent and I’m... not.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the phrase opposites attract?”

My only answer is a grunt.

“How does she feel about you?”

That’s a good question and I mull it over for a minute. From what I can tell, she certainly seems to enjoy kissing me. And when I had her pressed against the wall earlier down in the gym, she was definitely into it. Giving as good as she was getting.

When I don’t respond, Liam asks, “Has anything happened?”

“We’ve kissed a couple of times,” I admit.

“And she kisses you back?”

“Of course, she does. Quite enthusiastically,” I can’t help but add.

“Then get over yourself, Con, and don’t fuck this up. You don’t ever fall and if this woman is making you feel things that you never have before, then you owe it to yourself to pursue it further with her. Trust me. I know.”

I know he’s referring to Rory and how he did his best to stay away from her after discovering she was Matteo Marino’s daughter. It’s been ingrained in our heads since we were young that the Marino family is our rival and our enemy. But both my brothers have married Marino women, so that’s put quite a damper on the feud.

Fine by us. We never fully understood it, anyway.

But now with Desmond back, we have a lot more to worry about than Matteo Marino. All of our futures are at stake because Desmond is out for control and if that means spilling his own family’s blood, he won’t hesitate or think twice.

And that makes him a very dangerous enemy.

Liam and I talk for a little while longer and then say goodbye. He should

arrive at the hotel by early evening and then we can all sit down and come up with a game plan to defeat Desmond. In the meantime, I take a quick shower and wash away my workout. I also relieve some of the sexual tension thrumming through my body and jerk off.

Since I'm not going to be fucking Emma any time soon, it's best to give my poor dick some relief.

The problem is, the moment I'm around Emma again and smell her soft lemon vanilla scent, I start getting hard all over again. She's like this siren, calling to me, and I'm dying to have her. All of her.

But I refuse to cross that line again. It's not good for either of us. Nothing can happen, I keep telling myself. Over and over again. Like a loop replaying through my head.

My mind hears it, but my heart isn't really on board and my dick never got the notice because I'm sitting with Emma right now and he's raring to go.

Fuck. This is miserable.

Could Liam be right? I wonder. Do I owe it to myself and Emma to see what might be between us?

Doing my best to not breathe her delicious scent in too deeply and ignore the way her soft thigh brushes mine, I grit my teeth and focus on baby Griffin who Finley is bouncing up and down on her knee.

We've been talking about Desmond and what we know. My mom has the most insight because she remembers when he used to run things with our father.

"But they had a falling out," she tells us.

"Why don't I remember that?" I ask.

"Because you were too busy doing your own thing and starting up your club. And because I didn't want you kids to worry about it. Nolan had us involved in a lot of questionable things and Desmond dug the hole deeper. I'm not sticking up for Nolan or agreeing with his choices or pretending I didn't feign ignorance for so long, but Desmond always possessed a different kind of

darkness. While Nolan made decisions based on what would bring in the most revenue, Desmond didn't always care."

"He's ruthless," I say, thinking back about how he treated Emma and the things he said. The whole situation makes me uneasy because I know Desmond will do whatever it takes to steal the business away and run it himself.

"More than ruthless," my mom tells us.

"What exactly do you mean by more than ruthless? Matteo Marino is ruthless. Dad was ruthless. What makes Desmond worse?" Rafferty asks.

"Because he doesn't have an empathetic bone in his body. And when you add that with being bloodthirsty, it's a very dangerous combination."

A very dangerous combination indeed.

We all end up spending the day together in the suite and instead of only focusing on Desmond, we talk, share stories, play games and do a lot of laughing. By evening, my cheeks hurt from smiling and my side aches. I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard.

Liam ends up calling and tells us he won't be able to fly out until tomorrow earliest. Apparently, the jet is having mechanical issues and I tell him it's fine. There's no need to risk anything and they should wait until it's all fixed up and ready to go. In the meantime, we're all safe and secure in the hotel and I tell him not to worry.

With Liam out of town, my family's safety falls on me and as long as we stay here where security is tight, everyone will be fine.

The only thing that isn't fine is my increasing attraction to Emma. Every time I look at her, a scorching heat thrums through my entire body and my hands itch to pull her into my arms.

Despite the pull and overwhelming attraction, I resist.

Later that night, I'm back on the couch, trying to ignore my tented pajama bottoms, and the fact that Emma is so very close. The damn air smells like lemons and vanilla. It's enough to drive me mad while the overpowering urge

to reach out and touch her is killing me. But I hold back and curse my incessant ache for her.

At this point, only one thing will cure it and that's slipping into her bed and fucking her senseless. But I can't do that. And the last thing I want her to think is that she owes me.

Yes, I may have rescued her from Desmond and brought her and her dad here for safekeeping, but I'm not like my uncle. Demanding or expecting sexual favors in exchange for my help and protection isn't something I do.

With a sigh, I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to think gentlemanly thoughts, but unable to stop picturing Emma naked and writhing in my arms as my hips piston, pounding into her sweet, little body.

Fuck.

Uncomfortable, sweating profusely, I roll off the couch and stomp over to the sliding glass door. Opening it up, I step out onto the balcony, desperate for some cool, fresh air. Needing like hell to escape the tantalizing scent of lemons and vanilla.

EMMA

I haven't been able to fall asleep and listening to Conor toss and turn and sigh isn't helping the situation. Finally, he rolls off the couch and walks over to the sliding glass door, opens it and steps onto the balcony.

There's a lot going on and maybe thoughts of Desmond taking over and the need to protect his family is keeping him up. Stressing him out. There is the possibility it could be something else, though.

It could be me, I realize.

If Conor is feeling anything like I'm feeling, then I'm definitely contributing to his anxiety. I don't want to or mean it, but there's no denying the truth. That kiss we shared earlier in the gym was electric. It's making me wonder what else we could do that would cause sparks.

The air in the room feels thick, almost sensual, and it's hanging over me like a humid blanket. No wonder he went outside to get some fresh air. Sliding out of bed, I decide two things. First, I'm going to join him on the balcony. And second, I'm going to try to ease the sexual tension between us.

There's really only one way to do that. I'm going to sleep with Conor O'Shea.

Granted, he might decide to play the Knight In Shining Armor card and turn me away, but that would be the wrong decision. If anything, by giving in to our desire, it will help free his mind for what's to come with Desmond. He needs to focus all of his attention on that and not waste time fantasizing about

us.

Plus, there's also the fact that I owe him everything. He saved me and my father, and now he's protecting and caring for us when he doesn't have to. I want to pay him back somehow and the only thing of value I have to offer is my virginity.

But will he even want it?

It's not like I've been purposely saving it or anything, but I'm glad I did. Because more than anything, I'd like to give it to Conor. He's everything a man should be and there's no one more deserving. He impresses me in so many ways and, of course, there's the simple fact that I'm incredibly attracted to him.

The thought of spending the night in Conor's arms, giving my body to him, makes me erupt in shivers. Reaching the sliding glass door, I pull in a deep breath then open it up and step outside.

Conor's head snaps around and his eyes skate down my body. I'm only wearing a t-shirt again and it hits me mid-thigh. It's oversized and not what I'd consider very sexy, but the hungry look in his gaze makes me think he likes it. A lot.

"What's wrong?" he asks, stepping closer.

Once again, his words make my heart melt because he's always putting my safety above all else. "Nothing," I say, wrapping my arms around myself. It's not the air out here that's giving me goosebumps; it's the amazingly hot, shirtless man. "It's just a little warm in there and I needed some fresh air."

Although I have to admit that seeing Conor's wide, strong chest and ripped abs is making me warmer. Maybe this is a mistake. I don't know how to seduce this man. He's too beautiful in a rugged, untamed sort of way. How am I going to handle all that raw masculinity?

Doubts begin creeping in and he moves right in front of me and lifts his arms, running his calloused hands up and down my arms. "You're chilled," he murmurs, rubbing the prickled skin.

"No, I'm actually overheating," I tell him. My eyes lift to meet his. "For

you.”

He freezes, gaze locking on mine, and I swallow hard.

“Emma,” he practically groans. “Don’t tell me that.”

“But it’s true,” I insist. “I’ve never met anyone like you, Conor.”

“There’s nothing special about me,” he murmurs, his fingers digging into my upper arms.

“That’s not true. You put others in front of yourself. I’ve experienced your kindness firsthand and I’m forever grateful for what you’ve done for me and my father.” Pulling in a deep breath, I lift my hands and lay them flat on his chest. His skin is warm and firm, yet when I touch him, he flinches. “I want to thank you.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” he grits out.

“Actually, I owe you twenty-five grand,” I say with a small smirk. “But you’re an honorable man and will let me pay it off over time which I appreciate.”

“I already told you, I don’t want your money.”

“Then let me give you something else,” I murmur, standing up on my tip-toes and pressing a kiss to his stubbled jawline because that’s all I can reach. I’m too short to reach his lips, but the soft kiss along his jaw seems to work because I notice a muscle flex there. He’s fighting his feelings, his desires, and all I want is for him to let go and give in to me.

“Emma,” he growls. “You’re playing with fire.”

“I don’t have much to offer you,” I whisper. “But I have myself.”

A blue fire flares to life in his gaze and my heart thunders. “Be very clear with what you’re saying right now because I am hanging on by a thread, sweetheart.”

“I want you...in my bed,” I tell him.

Whatever is holding Conor back snaps like a rubber band stretched too far and he pulls me against his hard body, dips his head and slams his mouth

against mine. Sensations flood me and I slide my hands up, skimming them through his hair which needs a cut. But I love the tousled feel and whimper softly when his tongue pushes past my lips.

It's like he's claiming me, and I open my mouth more, letting him know that I'm all his. Leaning into his hard, muscled body, I can feel his big, steel length pressing into my belly and, for a moment, I wonder if he's too large. He's so tall, muscled and big in every way, and it's a little intimidating.

He must feel me tense up a little because he immediately breaks the kiss, grabs my chin and lifts it up. His dark blue eyes search mine as he asks, "What's wrong?"

Clearing my throat, I try to look away, but he doesn't let me.

"Talk to me, Emma."

My mouth opens and I'm not sure how to tell him his size is a little scary. But I know Conor will understand and not belittle or make fun of my concerns. "I'm just, um, nervous."

"I would never hurt you," he tells me.

"I know you wouldn't. The truth is, I've never done this before and you're like a size XXL while I'm more like a small. What if we don't fit?"

His shoulders sag slightly. "First, we are going to fit together perfectly. I'm sure of it." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and there's something deep in his eyes that wasn't there before. It's almost like he's looking at me a little differently. "And, second, I'll make sure you're ready for me."

His words give me the reassurance I need and I lean in and press a kiss over his heart. "Please take me to bed, Conor," I whisper.

I don't have to ask again. He sweeps me up into his arms, carries me back inside and lays me down on the bed. Then he crawls over me, propping himself on his elbows, and his mouth descends. The kiss is slow, hot and so very thorough. The way his mouth moves over mine, taking, but also giving, has me arching beneath him. He uses his tongue, teeth and lips. It's clear he knows what he's doing because the fire between us is burning brighter than ever and my need for him is becoming too much to bear.

Soft, needy whimpers escape my throat and fill the air as he continues kissing me passionately then trails steamy kisses down the side of my neck. His hand disappears under my t-shirt, pulling it up, and his fingers skim over the edge of my panties. The touch is light and I squirm beneath him, wanting more. So much more.

Trailing his lips lower, Conor slides his other hand over my breast, cupping it through the t-shirt, molding it. I may be small, but I have plenty of curves and the fleshy globe fills his hand, fitting perfectly.

“I need my mouth on you,” he rasps then reaches down and pulls the t-shirt up. I help wriggle it off and being topless in front of Conor is nerve wracking. He’s so built and my nerves kick in when his gaze slides down to stare at me. “Gorgeous,” he murmurs. Then he leans down and begins kissing first one breast then the other.

I’m practically panting and when he sucks a taut nipple into his mouth, I press closer, offering myself to him. His tongue swirls and his teeth lightly scrape against the sensitive bud and it’s almost more than I can bear. I never imagined anything feeling so good.

Until he reaches for my panties and slides them down my legs. Lying there naked as his hot blue gaze roams over my body, I try not to get in my head. But he immediately starts whispering words of reassurance, telling me how beautiful and perfect I am.

Conor’s warm lips kiss along my stomach, hip and then graze my thigh. Breathing hard, I wait to see what he does next and he doesn’t keep me in suspense for long. He uses his shoulder to nudge my legs apart and his tongue skims up my inner thigh. With his face between my legs, I wait with bated breath. Conor lightly blows on my center then laps his tongue up my seam.

“Oh, God...” I moan. He keeps doing it then pulls my clit into his mouth and sucks. I try to twist away, but he holds my hips firmly against the mattress, so all I can do is dig my fingers into the sheets and squeeze my hands into fists.

The sensations pummeling through my lower body grow in intensity until I’m on the verge of screaming.

“Conor!” I gasp, unable to take much more.

“Hold still. I’m not done yet.”

“I-I can’t,” I cry. My hips undulate against his face and, at this point, I have no control over my body. The pressure keeps building and just when I think I can’t take anymore, Conor slips a finger inside my core.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he says, moving it in and out. When he adds a second finger, scissoring them, stretching me, my head drops back. He keeps strumming my clit, alternately sucking on it, and the pulsing between my legs increases.

I can’t take much more and it feels like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, on the verge of falling over.

“Come on, sweetheart, you’re so close,” he murmurs. “Let go.”

And I do. A cry rips from my throat and my inner muscles tighten around his thrusting fingers as waves of pleasure roll through my lower body. Suddenly, everything feels loose and flowy, and my eyes flutter shut.

Conor pulls back and when I open my eyes again, I see him shoving his pajama bottoms down. Even though it’s dark, there’s no mistaking the thick, long cock reaching for the ceiling between his legs. He slides back up my body and settles between my legs. Then his mouth captures mine in a kiss that makes me dizzy.

I can taste myself on his lips and it’s strange at first. His hands roam over my body, exploring everywhere, and I can’t believe it, but I’m starting to heat up again. He has this power over me and in less than a minute, I’m moaning and rubbing against his hot, weeping erection.

“Hang on,” he murmurs, rolling off the bed.

Slightly dazed with passion, I watch him bend over, dig through a duffel bag and return a moment later. He tears the condom open with his teeth, rolls it up his length and drops down between my legs again.

“Are you ready for me, sweetheart?”

I whimper when I feel his thick head press against my hot core. “Yes, please, Conor.”

I can see the way he grits his jaw, the strain on his face, and how he's trying to go slow even though it's difficult. Carefully, he starts to enter me. Slow and easy and with so much consideration that I want to cry. And just when I think my body can't stretch to accommodate him any further, he slides back out and begins again. Taking his time, putting my wants and needs above his like always. As he sinks deeper, the pleasure-pain envelopes me and I wrap my legs around his waist.

My heart and body expand fully, welcoming him all the way in and I sigh softly.

Conor O'Shea is a very dangerous man in more ways than one. But he's my hero in every single way.

CONOR

I'm probably about to pop a vein on my forehead, but I do everything in my power to maintain my stringent control even though everything in me wants to let loose and start pounding away like a lust-filled mad man.

But this is Emma. Sweet, sweet Emma who just handed me her virginity and I'm going to cherish it. No matter how much I'm dying, I grit my teeth and force myself to give her a moment to get used to the feel of me inside her.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

A laugh bursts from my throat. "I think I'm supposed to ask you that question."

"I'm good, but you seem a little tense."

I'm a helluva lot more than a little tense and if I don't start moving soon, I think I'm going to die. But if I have to go, I suppose being balls-deep in Emma is the way to leave this world. Very slowly, I begin rocking my hips, trying to hold off the orgasm that is threatening to explode and launch me into the stratosphere.

"Let me know if anything hurts or is uncomfortable, okay?"

"Okay," she murmurs, wiggling her hips slightly. Her short nails are digging into my arms and her legs are wrapped around me tightly, and it feels like heaven.

"Now move with me, sweetheart. Yeah, just like that."

She's a fast learner and my desire to please her has me keeping a slow, rhythmic drag, allowing her to keep up with me. It's taking its toll, though, and I need her to get there first and fast before I blow.

Reaching down between our bodies, I find her swollen clit and start circling it with my finger, trying to draw another orgasm out of her. Lucky for me, it doesn't take long. Emma's body tenses and her inner muscles clamp down, trying to pull me deeper.

Holy shit. Holding myself up on my elbows, a bead of sweat rolls down my temple as I watch her ride out her release. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen and the selfish bastard in me takes great joy from knowing I'm the first man to give her this pleasure and make her come like this.

A small cry rips from her throat and I can't hold back another second. Picking up my pace, I adjust her hips and then it's go time. Telling myself to be careful, I thrust into her core harder than before, my eyes on her, looking for any sign of distress or discomfort. But my girl just closes her eyes and drops her head back on the pillow, tightening her legs around my waist and holding on for dear life.

There are no words to describe what it truly feels like being deep inside her, our bodies moving together. Sometimes sex can feel hot and dirty, or it can be completely emotionless, and other times it's been nothing more than a physical release. But with Emma, it's so much more.

And the complete and total difference between her and the other women I've been with throws me off. There's no comparison. It's like night and day. Despite my other partners being more experienced, Emma has me coming harder than I ever have in my life.

Mine.

With a groan, my release hits me like a freight train and I explode so hard, I see stars. My entire body shudders and the bed quakes beneath us. My elbows give out and I roll to the side so I don't crush her, landing on my back. Breathing hard, heart thundering in my chest, I stare up at the ceiling, trying to gain some semblance of control.

That little girl just rocked my world off its damn axis.

Turning my head, I sneak a glance at her and her amber eyes meet mine. My words are caught in my throat and I can't seem to pull them out. I want to ask if she's okay, to make sure I didn't hurt her, but her mouth edges up in a grin and I return the smile.

Whether she knows it or not, that one little smile has the power to bring me to my knees. I would do anything to protect and help Emma. And to stay in her bed, even though I don't deserve it.

"Are you okay?" she asks cheekily.

"Never been better," I respond and reach over to tuck a lock of loose hair behind her ear. For a long moment, we just stare at each other, almost as though we're trying to understand what just happened.

Since this was her first time, maybe she thinks what transpired between us is normal. But it was so much more than a regular fuck.

"Be right back," I murmur and slide out of bed. I walk into the bathroom, reach down to pull off the condom and notice her blood on it. My heart catches. Not only because I caused her pain, even though that couldn't be avoided, but also because there's a damn tear.

Fuck.

How in the hell did this happen when I was so damn careful? Telling myself not to panic, I toss the damn defective thing in the trash with a muttered curse. Realistically, the odds of her getting pregnant are low.

Right?

Even so, there is a possibility.

Swiping a hand through my tousled hair, I grab a washcloth, run it under warm water and go back to the bed.

Emma looks a little uneasy, already covered up and tucked beneath the sheet.

"May I?" I ask. She just blinks, eyes the washcloth, then holds out her hand.

"I can do it."

But I shake my head, craving that moment of intimacy with her. "Let me,

sweetheart.”

When she doesn't move, I reach for the sheet she's clutching like a lifeline and slowly tug it away, exposing her naked body. Her skin is still flushed and warm. Lowering the washcloth between her legs, I carefully clean her.

Afterward, I get rid of the washcloth, climb back into bed and pull her into my arms. Pressing a kiss to her temple, breathing in her soft scent, I know I'm a goner. This is what Liam and Rafferty must have experienced with Rory and Sofia. There aren't exactly words to accurately describe the depth of what I'm feeling. Just an overwhelming sensation that everything is right and good and wonderful.

“That was amazing,” I tell her. “Just, ah, one little thing you should know.”

Emma turns in my arms, brow furrowing. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Christ, no. You were perfect in every way. More than perfect.” She relaxes slightly, searching my face.

“What then?”

Shit. There's really no easy way to say it, so I don't bother trying to sugarcoat it. “I noticed the condom tore.”

Her amber eyes widen and I hate causing her any sort of anxiety. “So it didn't work?”

“I mean, I think it did, but there's a chance it might not have. Can you get pregnant right now?”

Emma tilts her head, mentally counting, and it occurs to me that her having my baby wouldn't be the end of the world. In fact, seeing her belly swollen with my seed is making me hard again.

What the fuck is wrong with me? You don't want her to get pregnant.

At least, that's what I tell myself. But secretly, some deep, dark, twisted part of me wants it. On a primal, possessive level.

She isn't yours, Con. Not really.

What will it take to make her mine, though? I wonder.

“I think I should be okay,” she finally says. But she doesn’t sound one-hundred percent convinced and I lay a hand along her face, gently brushing my thumb over her full lower lip.

“Whatever happens, I don’t run away. If you need me, I’m here.”

She nods then leans her face into my palm. Despite my better judgment, I capture her lips and kiss her passionately. Once again, it strikes me how different Emma is from everyone else. Pushing her away and trying to keep my distance didn’t work, so I decide to do the opposite instead.

I’m going to embrace whatever is happening between us and enjoy each moment while we’re tucked away together in the hotel, in our own little slice of heaven.

Because once Liam returns, everything is going to change.

We spend the rest of the night wrapped up in each other’s arms and sleep no longer eludes me. My body is satiated and my heart is full. Pleasant dreams filled with sunshine, lemons and Emma’s smiling face fill my dreams.

Morning arrives and we keep sleeping, unwilling to leave the comfort of the bed and each other’s warmth. Cuddling and lingering in bed with a woman is new, something I’ve never done before, but I embrace it. With Emma, it feels good and normal.

Eventually, though, my phone buzzes and I see Rafferty’s name flashing on the screen. Untwining myself from Emma’s arms and legs, I reach over and grumble a sleepy, “Hey, Raff.”

“Are you still in bed?” he asks, sounding absolutely astounded.

“Maybe,” I answer and yawn.

“The Conor I know would’ve already worked out, sparred and had a smoothie by now. You realize it’s after ten o’clock, right?”

“What do you want, Raff?” I growl. “Because if you don’t have anything important to say, I’m hanging up.”

Emma sighs softly, slipping out of my arms, and I feel her loss immediately.

“I just wanted to tell you guys that we’re all meeting down at the restaurant for brunch. So come join us.”

My gaze moves over to Emma, taking in her bed head hair and sleepy amber eyes. She doesn’t have an ounce of makeup on, is still half asleep and looks stunning. I’m tempted to take her again, but she must be sore after last night.

Relax, I tell myself. All in good time.

“We’ll be down in a little bit,” I tell my brother, then hang up and toss my phone back on the nightstand.

“Everything okay?” Emma asks softly, her voice still husky with sleep.

I’m dying to reach over and pull her back into my arms, but I know that’s going to lead us into dangerous territory fast. So, instead, I say, “Yeah. Raff said they’re all going downstairs for brunch.”

“What time is it?” Emma sits up and squints at the clock.

“Later than I’ve ever slept,” I tease. Unable to stop myself, I move closer and lay my hand over hers. “I could stay in bed all day with you, but we should go downstairs.”

She nods and I lean closer and press a kiss to her lips.

“Go ahead and use the bathroom first,” I urge her and watch as she slides out of bed, trying to pull the sheet with her. But I grab it, shake my head and toss her a mischievous grin.

“Conor!” she exclaims. “Let go!”

“Nope. I want to see that gorgeous body of yours.”

She rolls her eyes. “Please?”

As much as I want to say no, I can’t deny Emma anything. Reluctantly, I release my grip on the edge of the sheet and watch it slide off the bed, trailing behind her.

“Thank you,” she murmurs and turns to head toward the bathroom. On her way, she lets the sheet “accidentally” fall open and I get a perfect view of her curvy, little ass. “Oops.”

“Minx,” I growl, doing my best to ignore the heat stirring within me.

With a giggle, she disappears into the bathroom and I roll onto my back and groan.

No doubt about it. Emma Shepherd is going to be the death of me.

Tucking my hands behind my head, I figure there’s no better way to go.

EMMA

While finishing up in the bathroom, my mind wanders back to last night and all the delicious things Conor did to my body. I'm sore, but in the most wonderful way because it's as though I can still feel him inside of me. Moving, claiming, owning me.

Of course, I also remember when he told me the condom tore and that makes me nervous. Getting pregnant right now opens up a whole can of worms that I'm not ready to deal with. I have enough on my plate and, truthfully, I'm not even sure how Conor feels about me. The sex was amazing and he seemed to enjoy it thoroughly, but that doesn't mean he wants to get married and start a family any time soon. And I'm only twenty-one. Am I ready to be a mother?

Pushing baby thoughts aside, refusing to worry about something that probably isn't even an issue, I pull my t-shirt and leggings back on and hope someone stops by the apartment to get more clothes for me today. But for now, this will do.

I open the door and step out, seeing that Conor is already dressed. As he passes by me to go into the bathroom, he gives me a panty-melting smile and trails his fingers along my jaw. My heart does a mad thump in my chest, skittering all over the place like a jackrabbit. He closes the door and I sag against it.

One look, one touch, from that man and I'm a quivering bowl of jelly. Does he have any idea how much my emotions are spinning out of control and the effect he has on me?

Once we're both ready, we head over to the elevator and he motions for me to step inside first. It's only a few floors down so the ride is quick, but my nerves start to increase the closer we get.

"Everything okay?" Conor asks.

He can read me so easily and I'm not sure how I feel about that. My stomach is fluttering and even though I met his family already, I don't want them to think badly of me—like I'm taking advantage of their kindness and generosity. The debt I owe the O'Shea's hangs heavy on my shoulders and though Conor told me not to worry about it, I am worried.

"I just..." He steps closer, cornering me, and my worry slips away as heat infuses me. He's so near, so very big and strong, and the memory of his mouth all over my body sends my pulse skittering. "I'm fine."

Those blue, blue eyes of his study me intently and just when I'm wondering if he's going to lean down and kiss me, the elevator door slides open. Stepping back, Conor walks out and I follow on his heels.

Conor pauses, waiting for me to move up beside him then leans down and whispers, "Relax, sweet Emma. Everything is going to be just fine. I promise."

Then he drops a kiss along the shell of my ear and shivers explode through my body. A part of me wants him to take my hand in his as we walk into the restaurant, but he doesn't and it's probably for the best. His family and my dad might get suspicious and start asking all sorts of questions and I have no answers to give them. I have no idea what's happening between us—only that I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

I have to prepare myself, though. This is a temporary situation. We're hiding out, playing house together, and the moment the danger passes, I will go back home to my regular life. I'll return to the small, dingy apartment with my dad and take care of him. My future holds the same as it always did, which is housework, paying bills and endless hours working down at the grocery store. Which reminds me, I need to call them and give some sort of excuse as to why I can't come to work for the time being.

Uh, yes, sorry, but I'm currently on the run from some Irish mafia gangsters.

I'm sure that'll come off as believable.

"C'mon," Conor murmurs, placing his hand on my lower back and guiding me toward the large corner table where his family sits. My dad is also with them, noticeably beside Maeve, and the group is loud, boisterous and all talking over one another.

I've never had a big family like this and I wonder if Conor realizes how lucky he is. For the longest time, it's only been me and my dad. I've had to grow up fast and never got to enjoy any of the shenanigans that I'm guessing the O'Shea family did.

Everyone greets us enthusiastically as he pulls my chair out and I sit down. I give a little wave to my dad who grins and sends me a big wave back.

"How'd you sleep, honey?" he calls down the table and I instantly flush.

Better than I ever have before though there wasn't much actual sleeping involved. Clearly, I can't say that so I merely smile and respond, "Good, thanks."

"Only good?" Conor grumbles in a low voice. Beneath the table, his hand slides up my thigh and I swallow hard. "Do I need to remind you exactly how very amazing your night was?"

"Conor," I hiss as he squeezes my upper leg, long fingers between my thighs and far too close to my core which immediately overheats from his touch. He doesn't need to do or say much and I'm embarrassingly wet.

Yet he doesn't move his hand away. Just lets it linger there, slowly and softly kneading my flesh until I nearly whimper. My God, he's going to make me humiliate myself with a cry or someone is going to see what's happening beneath the tabletop.

As though he can hear me, he whispers, "Don't worry. No one can see."

The server arrives to take our order and I do my best to keep my voice steady as I order chocolate chip pancakes and sausage links. His touch is making every synapse fire and it feels as though my core is melting. If he moves his hands half an inch higher, I'm going to lose it.

Luckily, he doesn't and when he removes his hand completely after the food arrives, I can breathe easier. He gives me a very naughty smile, though, and I kick him under the table. But he just chuckles, finding my discomfort amusing.

The food is delicious and the conversation is delightful. Finley is such a bundle of energy and makes me laugh when she starts needling her brothers. Baby Griffin is beside her in a carrier and he entertains himself, gurgling happily. Maeve and my father talk nonstop—about what, I don't know. But he's the happiest I've ever seen and he suddenly looks ten years younger.

And then there's Rafferty and Sofia. The intense love they have for each other shines in their eyes. She's several months pregnant and I've noticed Rafferty touch her stomach a couple of times and they whisper things under their breath only meant for each other.

The smoldering looks they share make my chest tighten. So much love, respect and desire. Sofia being pregnant definitely hasn't dulled their spark. If anything, I think it's intensified it. The possessive gleam in his icy blue eyes, several shades lighter than Conor's, states one thing very clearly—Sofia is his and his alone.

She's also incredibly kind and offers me some of her clothes to borrow until mine arrive. Since she's not showing very much yet, she tells me they should fit pretty well despite me being shorter.

As I'm wondering what it would be like to be loved so completely, so fiercely, I feel Conor's gaze and I turn to see a similar look in his cobalt eyes. My heart skips a beat. We're nowhere near where Rafferty and Sofia are, but maybe...just maybe...we can get there.

Can I make Conor O'Shea fall in love with me?

The thought gives me goosebumps and before I can think too hard about what that would mean, Conor spears a bite of my pancakes and pops it into his mouth. My pulse quickens when I hear his soft moan of approval.

"I don't normally eat sweets like this," he admits and wipes the edge of his mouth.

"You're missing out," I tell him and pour more syrup over the stack. His egg

whites and fruit look good, of course, but leave little to be desired.

“Is that why you’re so sweet?” he asks, leaning over on his elbow.

Once again my heart catches. He’s very close, barely a breath away, and he’s flirting outrageously with me in front of his family and my dad. Although I like it, I can’t help but look over and see their reactions.

Finley is grinning from ear to ear, pretending she’s not paying us any attention, but I can tell she’s watching us. Rafferty is staring openly, his expression unreadable, and Sofia swats his arm and murmurs something. Reluctantly, he looks away and it makes me wonder if I would have his approval if he knew what happened between me and Conor last night. What’s still happening.

Truthfully, I’m not sure. He seems a little distrustful.

Meanwhile, my dad and Maeve are off in their own little world and maybe I’m wrong, but it almost looks like they’re flirting.

“What do you think about that?” I ask Conor under my breath and discreetly nod in their direction.

“I’m still deciding,” he answers honestly.

“Yeah, me, too,” I admit. I understand that they’d be lonely after losing a significant other, but it’s a little strange to see my normally depressed father flirting with a woman right in front of me. I want to be happy for him and encourage anything and anyone that brings him joy, though.

But the idea of those two getting together and Conor and I possibly being a couple is a little strange. The last thing I want to do is go on a double date with my dad and his mom.

The only one I haven’t met yet is Liam and, of course, his wife Rory. I know that’s Sofia’s older sister and their maiden name is Marino. There is a long, bloody history between the O’Shea family and the Marino family, so how those couples ended up getting together is beyond me. I remind myself to ask Conor later for all the details. I imagine both couples have fantastic love stories because they overcame the odds together.

Maybe their relationships can be an inspiration to me. There's a lot I need to overcome and figure out. If they can do it then I decide that I can, too.

After lingering too long at breakfast, Conor announces he needs to work out and invites me to join him. There's no missing the very heated look in his blue eyes and I instantly remember our scorching kiss that happened in the gym the other day.

I wouldn't mind repeating it.

After saying goodbye, we head back up to our room to change into workout clothes. Well, Conor does while I sit on the edge of the bed and wait. I've quickly realized that he's very rigid and motivated when it comes to his exercise schedule.

Me, however? Not so much.

But I really do enjoy watching him workout. As far as I'm concerned, he can sweat and lift and groan all he wants. It's all very entertaining and extremely hot watching those firm muscles flex.

When we reach the gym, I sit myself up on an exercise bike and pedal for a little bit, but quickly lose interest. I'm way more interested in watching Conor. He has a very specific routine he follows and the way he pushes himself is incredible. Obviously, it pays off because his chiseled body is the proof.

The man is perfect. Absolutely ripped.

It makes me a little self-conscious, but I don't stress too much about it because after last night, he increased my confidence tenfold. Every touch, every kiss and every whispered word helped me overcome any insecurities that I might've worried about before.

Conor watches me closely throughout his workout and by the time he's finishing up his final set, the air between us has grown heavier. We've been sending each other little, heated looks and all I want to do is jump on him. I'm tempted to walk over and straddle him as he's bench pressing, but there are a couple of other people working out, so I have to reel it in and relax.

But once we're back upstairs in our room, all bets are off.

I can tell Conor is feeling the exact same way because we don't even make it back to our room. The moment the elevator door closes, he pounces. His mouth crashes against mine and his body is so hot and sweaty from working out the past forty-five minutes. I moan softly as our tongues tangle.

He forces himself to release me when the door opens and says, "C'mon." Guiding me back down to the room, his hand at my back, I wait while he opens it. After I step inside, he follows, closes and locks it. The look he gives me can only be described as feral when he growls, "I need to take a shower. And you're going to join me."

My heart stumbles within my chest and I swallow down my nerves.

"Get naked, sweetheart," he tells me, stripping out of his sweat-soaked clothes.

"Conor—" I've never done this before and I'm nervous.

When I don't move, he stalks over and starts undressing me with urgent hands that shake. Yanking my shirt up, he tosses it. "I can't stay away from you a moment longer." He shoves my leggings and panties down in one fell swoop and all I'm left in is my bra. "Are you going to take that off and join me? Or am I going to die from wanting you?"

My gaze dips to his massive, straining erection and a sultry heaviness settles over me. There's no mistaking how much he wants me and I want him, too. Reaching behind me, I unclasp my bra and let it slide down my arms.

His eyes dilate, the blue nearly all black now, and then he grabs my hand and drags me toward the bathroom. On the way, he snags a condom from his duffel bag. His urgency makes me laugh and before I know it, I'm in the large shower with him, the water falling down on us.

Conor scoops me right up and my back presses to the cool tiles as his mouth crashes against mine. His large body thrums with need and he's hot to the touch, almost as though he were overheating.

I wrap my arms around my neck and embrace the feel of our bodies skin to skin. We're slippery and I gasp as his hand slips between my legs. His tongue moving in and out of my mouth matches the thrusting of his fingers in and out of my wet core.

It's enough to drive me insane, and I twist and moan in his arms as he brings me crashing into an orgasm that leaves my back arching and inner muscles spasming.

After shouting his name, I drop against him, breathing hard, the water pounding down on us. But Conor is only getting started, and I tip my head back, enjoying the feel of his tongue, lips and teeth moving along my neck.

"I hope you're ready for me, sweetheart," he murmurs, grabbing the condom and sliding it on.

"Yes, please..." I whimper.

Then he lifts my body, lines us up, and slowly pulls me down on his engorged cock. My body expands and he fills me to the point of pleasure-pain. Crying out, I dig my nails into his back, my heels into his tight ass, and hiss, "Do it. Don't stop. Fill me all the way."

Sliding back out, adjusting his stance, Conor holds me steady then thrusts up, embedding himself in me fully.

CONOR

With a low, desperate grunt, I try to keep my control and rhythm, but I can't. I hope my sweet Emma is ready because she just unleashed the beast in me and I begin to pound into her as the water pounds down on us.

She's so hot, wet and tight. And so goddamn responsive. It's enough to push me over the edge and I bury my face between her neck and shoulder, thrusting over and over and over. Dropping my hand, I work her clit, needing her to come because I don't know how much longer I can hold out.

"Conor," she gasps. Her legs tighten around my waist and I feel her inner walls begin to spasm around me.

"That's right, sweetheart. Let go," I encourage her.

The moment Emma's orgasm hits her and she cries out, I let go, too. The pressure building at the base of my spine erupts and I roar as I empty into her. My entire body shudders and I hold her tightly, never wanting to let go.

But I force myself to loosen my grip because I don't want to hurt her. She's too delicate and I'd never forgive myself if I caused her any pain. Emma Shepherd is a beautiful, bright, innocent pixie that I want to hold close and worship. I vow to protect her always and keep the shadows away.

Even if that includes myself.

Because, in all honesty, I realize I'm not the best man for her. I don't even deserve to be touching her much less fucking her. All I'm doing is tarnishing

her. Yet right at this moment, I don't care enough to stop.

Instead, I clasp her face in my hands and kiss her deeply. Everything I'm feeling, I put into this kiss. And I'm feeling so much. The fact that I'm just a fighter who owns a club and I'm not as booksmart as my brothers; the fear that I could let her down and my uncle might try to hurt her again; the fact that she might not want a big, scarred fighter who doesn't have enough to offer her.

It's strange because I normally close myself off emotionally to women. It's why I've never had a serious relationship. I literally shut down my feelings and can turn into a cold bastard without a second thought. Especially if I'm not interested. Even right after sex.

But with Emma, the opposite is happening. I want to shut down all the crazy emotions whirring through me, but I can't. They're overwhelming and disconcerting, and they're filling my head with doubts and insecurities.

I care too damn much and that's never happened before.

Fuck.

I should stop kissing her, touching her. And I should certainly stop fucking her. I can't though. She's like my kryptonite, my drug of choice. Even though I know I should leave her alone, she calls to me like a siren on the rocky sea. And I can't ignore her. Even if that means crashing on the rocks and breaking apart into a million pieces.

Am I setting us both up for disaster and heart ache? A little voice in my head keeps warning me that I am. To stay away from Emma because I'm going to cause more harm than good.

Fuck you, little voice, I think defiantly, and slide my tongue deeper into her mouth, exploring every dark recess.

So, letting Emma go any time soon isn't an option. That's becoming more and more clear. But what's the saying? Eventually, all good things must come to an end. I guess in the meantime, I'm going to prolong that end for as long as possible.

Breaking the kiss, sliding out of her body, I set her down on her feet and

steady her when she wobbles slightly.

“Okay?” I ask with a grin.

She nods and smiles up at me. I reach out, tossing the condom into the nearby trash can, then turn back around and grab a washcloth. After soaping it up, I motion for Emma to come closer and begin to wash her.

With a soft sigh, her head falls back as I pay special attention to her breasts, lathering and massaging the tight, little buds and molding her soft flesh in my palms. She fascinates me. Every curve, every sigh, every movement she makes.

Lowering the washcloth, I drag it along her thighs then between her legs. Emma grabs onto my arm to steady herself and wicked ideas are filling my head. Dropping down to my knees, I scoop her leg up over my shoulder and bury my face between her quivering thighs.

Licking, fucking her with my tongue, I have only one desire right now—make her come on my mouth. Let’s go for three orgasms in a row.

“Conor!” Her back hits the tiled wall as I suck on her swollen clit, finding just the right suction and swirling motion with my tongue to drive her crazy. Emma thrashes, eyes rolling back in her head, and she’s holding onto my shoulders for dear life. Nails digging into my flesh as she tries to stay upright.

But I don’t let up. Not one bit. I work her hard, using my mouth, tongue and teeth to push her right over the edge again.

She cries out then begins to sag, her entire body shaking with the power of her release, so I scoop her up into my arms, turn the water off and grab a big, fluffy towel. Covering her up, holding her close to my chest, I carry her into the other room and gently lay her on the bed.

Emma reaches up for me and I’m about to join her when my phone rings. “Hold on, sweetheart,” I murmur and press a kiss to her lips.

Walking over to the side table, I swipe my cell phone up and see Liam’s name flashing across the screen.

“Hey, Liam,” I answer.

“I’m here,” he says. “We finally just got to the hotel about fifteen minutes ago and Rory and I are in the suite. Where are you?”

My gaze darts over to Emma, still naked, wet and wrapped up in a towel. I’m in a similar state except...I glance down at the water rivulets running down my body...no towel.

“Third floor,” I say, not exactly answering his question. “Why don’t I meet you downstairs at the bar. Say in ten minutes?”

“Sure thing. See you down there.”

“Great.” I hang up and glance over at Emma who looks sleepy and very satisfied. “I’m going downstairs to meet Liam. Why don’t you stay here and order room service, if you want. We may be a while.”

Emma sits up, studying me closely as I grab my boxer briefs, cargo pants and a t-shirt. After I’m dressed, I look up and meet her inquisitive amber gaze.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, searching those golden orbs.

But she shakes her head. “Nothing.”

Stalking over, I grab her chin, tilt it up and kiss her soundly. “See you soon.”

My words seem to have the right effect because she nods and sends me a shy, little smile. “See you soon,” she responds.

I leave the room and head downstairs where I spot Liam already waiting at the bar. When I reach his side, he stands and we give each other a half hug and thump each other on the back.

“Damn, it’s good to see you, bro,” Liam says.

Pulling out the stool beside him, I sit down. “I know. It feels like forever, doesn’t it?”

“It really does. I can’t tell you how good it is to be back, but I’m not happy to hear what’s been happening.”

“Fucking Desmond,” I growl.

The bartender walks over and sets a couple of frothy Guinness beers in front

of both of us and we nod our thanks.

“I want to see that paperwork he has which makes him think he’s entitled to the family business.”

“Sean Flannigan doctored up something. I’m sure it’s all bullshit, but when he pulled it out and started waving it around, I had no idea what to even look for.”

“I’m going to demand they send it over.”

“There’s no way it can be legit, right? I mean, Dad left everything to us. And then for him to kick mom and Finley out like that just infuriates me.” Just the thought makes my blood boil.

Liam takes a drink of his beer then shrugs. “I’d like to think it’s bullshit, but Flannigan is crafty. A part of me is worried that…” His voice trails off and I lean closer.

“What?” I press.

My twin’s cobalt eyes, the same shade as my own, darken. “That maybe he visited dad in the hospital after he was shot. He was conscious for a very brief time, but not really in his right state of mind. What if he had Dad sign something? Just in case we got rid of his ass.”

“Which you did.”

“Yeah. It wouldn’t surprise me if Sean Flannigan wanted to make sure his ass was covered.”

“Shit,” I grumble as the reality of that scenario hits me. “If he managed to do that then we might not have a strong enough argument or legal proof to take control again.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, I turn the cold mug, wondering what we can do. Inevitably, my thoughts turn to Emma and our shower fun. But it was more than just that. The way she rocked her hips against me, taking me deep, throwing her head back and crying out my name.

Hell, I’m getting hard all over again just picturing it.

“Con?”

“Huh?” Snapping out of my scorching thoughts, I glance over at my brother who’s openly grinning.

“I asked what’s going on between you and Emma Shepherd. Do I need to ask a third time or—”

“No, you don’t,” I interrupt him. How exactly do I answer his question? Truthfully, I have no idea what’s going on between us other than we’re enjoying each other immensely. Beyond that, I don’t know. I wish I did, but that inner voice reminds me that I shouldn’t be touching her or using her sweet body to find my release.

But I’m not using her. Am I?

No. We’re two grown-ass, consenting adults who have a crazy chemistry that we can’t deny. So while we’re locked up together, why not indulge a little?

My heart knows it’s more than just that, though, and I can’t think about that right now. Instead, I answer my brother’s question in the vaguest way possible.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

Liam makes a face. “Oh, fuck that, bro. You know exactly what I mean.” He lowers his voice, gaze locked in on mine. “Have you slept with her?”

I hesitate for the briefest moment and I think that’s what truly gives me away. Or the fact that my twin knows me better than anyone. “Why does it matter?” I ask, avoiding the question. But my brother is way too smart.

“You have,” he surmises. “And?”

“And what?”

“Damn, Con. You fuck Emma and now have nothing to say about it? Was it that bad? Or that good?”

I glare at him, going straight into protector mode. “First of all, she was more than just some random fuck. Emma is sweet and kind and this bright light that—” I stop speaking when I see Liam smirk. “What’s so damn funny?”

“You’re falling for her.” He punches my arm then takes a swig of his beer.

“You don’t get it. It doesn’t matter,” I tell him with a weary sigh.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s way too good for me. I don’t deserve her.”

Liam leans in and murmurs, “I think you need to explain that to your dick.”

My eyes narrow and I’m on the verge of punching him in the face. “Fuck you, Liam.”

Liam bursts out laughing. “Damn, you’re grumpy. She’s really done a number on you. And why do you think you aren’t good enough?”

“She deserves better.”

“Oh, c’mon. You sound like a damn martyr. Hell, Con, you’re a fucking billionaire and I have to say you’re also extremely good-looking. Any woman in her right mind would say you’re the full package.”

I can’t help but laugh at my twin. He used to be wound so tight, but Rory has done a good job of helping him loosen up and find the humor in life. “Better looking than you,” I tease.

“You wish.”

I think over what Liam just said, but I’m still not entirely convinced that I can give Emma what she needs and deserves. There’s an inner fear I’m grappling with and it boils down to the fact that I don’t want to disappoint her. Yeah, everything is sunshine and rainbows now, but what about when it’s no longer new? Will she grow bored with me? Expect more? Will I want someone or something else?

Hell no. I want her just as she is, all the time.

But even if I do decide to take a chance with her, our timing couldn’t be worse. There’s way too much going on and other than protecting Emma, my first priority is regaining our family empire from Desmond.

As much as I’d like to frolic around in bed with Emma for the next month, it has to stop. I need to find my focus and not be distracted. It’s going to be

hard, but it's time to reel it in and put an end to our showering together. And the bedroom fun has to be over because I can't think straight with her so close, smelling like soft vanilla and lemons.

For now, anyway.

Leaning my elbows against the bar, I turn my attention to Liam. "Enough about my love life. We need to figure out how to overthrow Desmond and regain control of the business."

Things are falling apart around us and Desmond's control is growing.

"If he thinks he's just going to hunt us all down, he has another thing coming. We're going to turn the tables then bring that bastard to his knees."

"And if he's still alive after we're finished, I'm throwing his ass on a plane back to Ireland," I snarl.

Desmond's days in this town are numbered and my brothers and I will make sure he's dealt with in the most efficient way possible.

Damn, it feels good to have Liam back. Along with Rafferty helping us, Desmond doesn't stand a chance. He's going down and there's nothing he can do about it.

EMMA

While Conor is down meeting with Liam, I lie in bed for far too long, still wrapped in the fluffy, white towel, and think over everything that has happened between us. It's been an incredible whirlwind. An adventure like I've never experienced before.

My thoughts turn into daydreams of "what if" and even though I know that's dangerous territory to tread, I can't help it. Conor O'Shea is the most amazing man I've ever met and he's treated me with more kindness than anyone ever has before. Plus, he's insanely handsome and makes my pulse leap every time he's close.

Maybe I don't have anyone else to compare him to, but I have a feeling that even if I did, Conor would still be better in every department by leaps and bounds. And, yes, he's gorgeous, but it's so much more than that.

It's the way he's always making sure I'm taken care of and asking if I'm okay; it's the way he protects me; it's the way he makes love to me. Because what happened earlier was so much more than sex to me. He holds me and kisses me and snuggles me. If it were only sex for him, why would he make sure I'm always taken care of first? Every single time.

Even today, after his release, he washed me and pleased me all over again. Then he wrapped me in a towel and carried me over here, setting me on the bed with so much gentleness. Despite his size, he's always so careful and considerate with me. He treats me like I'm something special.

Right before our first time, I was nervous, scared I wouldn't be able to handle

him. But he made sure I was ready and guided me through it every step of the way. His consideration touches me and shows me that he truly cares.

With a soft moan, I stretch like a content feline, secure in my knowledge that Conor cares. I have no idea how deeply, but I know that I'm balancing on a very slippery slope. He would be so easy to fall in love with and I can feel myself sliding in that direction.

It's scary, but also exhilarating.

Sitting up, I look over the large, ruffled bed and wonder what it would be like to hear Conor tell me he loves me. My heart thumps harder at the thought. If things keep going the way they are right now, it's a definite possibility. At least I hope so.

My stomach growls and I have no idea how long Conor is going to be downstairs, so I decide to order some room service like he suggested. I worked up quite an appetite so I order a plate of pasta with veggies and I can't resist getting the plate of homemade chocolate chips again. I can't wait to see the look on Conor's face when he gets back and sees the warm cookies waiting.

I'm finding myself wanting to do things that please him. Seeing him smile is so worth it and I'll do anything to put it there.

Hopping off the bed, I get dressed and straighten the room up. It doesn't take long for the food I ordered to arrive. I thank the man, give him a couple of dollars for a tip and then plop down in a chair at the small table and uncover the tray.

"Mmm..." It smells absolutely divine and I reach for the fork and take a bite. Too good to be true.

Like Conor? I can't help but wonder uneasily.

No, I'm just being silly. I like Conor a lot, and he likes me. Hopefully, more than I even hope to imagine.

Except the moment he returns, something has changed. He isn't acting as friendly as he was and his face is set in all hard edges.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, immediately picking up on his gray mood. “Did something happen with Liam?”

“Liam is fine. I’m fine,” he continues, though I don’t believe him.

“I got you cookies,” I tell him and nod to the plate.

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry.”

“Oh,” I murmur, disappointed by his attitude. He’s acting so withdrawn and cool.

And I hate it.

Standing up, I wander closer, trying to get a better read on him.

“Conor?”

He looks over, face blank, and arches a dark brow.

“You can talk to me. If something is bothering you or—”

“Everything is a mess right now, Emma. Sorry, but I don’t exactly have time to sit here and share my feelings with you.” He turns away, stalks over to the chair beside the window and drops down in it, a glum look on his shadowed face.

Reeling back, shocked by his flat words and callous tone, I swallow back my hurt and the utter disappointment rising in me. Where did my Knight In Shining Armor go? And who is this stranger in his place?

Suddenly, my heart feels sick and worried. I know he has a lot going on, but he did before his meeting with Liam, too. What changed his attitude toward me so drastically? Did Liam say something? I’ve never even met his twin, so I have no idea why he’d say anything bad about me.

There’s also the possibility that he’s just being a moody man, unhappy because he has no control over what’s happening.

Either way, my feelings are hurt and I need to get out of here. Go for a walk or something. Anything that’ll give me some space from grumpy pants here.

Covering the rest of my pasta, I snag a cookie and tell Conor I’m leaving.

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” He pops up out of the chair, but I head straight for the door. “Emma!”

Pausing, I glance over my shoulder and meet his frown. “Yes?” I ask innocently.

He crosses his big arms, not looking happy at all. “Where are you going?”

“For a walk, Conor. I didn’t think I was a prisoner here.”

“Don’t leave the hotel,” he grumbles.

I’m not sure when he started ordering me around, but I really don’t care for it. Crossing my arms, too, I return his fierce look with one of my own. “You’re not the boss of me, Conor O’Shea.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Before I can come up with a snarky comment, he strides over in two long-legged steps and he’s breathing hard, his focus on my mouth.

“Don’t you dare leave this hotel or so help me, I will hunt you down, drag you back and put you over my knee.”

Maybe his words are meant to inflict fear, but heat explodes in my core.

“And then what will you do with me?” I can’t help but ask, my voice low, needy. He’s still staring at my mouth, so I bite my bottom lip, chewing it slightly.

“Dammit, Emma, I’m trying so damn hard not to—” His voice falls away and I can see the frustration building in his dark blue eyes.

Ah-ha! I knew something was going on with him. “You’re trying not to what?” I ask.

Conor lets out a deep breath then pins me with his cobalt stare. “I think we should take a break. Cool things off between us. I need to help my brothers bring Desmond down and you’re nothing but a distraction.”

My mouth drops. I’m merely a distraction? Hurt and anger flood through me, replacing the heat. He must see how displeased his words make me because he reaches for my elbow, but I yank it away.

“Emma—”

Forget a walk to clear my head. I’m out of here. It’s clear that Conor doesn’t want anything throwing him off his game and I’m in his way. Turning away, I start stomping around the room, gathering my few things—mostly items and clothing borrowed from Sofia—and then grab my toothbrush.

“What’re you doing?” Conor demands, hands on his hips.

“Leaving,” I declare firmly. “I don’t want to be in your way or a distraction.”

I reach out to grab the door handle, but Conor pins me against the door with his big, warm body.

“That’s not what I meant, dammit,” he growls in my ear. His large hands are on my hips, holding me in place, his chest pressing against me, and as much as I want to stay mad at him, it’s so damn hard. Especially when I feel his cock hardening and he slowly circles his hips, jabbing it into my back. “You feel that? What you do to me. I can’t think straight when you’re around. All I want to do is fuck you and be inside you.”

His tongue circles my ear, tracing the shell, and I try not to react. At least outwardly. The truth is my panties are already soaked.

“My family needs me,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my skin, big hand wandering up and around to cup my breast. Squeezing and molding it to fit his palm. “I have to be there for them and it’s so hard for me to focus on anything but your sweet body.”

I’m doing my best not to respond to him and it’s nearly more than I can bear. But I force myself to dig deep and push back against him, shoving him away. Turning, I say, “I think it’s best if I stay upstairs with my dad. Do your thing, Conor. Like I said, I don’t want to be a distraction.”

“Emma…”

But I can’t stay a moment longer. And we certainly know if I do then he’s going to toss me in the bed and we’re going to fuck like rabbits. Because that’s the word he used. I mistakenly thought it was more than that. Or maybe I was just being naive and foolishly hoping.

Either way, I open the door and walk out, trying to ignore the tears burning my eyes and threatening to fall.

Marching over to the elevator, I hit the button and wait. He doesn't call out or try to stop me and I don't have the strength to turn around, look at him and then step onto this elevator. I know I would go running back into his arms.

So I stare hard at the door, refusing to look back. When the door slides open, I get on and slap a hand against the button marking the suite on the top floor. Even though I don't intend to look back at our room, I do.

And the door is already closed.

The elevator door closes, too, and I squeeze my eyes shut as sadness washes over me. It feels like whatever amazing thing was happening with Conor just ended. Ignoring the pang in my heart, I try to shut my emotions down.

But that's always been a hard thing for me to do, especially since I wear my heart on my sleeve. And, after two minutes in the suite, I'm clearly not doing a very good job hiding how upset I am because the woman with dark hair who'd been sitting with Sofia comes over and I see the sympathy in her eyes.

"I'm Aurora," she says, shifting Griffin to her opposite hip. "Liam's wife. But you can call me Rory."

I look up, trying to smile, and it comes off as shaky and probably insincere. "Nice to meet you," I force out. "I'm Emma."

Just Emma. I'm no one's significant other or very important in any way. If I disappeared right now, I don't think anyone would even notice. My dad is too busy with Maeve and the O'Shea's all have each other.

Well, I suppose Conor would notice. Eventually. But that doesn't mean he'd come after me because he certainly didn't downstairs.

"Why don't you come join me and Sofia?" she urges with a little smile. "We have cookies."

I can't help but smile back. What is it with this family and cookies? Reluctantly, I stand up and follow her over to the quiet corner of the suite. We sit down on the floor, she lays Griffin on a blanket and Sofia smiles at

me. “Where’s Finley?” I ask, noticing that Conor’s bubbly sister is missing.

“Off exploring the hotel,” Sofia answers. “She gets bored easily.”

Something that I wasn’t allowed to do. With a small nod, I play with the edge of the baby’s blanket. These two women are so lucky. They both have men that love them to the moon and back and a supportive family. Not to mention they’re both drop dead gorgeous. I can’t help but be a little jealous.

“I’m fairly blunt,” Rory says, eyeing me closely, “and my sister tells me something is going on between you and Conor. Is that true?”

Even though her tone is teasing, my chest constricts painfully. “No,” I force out.

The sisters exchange a look. Then Sofia says, “Well, you sure fooled me. I must’ve imagined that crazy chemistry I saw.”

Can I confide in them? I wonder. Maybe talking about it will lessen the hurt, though I can’t really imagine how. And I’ve never had close girlfriends before. It might be nice to be able to open up to Rory and Sofia.

Pulling in a deep breath, I look over at them with sad eyes. “I thought we had something, but we don’t. I was wrong.”

“We’re going to need more details,” Rory presses and Sofia nods in agreement.

“A lot more.”

“Conor rescued me from Desmond and I’ll be forever grateful to him for that. He brought me and my dad here for safekeeping, told me I didn’t have to pay my father’s gambling debt back—but I will and I told him that—and has shown me nothing but kindness.” I look from one sister to the other. “He’s a good man and we grew closer since coming here.”

“Since sharing a room?” Rory asks, arching a slim, dark brow.

Swallowing hard, I nod and decide to open up. “Things, ah, happened. I’ve never been intimate with a man until Conor, so maybe I read the entire situation wrong. But I really thought he liked me and we had a chance for something more when this was all over.”

Sofia smiles softly and reaches for my hand. “Rafferty was my first,” she admits and glances over at Rory.

“And Liam was mine,” she says softly.

“So we understand exactly how you feel.”

“Liam did that push-pull thing with me so hard that my head spun. One minute he was seducing me and saying everything I wanted to hear and the next he was being cruel and making me believe we could never be together.”

“At least he didn’t kidnap you and make you his prisoner,” Sofia grumbles under her breath.

“What?” My eyes go wide.

But Sofia just waves a dismissive hand through the air then lays it over her rounded belly. “A long story that I’ll tell you later.”

I definitely want to hear that story, but right now I look back over at Rory. “What happened between you and Liam is what’s happening with me and Conor. Everything seemed great and then he pushed me away. He called me a distraction.”

I can’t hide the hurt in my voice and Rory lays a hand on my arm. “These rotten O’Shea twins. They’re so similar it’s scary.”

“Rafferty is right there with them,” Sofia adds. “I’m not sure how Finley wound up with such broody, older brothers.”

They chuckle and I can’t help but smile a little. Already, they’re making me feel a bit better. “So how did you fix the bad things that happened between you and Liam and get beyond that? Because you seem so happy together now.”

“We are, but it took work. And it’s something we’re still dealing with when it comes to our family. My father wants nothing to do with me or Sofia now. His grudge against the O’Shea family is legendary and he feels betrayed because we fell in love with them. It’s a constant battle and I don’t know if it’s one we’ll ever overcome. He’s never even met Griffin,” she adds sadly.

That breaks my heart and I can’t imagine much will change after Sofia has

her baby. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault our dad is a complete ass. Maybe one day he'll understand how much he's missing because he refuses to let go of his bitterness. But until then, I can't worry about it. I can only love my husband, our baby and this wonderful family."

"A truce may never completely happen between the O'Shea's and Marino's," Sofia adds. "But we're proof that it's a possibility."

"Desmond just complicates everything further," Rory says. "As if the feud isn't bad enough, he has to come along and cause a civil war among his own blood."

"Do you think they'll be able to get their businesses and compound back?" I ask.

"You're the only one of us who's met Desmond. What do you think?" Rory asks.

I frown, considering the man who sent thugs to drag me to him and then locked me up in a suite. Who kissed me then punched me. Who threatened to rape me and steal my innocence. "He's a monster," I tell them. "See this?" I'd nearly forgotten about the yellowish bruise on my face.

"He hit you?" Sofia bursts out in indignation.

I nod. "That wasn't even the worst of it. Since I couldn't repay him the money my dad owed, he said he'd use my body as payment."

"Oh, my God." Rory reaches out again, laying a comforting hand on my arm.

"Pig," Sofia adds, touching my other arm.

"It didn't get to that point, thank God. And I shouldn't be upset with Conor. Defeating Desmond should be their main priority and he's not going to be easy to outsmart or take down. I'm just being too sensitive."

"You care for him, don't you?" Rory asks gently.

I nod.

"Are you falling in love with him?" Sofia studies me closely.

Am I? Yes, I know that I am. Otherwise, I wouldn't be so upset about him pushing me away. Then pulling me back and pushing me away all over again. Like some twisted, vicious merry-go-round.

I know I can confide in these two women and already feel a bond, a kinship, happening with them so I decide to be completely open and honest. "I am falling in love with him."

"Then everything will work out," Sofia predicts.

I hope she's right, but the real question is how exactly does Conor feel about me?

Sadly, I have no idea.

CONOR

I feel bad about what happened between Emma and I, but maybe it's for the best. When I said she was a distraction, it wasn't meant to hurt her feelings. She's the best kind of distraction there is, but I can't afford to have that right now. Being on my A-game and completely aware of the situation at hand is my top priority because keeping my family safe is most important.

Well, my family and Emma.

The idea that she could be my family one day—my wife—hits me out of nowhere. I have no idea where the thought came from, but these are the kinds of diversions I'm talking about. Emma with her golden eyes and hair, so pure and sweet, is enough to drive me to my knees and give her anything she asks for.

Later, I scold myself. Right now, it's better if we don't stay in the same room. As much as I want her here, I tell myself it's a good thing she went upstairs. She should be in the suite with her father, anyway.

I don't like her so far away, though. Even if I keep trying to convince myself it's for the best.

“Dammit,” I grumble and rake a hand through my hair. Breathing in deeply, the air still smells scented with lemons and I'm on the verge of running after her and apologizing when there's a knock on the door.

She came back. The thought flits through my head as I reach the door and

throw it open. But it's not Emma, it's my brothers.

"What's going on?" I ask and step back to allow them inside.

"I spoke with Sean Flannigan," Liam says, getting right to it. "Apparently, a meeting has been set up between Desmond and Matteo Marino. And Desmond wants us there, too."

"You gotta be kidding me?"

"That's what I said," Rafferty adds darkly.

"How can that end well?" I ask, crossing my arms. "Someone is going to end up killing somebody."

"No weapons allowed," Liam tells us. "And we're meeting in a neutral location here in the city."

"Where?" I ask dubiously.

"The backroom of Fugazy Steakhouse after hours tonight at eleven."

"Am I the only one here who thinks this is a bad idea?" I ask.

"I think it's a shit idea," Rafferty comments dryly.

"So you don't think we should go?" Liam asks, eyeing each of us. "If we don't sit down and talk and try to work things out, nothing is ever going to be resolved."

"True, but let's not forget a few obvious things," I say. "Like the fact that you both knocked up and married Marino's only daughters. He will never forgive you for that. And I just broke in and screwed up Desmond's plan to claim payment by using Emma. The wounds are still pretty fresh and neither man has a track record for forgiveness. Or for being trustworthy."

For a long moment, neither says anything. Then Liam shakes his head. "I'm going, but I'll leave the decision up to you two whether you'll accompany me or not."

"You really think I'd let you walk into the lion's den alone?" I ask my twin.

"Yeah, no fucking way," Rafferty adds.

“Thanks,” Liam says. “I really just hope this is the first step to figuring things out. Only by discussing the situation can we attempt to reach a truce and hopefully some kind of peace.”

I had a feeling this was about more than just the businesses. Liam was married to Rory and they had a child together. He wasn't saying it, but he wants Griffin to meet his grandfather. Same with Raff and Sofia and their child that's on the way. This feud is taking its toll on them emotionally and they are ready to end it. I honestly can't blame them.

But I don't trust Desmond or Matteo. My brothers have good intentions, but I don't want them being duped in any way. So it's up to me to gauge the situation closely and make sure no one is lying or has ill intentions. But when you're dealing with a couple of master manipulators and liars like Desmond and Matteo, it's easier said than done.

My brothers and I talk about the situation from every angle and decide how far we're willing to negotiate. We decide on our terms and what we want. I think our goals are reasonable, but Desmond is going to blow up and fight us every step of the way.

In regards to him, we want the compound back. We also want full control of the O'Shea empire, but any illegal shit Desmond started up again is all his. This, of course, is contingent on whether or not his claim is legit or bullshit.

“Desmond is going to fight us tooth and nail,” Rafferty predicts. “Why even call this meeting? Especially when he holds all the cards right now? Do we really think he's going to start playing nice for no good reason?”

“Yeah, Raff has a point.” Suddenly, a bad feeling twists my gut. There's some other reason to get us all together. Something Desmond wants, but I'm just not sure what it is exactly, though.

Not yet, anyway.

“He's crafty, so it makes sense,” Liam agrees. “For now, I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

That might be a huge mistake, but I don't tell my brother that.

“Until he proves he can't be trusted,” Liam continues.

“Haven’t they both already proven that?” Rafferty asks.

Liam lets out a long breath then lifts his left hand, reminding us of his history with Matteo Marino. He’s missing the top part of his pinkie finger because Matteo cut it off when we were sixteen. “I want to let this go so badly. Now that I have Rory and Griff, I’ve realized what’s important in my life. For their sake, I’m willing to try.”

I have to give my twin credit for being the bigger man because I don’t think Matteo or our uncle are out for anyone but themselves. Slapping Liam on the back, I say, “I’m with you one-hundred percent, bro. Whatever you want to do, I’ll be by your side.”

“Same,” Rafferty says. “That doesn’t mean I trust them, but maybe things will go better than I anticipate.”

I seriously doubt it, but maybe I’m wrong. At least, I hope so.

When the time arrives for the meeting later that night, I drive us over to the restaurant in my Jeep. We take Sully, Liam’s loyal bodyguard, and I also have my gun in the glove box just in case.

Because do I trust either of these snakes? Hell no.

I didn’t see Emma before we left and as we walk up to the dimly-lit restaurant, I’m regretting that decision. What if something happens? What if I never see her smiling face again?

Shoving the dark, foreboding thoughts away, I push my shoulders back and look over at my brothers. “Ready?” I ask and they nod. Lifting my fist, I knock on the locked door and the rat fink himself comes to answer.

Sean Flannigan is the worst kind of scum and he has the nerve to give us an oily smile after basically fucking us up the ass after running to Ireland and starting this whole shitshow.

“Come on in,” he says and three huge enforcers walk over and begin to pat us down for weapons.

“Merely protocol,” Sean states.

Once we’re declared clear, Flannigan ushers us to a backroom.

We're the first to arrive and I instantly tense up. "Where's Desmond?"

"He'll be in shortly. And hopefully Matteo will be arriving at any moment, too."

There's something smug about the look on Flannigan's face and I don't like it. It sets a warning off in my gut and instead of sitting down like Liam and Raff, I stand there, arms crossed, looking around for a second exit. But there isn't one.

I feel like a fish in a barrel and it's not a good feeling.

"What's wrong?" Liam hisses.

"I have a bad feeling," I answer in a low voice. "Did either of you bring a weapon?"

"No," they both respond at once.

Fuck.

"Did you?" Liam asks.

"I have a gun in the glove box in the Jeep. And a knife in my boot." Luckily, the enforcers missed it. But maybe I'm just getting worked up over nothing. It's a possibility, but the thing is...my gut has never failed me.

"I think we should go," I murmur and, at the same time, the door opens and Matteo Marino appears, flanked by two bodyguards. The look on the older man's face is carefully blank, but he looks haggard. Not like the man I remember. His dark hair is threaded with silver and his dark eyes look dull. The suit he's wearing hangs loosely on him and the dark circles under his eyes speak louder than words.

Hmm, interesting. Maybe he's as tired of this feud as we are and losing both of his daughters has taken its toll on him. I've never seen him show any sign of weakness or regret any decision he's made. The fact that he's even here is surprising. I don't think Matteo ever met with my father to negotiate anything. All they ever did was fight.

I suppose he's getting older now and maybe his priorities are shifting. Also, Anna, his wife, has told Rory and Sofia that he hasn't been in the best of

health these last few months. I can see that and I'm hoping my initial reaction to this meeting was wrong.

Although, it still bothers me that Desmond is the one who called the meeting and chose the place. And it's his enforcers out there guarding the front door. I'm also questioning the fact that we left Sully out there with them. But he'll keep an eye on everything, so that makes me feel a little better.

Or, at least, that's what I try to convince myself.

Matteo Marino sits down and releases a long, pent-up sigh. "I didn't want to attend this meeting," he says bluntly.

"Did any of us?" Liam asks, eyeing his father-in-law closely.

It's so strange to think our families are in-laws now. That the most infamous enemies since Prohibition are now related. The irony of it all is almost enough to make me laugh.

"Your uncle plays by his own rules and I don't like that."

"Really?" Liam scoffs. "What about you?"

Matteo hikes a dark brow. "What exactly are you asking me?"

Liam lays his elbows on the table and leans forward. "Who killed our father? At first I blamed you."

"And now?"

"Now I'm not so sure."

Liam was dead set against Matteo Marino and was convinced he'd ordered one of his enforcers to take our father out. But, lately, he's changing his tune.

"I never gave the order to gun down Nolan," Matteo stated, looking from Liam to me to Rafferty. "As much as we hated each other, there was a grudging respect between us. And he had plenty of other enemies besides me."

Matteo admitting that he didn't kill our father is epic. But can we believe him? I'm not entirely positive.

A long moment of silence transpires as we digest his words. Truthfully, anyone could've killed him and he has a valid point about Dad's numerous enemies. But Matteo would say anything to take the suspicion off himself.

But the more I think about it, the more I realize it doesn't really matter. Our father's murder was almost two years ago and no one had ever been arrested or even questioned, for that matter. The police pretty much looked the other way and did nothing. I'd assumed that's because they were paid off by Matteo.

But maybe not.

"Anna tells me my daughters are happy," Matteo says in a low voice.

Holy shit. My attention snaps over to my brothers. As far as I know, Matteo has never acknowledged their marriages or his grandchild in any way. Ever. This is huge and my pulse speeds up as I wonder where the conversation is going to go.

"Despite being seduced and kidnapped by the two of you," he can't help but add under his breath.

Here we go, I think.

Rafferty jumps up and points an accusing finger at Marino. "You're the one who locked me up, had me beaten and then dragged Sofia back and threw her in that fucking cell!"

Matteo, looking somewhat pained, begins drumming his fingers on the tabletop. "I was upset."

I nudge my brother, motioning for Raff to sit and calm down. But I suppose if we were talking about Emma then I'd be equally upset. But this is as close to a normal and civilized conversation as we've ever had with Matteo. I don't want things to blow up completely yet.

"You said your daughters no longer existed in your eyes," Liam coolly reminds him. When the Marino sisters had found out their father had said such callous words, it had hurt them deeply.

"I know what I said," Matteo snaps. "You needn't remind me."

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Liam says passionately. “All this strain and discord between our families. I, for one, don’t want—”

“Gentleman, good evening,” Desmond interrupts, cutting Liam off. Our uncle waltzes in like he is the king shit, Sean Flannigan at his side. The three enforcers from the other room also appear, clearly backing them up, and I spot Sully, too.

Quickly doing the math, I realize my uncle has the most men on his side and I don’t like the odds being tilted toward his favor.

Especially since I have no idea what he has up his sleeve.

But I guess we’re all about to find out.

“As you may or may not know, I have taken control of the O’Shea empire since my nephews have done such a piss-poor job.”

I roll my eyes. “We beg to differ. And your claim is tentative at best.”

“What is this meeting about, Desmond?” Matteo demands, getting straight to the point. “I’m a busy man and I’m still trying to figure out why I bothered coming.”

Although, I think I know exactly why he came and it has nothing to do with Desmond. He wanted to see Liam and Rafferty and ask about his daughters. Possibly set up some kind of truce maybe? I don’t know, though, because then Desmond had to bust in and interrupt like he’s always so good at doing.

“Yes, let’s get to the point,” Liam says.

And that, ladies and gents, may be the first time an O’Shea and a Marino were ever on the same page. I smother the smile that makes my lips twitch.

One thing is clear—Desmond is pissing us all off with his superior attitude and he needs to get on with it.

“My point is this,” Desmond begins smugly, slowly walking around the table. “This town is mine and all its businesses, above and below ground, are mine to run.”

“Your ego is astounding,” Matteo comments dryly. “If you think I’m going to

sit here and listen to this—”

“Oh, you will sit there. And you will listen,” Desmond snarls. At the same time, he nods to his enforcers and they pull their guns out.

Fucking great. This just went from a potential truce to all out war.

Suddenly, things begin to happen so quickly that it’s hard to keep track of anything but my brothers and who’s holding a gun. Desmond spouts off how he is controlling everything and he angers Matteo enough where the two men get in a heated argument.

“You’re a desperate fool,” Matteo tells Desmond. “Your brother was the brains of the operation and you were always in his shadow, stumbling along and trying to keep up. These three have made some questionable decisions, but I understand why they’re doing it.”

Another holy shit moment. For a moment there, it’s almost like Matteo is giving his approval. He’s smart enough to realize that we’re protecting his daughters. Yeah, his approval is sort of half-ass, but it’s clear he likes us better than Desmond. But that’s not saying much because Desmond is a first-class asshole.

“If you think for one second that I will bow down to you, you’re insane.” Matteo looks down his nose at my uncle then scoffs. “You’re a maggot with no worth.”

Desmond’s face turns a deep shade of reddish purple and he looks like he’s going to blow. But, instead, he nods to his enforcers and they turn their weapons on Matteo.

“You’ll change your mind,” Desmond says. Without warning, gunfire fills the air and Matteo is shot right before our eyes. As he slumps forward, I jump up from the table and urge my brothers to do the same. Sully is yelling for us to run and Marino’s guards grab their boss and start hauling him out of harm’s way.

It’s all a chaotic mess, but the first thing I’m focused on is disarming one or three of those assholes. I think we all are because we charge them and I manage to pull my knife and slice at one of the enforcer’s arms. He drops the gun and I slam an elbow into his face, causing bone to shatter.

Liam and Raff are attacking the other guy and Sully is yelling for us to get out. Talk about a mess of confusion. Desmond and Flannigan have conveniently escaped, Matteo's blood is all over the table and I grab Liam's arm.

"Let's go!" I yell. He, Raff and I race for the door and that's when I hear my twin shout out in pain. Spinning, I see he's clutching his arm and blood is dripping through his fingers. Holy hell. The restaurant is quickly turning into a death trap and if we don't get out of here now, we're all going to wind up shot.

Or worse.

EMMA

Lying in bed up in the suite, I can't sleep, so I just stare up at the ceiling. After spending most of the day hanging out with Rory and Sofia, I don't know if I'm feeling better or worse. Hearing them talk about how much they love their men is sweet and I'm so happy they've found their happily ever after.

But hearing them gush on and on about Liam and Rafferty only reminds me that the feelings I'm having for Conor are one-sided. Here I am, falling hard and desperately for him and what does he do? He says we should spend some time apart.

Yeah, clearly one-sided. And it hurts.

Conor said he wants me and needs me, yet he pushes me away. How does that even happen? It seems to me that if he truly cared, he wouldn't want me to go stay in another room.

Yet here I am.

At least there's room for me and I'm not stretched out on the floor. I'm grateful to be in my own bed and my dad snores softly on the pullout couch in the living room while Maeve and Finley have the other bedroom. A couple of the hotel rooms opened up on a lower level when guests left earlier today, so Liam, Rory and Griff took one and Rafferty and Sofia took the other one. It seems so much more quiet up here without everyone.

The other reason I can't sleep is because the girls told me that Conor and his

brothers went to a meeting tonight. Glancing over at the clock on the nightstand, I see it's almost midnight. My stomach has been nervous all night because I know they're meeting with Desmond and Matteo Marino.

Rory and Sofia wanted to go, too, but Liam and Rafferty said absolutely not. They don't trust either of the men and told their wives it was best if they stayed here. It makes sense, though, especially with Sofia being pregnant. Obviously, their safety is the men's first priority.

I shouldn't stress out about it. It's just a meeting. What's the worst that could happen? They argue, maybe get physical? Conor does like to fight and he's been in a crappy mood all day. He's probably just looking for an opportunity to throw some punches.

Besides, the three brothers put together are a force to be reckoned with. They're an intimidating group—strong, smart and loyal. Matteo and Desmond are the ones who are at a disadvantage.

Unless, of course, they bring their army of enforcers. I think that's what's got me so wired and anxious. Desmond and Matteo can't be trusted. Not even a little. So if either of them has something planned, then this meeting isn't going to end well.

As if in answer, my phone starts buzzing and I reach over and grab it off the nightstand. My heart sinks when I see Rory's name.

"Rory? Is everything okay?" I ask, my voice laced in panic.

"No! There was a shootout at the restaurant and they're at the hospital now. Liam and my father were both shot."

"What? Oh, my God." My heart sinks. "A shootout?" Oh, no, no, no. All sorts of horrible images fill my head.

"I'm trying not to freak out," Rory tells me. "Liam said he was barely nicked, but I don't know. I was going to head over to the hospital, but he said to go up to the suite and they'd all be back shortly."

Slipping off the bed, I pull on the pajama bottoms Rory let me borrow. "What can I do?"

“They said they’re coming straight up to the suite and we should just wait. I know they’re at the hospital, and they said it was to drop my dad off. Liam is too tough to admit if he got hurt. But there’s a First Aid kit in the kitchen. Can you grab it? Just in case.”

Rory’s voice rose, a little hysterical, and I immediately moved to the main room of the suite and began flipping on lights. Someone needs to take charge and keep a level head. “Don’t worry. I’ll have everything ready for when they get here.”

“If anything happens to Liam...” Her voice trails off.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I tell her. They all have to be fine, I think.

“I swear I will never forgive anyone who hurt him. I don’t know any of the details, but if my father was behind this...” Her voice trails off ominously.

Oh, man, she sounds like an avenging angel and I can only imagine the chaos that would cause. As if there isn’t enough going on already. “Are you and Sofia coming up right now?” I ask, trying to get her mind on something other than the urge to murder her father.

“Yeah, we’re on our way.”

“Okay, see you soon.”

I hang up, toss my phone and find the First Aid kit under the kitchen sink. Hurrying back into the living room area, I see my dad is getting up.

“I’ll get more blankets,” he says, jumping in to help. “And water.”

For a moment, I pause, not used to him helping out. Normally, I would’ve had to ask him to move off the couch and move out of the way. But he’s already up and bustling around. And my throat closes with emotion. I’m so damn proud of him.

“What’s going on?” Maeve asks, stepping out of the other bedroom, tightening the belt around her robe, Finley on her heels. “Did something happen at the meeting?”

“I’m not sure exactly what happened, but Matteo was shot and they took him to the hospital. Rory said they are heading straight up here. I think someone

else may have gotten hurt, but hopefully not too badly.”

Maeve’s gaze drops to the First Aid kit. “This has all gone too far. I thought the danger and fighting might ease up after Nolan died, but now my boys are involved.”

I can’t help but wonder who shot Matteo Marino? If I were a betting woman, I’d place my money on Desmond.

I walk over and give her a hug. “Don’t worry,” I tell her. “If anyone can handle Desmond and Matteo, it’s those three.”

After I pull back, she gives me a small smile. “You’re right. I know they can handle them, but I still worry. They’ll always be my babies.”

It’s hard for me to picture those three as babies, but the moment Rory arrives toting Griffin, I can picture it. Because I have no doubt that one day little Griffin will grow up and be just as tall and handsome as his father. Already, he looks a little bigger every day and with those bright blue eyes and dark hair, he’s going to be a heartbreaker as well.

All these damn O’Shea men are heartbreakers. Or, at least, they were until two of the three were tamed by their women. Now it’s up to me to catch the last one and I’m not sure I have what it takes.

The girls arrive and Maeve takes Griffin and sits in the corner with him, along with Finley and my dad. We’re all extremely impatient and on edge. When the door finally bursts open and all three walk in, my heart thunders as my gaze quickly finds and lands on Conor. Is he hurt? It doesn’t look like it and then I see Liam clutching his upper arm which is wrapped in a blood-soaked towel.

Rory leads him over to the couch, fawning over him like crazy, and he continually assures her he’s okay. “What happened? How did you and my father end up getting shot?”

“Desmond,” Liam growls. “I’m okay, though. It’s just a graze.”

But Rory doesn’t seem to agree.

“You’re bleeding! Sit so I can look and see what’s going on better.”

“Yes, a ghrá,” he murmurs dutifully and allows her to guide him over to the couch. While she fusses over Liam, Sofia runs over and throws her arms around Rafferty. Of course, my attention settles on Conor.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly, brow furrowing.

He nods and I walk closer, checking him out, looking for any sign that he’s covering up an injury and needs to be treated.

“A bullet grazed Liam’s arm, but Raff and I are fine. Sully, too,” he assures me and I look over at their loyal bodyguard.

I nod and my dad walks over and hands them all cold bottles of water. A small smile tugs at the corner of my mouth as he walks back over and sits with Maeve, Finley and Griffin. I know I wouldn’t be in this situation if he hadn’t screwed up, but if that were the case then I never would’ve met Conor or this amazing family.

And for better or worse, here we are.

Our gazes lock and all I want to do is throw myself against him and feel his arms wrap tightly around me. But I hesitate, not wanting to make things awkward. I have no idea where we stand and I don’t want him to feel weird in front of his family. I also don’t want to look like the pathetic little girl who’s falling in love with him.

Even though that’s exactly who I am.

We all end up sitting down and they start telling us how the meeting went from a calm discussion to a shoot-out. Once Rory and Sofia realize their husbands are fine, they start asking about their father. Despite being on bad terms with him, he’s still their blood and, now that they know he isn’t to blame, I can see the concern in their eyes.

“Matteo was shot three times when Desmond’s thugs opened fire,” Liam states grimly. “We’re lucky we all made it out of there alive.”

My heart clenches and the idea that we could’ve lost one of these men—that I could have lost Conor—hits me hard and deep. If he would’ve died tonight and with no idea about what I’m feeling right now, I would’ve been so devastated.

Because the truth is...I love him.

As they talk about Matteo and the extent of his injuries, I stare at Conor and thank every angel and saint up in heaven that he's sitting here, unscathed. A part of me is tempted to tell him how I'm feeling, but the other part of me is so scared that he doesn't feel the same way. I know I'm being a coward and maybe I just need to blurt it out and be brave.

Or, maybe the wiser decision is to feel things out first.

Deciding on the safer course of action, I move over and sit down beside him. For the next half an hour, they tell us what happened at the meeting and, I swear, he moves further away from me with every moment that passes. Little by little until there's several feet between us. He's also avoiding eye contact with me and not looking at me when he speaks.

By the time the conversation is over and everyone declares it's time for bed, Conor is the first one up and heading for the door without so much as a glance back at me. Talk about the cold shoulder.

He doesn't look in my direction as he walks out of the suite, surrounded by his brothers and their family. For a shocked moment, I feel like someone sucker-punched me in the gut.

Are you serious? He didn't even say goodbye or acknowledge me. A wave of hurt washes over me as the door closes and I glance over at Maeve, Finley and my dad. Out of the three of them, Finley seems to be the only one who noticed how cool Conor treated me. She gives me a sad look then comes over and hugs me.

"Everything will be okay," Finley assures me. "It's just been a crazy night and my brother is a big idiot."

I know her words are meant to make me feel better, but tears prick my eyes. I wish I could believe her, but she's making excuses for Conor because he clearly wanted nothing to do with me and poor Finley feels bad.

"It's okay," I murmur, feeling like the biggest fool in the world. I have no idea what made him pull away so completely, but what can I do about it? I can't very well force the man to love me back.

“He does care about you. I know it.”

I’d love to believe Finley, but I don’t want to be delusional. I already feel stupid enough for falling as hard as I have. “Well, he sure has a funny way of showing it.”

Finley lets out a soft sigh. “Out of the three of them, Conor is the most sensitive. You’d never know it because he’s so big and tough, always fighting and stuff. But believe me when I say he’s never looked at anyone the way he looks at you, Emma.”

I can’t help but make a scoffing sound. He didn’t spare me one look in the past forty-five minutes.

Not. One.

“It’s true,” she insists, clearly seeing my look of disbelief. “And the thing about Conor is he does what’s right. It’s like it’s ingrained in his DNA or something.”

“Why’re you telling me this?” I ask, forcing the threatening tears back. I refuse to cry over a man who doesn’t want me.

“Because even if he wants to be with you, he’ll stay away if he thinks it’s for the best.”

But why would he think that?

“Goodnight, Emma. And don’t worry, Conor will come to his senses. Eventually.”

Eventually? That doesn’t sound very promising or make me feel any better.

“Goodnight, Finley,” I murmur. After I turn off the lights, I wander back into my bedroom, shut the door and drop onto the bed. My biggest fear is coming true—the man I’m falling in love with is pulling away from me and not communicating.

I have no idea how I can fix this.

And a part of me is terrified that it’s too late and I’ve lost him already.

CONOR

After returning to my room, I feel terrible. Like the world's biggest asshole. But I had to keep my distance from Emma or I would've dragged her back down here with me and already had her naked and in bed.

Is that such a bad thing? a little voice asks.

Yes, it is. Hurting Emma is a shit thing to do.

After running out of that meeting with guns popping and seeing Liam get grazed by a bullet and Matteo Marino going down, I had an important revelation: I'm not willing to put Emma in that kind of danger.

Absolutely no fucking way.

The situation took a different kind of turn for me tonight. It became real. Not to say it wasn't before, but now I can see just how far my uncle is willing to go to maintain control of the family business.

Desmond is willing to kill anyone who stands in his way.

I think we got lucky tonight and his true intention was to take us all out. It's a miracle we escaped that small back room with our lives. Sure, Liam got hit, but the damage to me and my brothers was extremely minimal compared to the three bullets Matteo took to his chest.

Matteo Marino's bodyguard, along with me, my brothers and Sully, rushed him straight to the hospital. Not something I ever would've imagined

happening. I can still see all the blood. It was enough to open my eyes and help me see that I'm dragging Emma into a bad place. Into a sticky mess that's going to end badly.

All I want to do is protect her. Ironically, it seems like the best way to do that is to let her go. It's going to be hard, but it's my best option at keeping her alive.

I can't stop tossing and turning. Letting out a frustrated groan, I throw my arm over my face and have the sudden urge to burn off some steam. Clearly, I won't be getting any sleep, any time soon, so I roll out of bed, slip a t-shirt and my gym shorts on and decide to go down to the workout room.

It's late, but I have the key to let myself in and I'll have the place to myself since everyone else is probably sound asleep. You know, like normal people. A quick glance at the clock tells me it's going on three in the morning. There's no point lying up here awake when I can go down there and lose myself in some cardio.

Plus, I need to figure out my exact plan. I need to send Emma away, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. It's probably inevitable, though. She trusted me—gave me her body and quite possibly her heart, or at least a piece of it. And what am I going to do? Tell her she has to leave.

Christ. I shut my door and head over to the elevator. I hate what I have to do, but my mind is made up. Now I just have to figure out the details and hope she doesn't hate me forever.

Maybe once this is all over, Emma will find a way to forgive me. But what if defeating Desmond takes longer than we're hoping? And what if Emma is too angry that I let her go in the first place?

Huffing out a breath, I rake a hand through my hair and realize I have no other options. Emma is my first priority and if keeping her safe means losing her then that's what I have to do. Even though it might kill me in the process.

As the elevator descends, I try to ignore my heart and only think with my brain. But the truth is, Emma has already infiltrated every part of me. Wherever I send her, I'll make sure she and her father are taken care of. I'm going to find them a safe place, most likely relocate them to another city, far

away from here. I'll make sure they have enough money to start a new life and that they'll be far from Desmond's reaching tentacles.

I can't justify keeping her in constant danger, always having her being a potential target and in the line of fire. As much as I care for her, that's selfish and not a risk I'm willing to take. Emma is far too special. I want her to wait for me, though. But again, that's selfish and can I really expect her to sit around for me?

What if finally ending this whole war takes a year? Or two years? Or, hell, even longer? It's not a fair request of Emma, but the idea of her going with another man makes me livid. Knowing that another man is touching her, kissing her and sharing her bed doesn't sit well with me.

"Fuck," I grumble as the elevator door opens. How am I going to handle this situation without losing her completely?

You could marry her.

The voice in my head makes me pause mid-step and it occurs to me that I'd marry Emma Shepherd in a heartbeat. Tomorrow and without question. Yeah, maybe I'm going a little crazy. Or maybe I'm falling so hard for this woman that letting her go is going to kill me.

But it's the right thing to do and despite the wild, carefree life I lead sometimes, I always strive to do what's right. If I married Emma, it would defeat my intention of keeping her out of harm's way because she'd remain by my side, surrounded by danger.

Shaking my head, I realize the heat is on and the risks are just too damn high.

I'm going to explain the situation to her gently and as best as I can so as not to hurt her feelings. But I've never been great with words, so if she gets pissed and tells me to go to hell, I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

The truth is I care far too much for her and won't risk her safety. Even if that means I have to make the ultimate sacrifice and let her go completely. It kills me, but I know it's the right thing to do.

I pluck the key from my pocket and I'm lifting my hand, on the verge of unlocking the door, when I get a whiff of smoke. Frowning, I shove the door

open and step inside, sniffing. Nothing. Moving back out, I reclose the door and lift my nose.

Yep. I definitely smell smoke. But where is it coming from?

Deciding to investigate, I wander down the hall, letting my nose guide me straight to the stairwell. Yanking the door open, I step inside and the acrid scent fills my nostrils. Fuck, not good.

I think it's coming from upstairs somewhere and my feet hit the steps. The higher I go, the worse it smells and I start jogging, passing the third floor where my room is, and continuing up. The hotel only has seven floors, and the higher I go, the stronger the smell of smoke.

Everyone I love is up here, sound asleep. If something is wrong, if an electrical fire started in the walls, I need to get them out right now. When I hit the seventh floor, I slam through the door and race right into a smoky hallway where a roaring fire is crackling and growing right before my very eyes.

Motherfucker. Turning, looking for a fire extinguisher, I spot one behind glass, hurry over and yank my shirt off. Wrapping it around my elbow, I slam it into the glass and, after it shatters, I reach into the small box and rip the extinguisher out.

Why the hell haven't the sprinklers come on? And why isn't the alarm going? There's a fire alarm within reach and I grab it and pull. Immediately, the blaring sound of bells fills the air and I race to the edge of the blaze, pull the extinguisher's pin and start spraying. At the same time, I yell Emma's name.

"Emma!" Even though I'm trying to remain calm and take care of the situation, I'm feeling the sting of panic. "Emma! Mom! Finley!"

Why the fuck aren't they answering? Wake up, please.

Finally, after what feels like forever, the suite's door opens and I see a wide-eyed Jonathan Shepherd.

"Get them out of there!" I holler. "Hurry!"

I'm doing my best to get the fire put out, but it's raging. There's no denying the smell of gas and it hits me hard that this was arson. Someone did this on

purpose and I vow to find out who because they're going to pay.

The heat is unbearable and I take a step back, feeling the hair on my arms singe.

“Conor!”

I look up and see Emma on the other side of the flames with my mom and Finley. Jonathan is pushing them toward the opposite side of the hall where there's another set of stairs.

“Go! I'll meet you downstairs,” I shout. At the same time, my extinguisher stops spraying. Damn, that was fast. I throw it aside and I'm about to turn and head down my stairwell and meet everyone downstairs when I hear a scream.

Spinning back around, I see Emma coming back, running toward the flames. “Conor! The stairwell below us is blocked! We're trapped!”

My heart sinks. Oh, Jesus, no. That would mean another fire must've been started at the same time right below us. By now, I'm hoping someone called 9-1-1. Their escape route was just cut off and all I have is an empty fire extinguisher.

The smoke is becoming too much to bear and I hear Emma coughing, trying to keep her face covered. Behind her, I see my mom, Finley and Jonathan coming out of their stairwell, smoke pouring out behind them.

This isn't good.

“Get back in the suite and shut the door! Grab some towels, soak them in water and keep them over your mouths! Then open the balcony door!” I call out and grab the empty fire extinguisher. “I'm coming up!”

Yeah, I have a half-ass plan forming in my head and it all hinges on whether or not I can get through to the room directly below the suite. For all I know, it may be engulfed in flames already. Sending up a silent prayer, I haul ass down the stairs and shove through the door that leads onto the sixth floor.

The hallway is full of smoke, but it's mostly at the opposite end of the corridor. I can work with that. Counting rooms, I jog down to the room that I estimate to be right below the suite and then lift the steel extinguisher and

slam it down against the door handle. Repeatedly.

Other than breaking in, I don't know how else to get in because I don't have a key. The doors aren't overly strong so I don't anticipate it will take much. After a few well-aimed kicks and several direct hits to the hinges and handle, I'm able to break the door down.

Thank Christ.

Racing into the room, I toss the canister and throw open the balcony door. A warm breeze hits my face and I lean over the edge of the railing. "Emma!" I shout. Directly above me, she hangs over the edge, looking down.

"Conor! We're trapped!"

I can hear the panic and fear in her voice and in the distance I hear fire engine sirens. I'm glad they're on the way, but they're not going to make it in time to save Emma and the others.

I need to do it myself.

"Sweetheart, listen to me," I say, trying to keep my voice calm and steady. "Get the bed sheets and wrap them around yourselves. You're going to have to lower yourselves down to me and I'll pull you back inside, okay?"

"Okay," she instantly responds and I hear her immediately start ordering the others to do what I just said.

"Hurry!" I yell.

First up is Finley and my sister is a lightweight, so I barely break a sweat hauling her in after those three help lower her down. They've attached the sheet around her waist and also tied it to the above railing for good measure.

My mom is next and Finley helps me grab her and pull her over the railing to safety. I'm expecting Emma next and I bite back an angry snarl when I see Jonathan climbing over the edge and dropping down.

"She wouldn't come down until I went," he says in explanation, but I don't have time to argue. Yanking him over and onto the balcony, I give him a good shove and yell at them all to run.

“Conor?”

Leaning over, I see Emma looking down at me, amber eyes wide. “C’mon, sweetheart. I’ll help you.” I swing myself over the railing, wedge my feet through the rail openings to secure myself, and reach up for her.

“Just lower yourself down, baby. You can do it. I’ll catch you.”

Heart in my throat, I watch Emma climb over the edge of the railing, gripping onto the rails tightly.

“I’m scared,” she cries.

“Lower yourself down so I can reach you. Now Emma!”

I can hear the crackling of the fire above and know it must be in the suite by now. She needs to move her ass or—

No! The alternative is unthinkable and I refuse to even consider it.

But my girl listens and I lift my hands and touch her feet, sliding my hands up her ankles, legs and then grasping onto her hips.

“I’ve got you!” I yell.

Emma lets go and I pull her onto the balcony with me. She drops into my arms, holding me tightly, and I carefully set her on her feet.

“We need to get out of here,” I urge her. But when we turn around, I see flames licking at the door frame. We run over and the hall is already consumed. It’s like a wildfire out there and there’s no getting through again.

Fuck.

I’m glad Finley, my mom and Jonathan made it out in time, but...

My gaze slides down to Emma and tears track down her soot-covered face. There’s no way I’m letting her die here tonight in this inferno. No fucking way.

“C’mon!” I grab her hand and we jog back over to the balcony where the air is easier to breathe. I see the first fire truck pulling up and there are a ton of people on the street below. Scanning the crowd for my family, I finally spot

my brothers down on the sidewalk with everyone else, caught up in the madness.

“LIAM!” I holler at the top of my lungs. Beside me, Emma starts shouting, too, until we manage to catch people’s attention. There’s a collective gasp and people begin pointing up at us. “We’re trapped up here!”

Liam’s head snaps up and when he sees me, he briefly looks relieved then horrified. My brother shoves through the crowd and races over to the firemen, frantically pointing up at us. They immediately spring into motion and maneuver their long ladder attached to the truck into position then start cranking it up toward our balcony.

The moment the ladder is secure against the railing, I help Emma step onto it and a fireman is there to escort her down. Then I hop over and step onto the rungs, and a sense of relief floods through my entire body.

We’re going to be okay.

With each step down, I know we’re going to make it and everyone I love is waiting for us down below. Also, the closer I get to the ground, the more my anger builds.

Someone tried to kill us all tonight. Wipe out the entire O’Shea family. Just the thought makes my hands shake and I need to clench them, take a deep breath of fresh air and regroup.

Liam grabs me in a big hug the moment my feet hit the pavement and I return the embrace then grab Emma and pull her into my arms. My hold is fierce and I don’t ever want to let her go.

But this is exactly the reason why I have to. Everything that just happened justifies my decision that she would be better off far away from me and all of my family drama.

Right?

Oh, hell, all I know is we barely made it out of there alive and I can’t possibly let her go yet. Burying my face into her hair which now smells like smoke, I feel her arms tighten around my waist.

I almost lost her and, if I had, I never would have forgiven myself. This woman means everything and it's up to me to never let anything like this happen again.

"Are you okay?" I murmur, finally pulling back and searching her sooty face. Wiping some black off her cheek with my thumb, I search her amber eyes.

"I will be," she says, voice a little shaky. "Thank you for rescuing me. Again."

"I'll always rescue you, sweetheart," I promise and press a kiss to her dirty forehead.

And I will. Even if it means letting her go.

The street is jam-packed with people displaced from the hotel and when I reluctantly let Emma go, she turns and is swallowed up by hugs from my family. Knowing she's safe for the time being, I go find my brothers.

"Desmond did this," I grind out, the fury in me rising and growing hotter by the second.

"Do you know for sure?" Liam asks.

"Who else would've done this?" Rafferty shakes his head in disgust, glancing over to where a pregnant Sofia stands with everyone else. She's rubbing her belly and looks upset.

And that just makes me even more angry.

"It's bullshit and if he thinks he's going to get away with it, he's dead wrong," I snarl. "That fucker just crossed a line and I'm done. We need to bring that asshole down before someone gets hurt."

"Do you have a plan?" Liam asks.

"Not yet," I admit. "But I'm coming up with one right now."

"We got your back," Rafferty says and slaps me between the shoulder blades.

"Always," Liam states.

Thankful to hear it, I start wracking my brain for a plan to bring our uncle

down once and for all because enough is fucking enough.

EMMA

The street and sidewalk in front of the hotel are full of chaos, and the firemen are directing us to cross the street and move out of the way. Trying to slip away from the crowd a little, I walk a few buildings down, searching for a more quiet spot where I can breathe and relax for a moment.

It's absolutely insane, hundreds of people are everywhere, and I keep an eye on my dad and the O'Shea's who wouldn't stop hugging me after climbing down to safety. I really wasn't sure if Conor and I were going to escape and it was damn scary. I'm still coughing from all the smoke and a paramedic checked me over before slipping a blanket around my shoulders.

Pulling it tighter against the chill in the nighttime air, I lean against the office building and realize how close we all came to dying tonight. Especially me and Conor. The fire and smoke left us covered in soot and I feel half-charred.

Being stuck up there was the scariest moment of my life. Yet somehow having Conor by my side made it all better. He's a fast-thinker and so strong. Thank God for that or we might not have made it out of that burning suite.

He could've run out, but he helped us all down to the floor below and didn't hesitate putting himself in danger. Conor O'Shea is a hero and once again came charging in to save the day. No matter what happens between us, I will be forever grateful to him.

My heart is still pounding hard after the close call and I scan the crowd, looking for Conor. He's with his brothers and they're huddled up, most likely

talking about what the hell just happened and who is the most likely to blame.

The police are here now, too, along with the firemen who are still working to control the blaze. They seem to have a decent handle on the situation, though, and I'm thankful everyone made it out safely.

The moment we stepped off that ladder, Conor swept me into his arms, asked me if I was okay and then pressed a kiss to my forehead. The memory of his lips against my skin makes my stomach flutter with butterflies.

Maybe almost losing me will make him realize he should keep me closer, not push me away. But that may just be wishful thinking on my part. In fact, the complete opposite might've just happened and now he's convinced it's far too dangerous to keep me around.

God, I hope not.

After all of this craziness with Desmond, I only feel safe when I'm near Conor. He has this calm, confident way of stepping in and taking care of everything. I trust him with my life and I'm going to do everything in my power to make him see that we belong together.

The crowd is being directed by the first responders to keep moving down the block and to stay as far back from the firetruck and burning hotel as possible. I don't want to get in anyone's way and I shuffle further along and lose sight of Conor and the rest of the O'Shea family.

All the commotion and chattering is a bit deafening and overwhelming and I break off from the sea of people and step into an alley. Watching everyone go by, I decide to wait and fall into step with a familiar face, but right now it's just a lot of strangers parading by me.

Pulling the blanket tighter around my shoulders, someone bumps into me and I move a little further back, keeping a close watch out for Conor or my dad or any of the O'Shea clan. The alley is dark and I glance up to see the light on the side of the brick building is burned out. Or broken. It's hard to tell from where I'm standing beneath it.

Just when I think I'm not going to see anyone, I get a glimpse of Conor over the crowd. Because he's so tall, he stands out over everyone else. Unfortunately, he's not close enough to hear me, so I wave, trying to get his

attention.

It doesn't work and I decide I'm going to just push through the crowd and make my way straight to him. But before I can take a step, I'm yanked back against a thick chest and a meaty hand covers my mouth.

"Don't scream," a deep voice hisses in my ear and I get a whiff of gasoline. "Or it'll be the last sound you ever make."

His message comes through loud and clear, especially when I feel the prick of a knife between my ribs. Oh, God. My heart rate skyrockets and my panicked eyes fly to Conor before I'm pulled deeper into the shadowy alley.

Grasping at the thick arm around my neck, I try to keep up as my kidnapper practically drags me to the opposite side of the alley where a car is waiting.

No, no, no.

The blanket that was around my shoulders slips loose and I discreetly let go, watching as it drops to the dirty ground and hoping the man doesn't notice. Luckily, it's dark enough in the alley and he's too focused on forcing me to keep pace with his fast strides.

The back door is thrown open and I realize this might be my last chance to escape. Deciding to try, I wait until the giant of a man moves his arm and lowers the knife. Then I spin around, stomp my heel down on his insole and try to make a run for it.

"Bitch!" he cries and lunges for me.

His fingers manage to snag in my long hair and he yanks so hard, I'm pulled right off my feet. With a pained shout, I feel tears prick my eyes as he hauls me back and then shoves me into the backseat of the sedan.

"Asshole," I grumble, massaging my head where it feels like he just pulled out a chunk of my hair.

Since we're on the opposite side of the block and across the street from the hotel, there's no disorder or crowded chaos over here. It's fairly quiet and that doesn't work in my favor. I have no one to call out to or try to wave down.

I'm all alone.

Flashbacks of being driven to the O'Shea compound flit through my head. Is that where we're going now? Are they returning me to Desmond? The thought makes me ill. If it weren't for Conor, I never would've escaped that awful man to begin with. So the idea of going back makes me want to vomit.

This time around, though, I'm not going to be so docile or polite. I'm going to fight like a tiger and escape. Because it's up to me to save myself. Conor has no idea where I am or what's happening. And as much as that scares me, I'm going to have to figure things out on my own.

Either that or die trying. Because I will not give up or give in to that monster, Desmond.

He's hurt way too many people and even tried to kill Conor and his brothers. What kind of person invites you to a meeting where peaceful negotiations are being presented and then orders his men to open fire?

A disgusting monster.

Even though I don't recognize the man who dragged me to the car or the one driving, my gut knows they're Desmond's minions. Which means I need to be ready to face him again.

And this time, I'm going to have a weapon.

Very carefully, trying not to draw attention to myself, I look around the backseat for something, anything, that could be used to hurt Desmond. Nothing. Moving my foot around on the floor, I feel around and I'm on the verge of giving up when the toe of my right shoe hits something.

A pen. Better than nothing.

Sliding sideways, I lean down, grab it and quickly tuck it beneath me. The two dimwits up front are too busy talking about some baseball game to even notice. Clearly, they don't think I'm any kind of threat and that's fine with me. Let them underestimate me.

Then they won't expect it when I stab their boss in the neck.

Carefully hiding the pen in the waistband of my pajama bottoms, I lay my

hands on my thighs, trying to steady them.

The sedan leaves the city, just like I knew it would, and we head into the country where Desmond and his horrible compound await. By the time we get there, I manage to have my heart rate under control and I'm ready to fight.

However, I play the scared, incompetent victim for my kidnappers so they don't feel threatened or pay me too much attention.

The driver signals a guard at the front gate and we wait while he heads back into the small gatehouse and hits a button to allow us inside. The large, wrought-iron gates swing open and the sedan pulls through and begins its drive up the long, gravel driveway.

The closer we get, the quicker my thoughts spin. This time around, I need to outsmart Desmond.

As the main house comes into view, my pulse speeds up. Here we go, I think, discreetly checking that the pen I stashed is secure.

The driver parks the car and then he and the thug in the passenger seat get out. My door opens and the man who caught me motions for me to step out. Doing exactly as he says, I slip out of the vehicle and dutifully follow them into the house. Several lights are lit even though it's late and, for the first time, it hits me that Desmond is up and waiting for me.

Which can only mean one thing.

Desmond planned the fire at the hotel and these two thugs probably started it. In fact, I'm sure of it because I remember how the man who grabbed me smelled like gasoline. I'd be willing to bet there were gas cans in the trunk of the sedan parked out front.

I'm glad Desmond's evil intentions were thwarted and no one died in the inferno. The O'Shea's may have lost one of their businesses, but the important thing is no lives were lost.

The men escort me straight to an office and I'm not even a little surprised when I see Desmond sitting behind the massive desk.

“Well, look who’s back,” he comments and gives me an oily smile.

“Not by choice,” I say. Tread carefully, I remind myself. Lull him into a false sense of security. You’re going to be a good girl and not try to escape.

Yeah right.

“I have to say I missed you and your sauciness, Emma. Welcome back. I look forward to taking up where we left off and breaking you.”

His smug expression and foreboding words make my gut curl.

Desmond stands up, circles his desk and leans a hip against it, eyeing me closely. “I have to admit, I never thought you’d become such a key part of my plan. But breaking the O’Shea boys and eventually wiping out the whole family, is my number one priority. And I’m going to use you to help me do that.”

Clamping my teeth together, I strive to keep my expression neutral even though inside, I’m seething and cursing this man to hell.

“That way, I will achieve everything I came here to do and I’ll have final and ultimate control of the O’Shea kingdom.”

As far as I’m concerned, Desmond and all of his minions can go straight to hell. But I don’t dare say that. In order for me to escape, I need to keep my mouth shut and play it cool.

I also need to figure out a way to stall his advances because from the salacious look in his eyes, he is planning to pick up exactly where we left off, just like he said.

And there’s no way in hell I’m letting that happen.

CONOR

The firemen get the blaze under control and we have the hotel move all of the misplaced guests to other hotel properties we own throughout the city. I feel like I'm being pulled in all different directions, answering the police and other first responder's questions, making sure my family is safe and taken care of and helping herd the crowd away from the smoke and diminishing flames.

It's clear arson was involved, and my brothers and I make sure to inform the police of our suspicions. I manage to keep half an eye on Emma for a bit, but I'm not overly worried since she was with my family the last time I saw her.

But once things feel more under control, I wander over to my mom, Finley and Jonathan. Emma is nowhere around and the first tinge of panic fills me.

"Where's Emma?" I ask with a frown. I had told her to stay close to my family, but with all the chaos and the crowd, she could've easily gotten separated from them.

"We thought she was with you," Finley says.

"No," I ground out, turning to scan the people still lingering around. I don't see her anywhere. "Help me look for her."

Making my way through the people on the sidewalk, my gaze searches back and forth, expecting to catch sight of her blonde head. Nothing. When I run into Liam and Rory, I'm starting to get worried. Where the hell is she?

"I can't find Emma," I tell them. "Have you seen her?"

“Not for a little while,” Rory says, holding a sleeping Griffin in her arms.

“Shit,” I curse. The idea that something could’ve happened to her right under my nose sends anger coursing through me.

“We’ll find her,” Liam assures me. “She’s got to be here.”

I wish I were as confident as he is, but I’m not. Not even close. A terrible feeling takes over—like I’ve failed her in the worst possible way. Losing my cool, I yell out her name, desperate to find her. To pull her into my arms where she belongs.

“Emma!” I call, moving further down the block. My pace picks up and soon I’m running along the street, yelling my bloody head off.

For whatever reason, I pause at the opening of an alley, breathing hard, and look up. The security lamp is busted and I turn to squint into the inky darkness between the two, tall buildings. And that’s when I spot the blanket.

Hurrying, I jog into the gloomy alley, bend over and pick up the blanket that the paramedic had been wrapped around Emma’s shoulders earlier. My stomach sinks and dread fills it like a lead weight.

Oh, Christ, no.

“Con!”

I turn to see my brothers rushing toward me and I clutch the blanket tightly in my fisted hand. “They took her,” I say without doubt.

“Someone on the street just said they remember seeing Emma,” Rafferty tells me.

“What did they say?”

“Just that she was wrapped in that blanket and standing at the opening of the alley.”

“Fuck!” I turn around and study the other end where a streetlight shines. Stalking forward, my brothers follow on my heels. When we reach the other side of the alley, I look up and down the street. “They could’ve easily dragged her down the alley to here and then forced her into a car.”

Guilt and regret wash through me. How did this night turn to such shit?

“That sounds like the most likely scenario,” Liam agrees.

“So we think Desmond took her?” Rafferty asks.

“Who else?” I growl, so angry I can barely see straight. “I swear to God, if he harms one hair on her head, I will skin him alive.”

“C’mon,” Liam says, motioning toward the other side of the alley. “Let’s regroup and come up with a plan to get your girl back.”

“She’s not my girl,” I automatically say in an annoyed voice.

“Really?” Rafferty lifts a dubious brow. “You sure about that, bro? Because you get awfully crazy when it comes to her.”

“It’s my fault she’s in this situation,” I explain, striving to keep my patience. How can they not see that?

“How so?” Liam asks as we walk quickly back through the alley.

“Because Desmond is our uncle and her father owed money to our family.” Why were they being so dense?

“That doesn’t make her your responsibility, though,” Liam states.

“Yes, it does!” I snap.

“Okay, okay, let’s not blow a gasket,” Rafferty says, exchanging a look with Liam that I do not miss.

“Sorry,” I grumble. “I don’t mean to be so short with you guys, but...”

I huff out a frustrated breath. The truth is Emma means a lot to me and I let her down.

“You care. We get it,” Liam says carefully. “Let’s just figure out how we’re going to get her back and take care of Desmond, once and for all.”

Now that’s a plan I can get onboard with. “Hell yeah.”

We find the rest of our family and priority number one is getting them off the street and somewhere safe. Though we’re reluctant to put them up in another

hotel of ours, we can't go to any of our residences here in the city. They're probably being watched by Desmond's enforcers and that's a chance we're not willing to take.

"So let's go to a hotel that doesn't belong to us," Rafferty suggests. "They're going to look for us at our places first, right? It only makes sense."

"You're a genius, Raff," I say and punch his arm. I'm feeling a little better now that we're getting everyone to a more secure location. Desmond can send his men out to scour the city, but it's going to take them a while to figure out we're holed up in one of our competitor's hotels under a false name.

Once we have everyone situated, Jonathan corners me, looking frazzled, and I can't help but feel sorry for the man.

"This is all my fault," he laments, shoving a hand through his thinning gray hair. "How can I help you find Emma?"

"If you really want to help then stay here and keep watch over our family," I tell him. "We would really appreciate that."

Jonathan nods. "I can do that. But, please, find my daughter."

"I will. You can count on it." It's a vow I intend to keep.

I'm about to join my brothers when my phone starts buzzing. Pulling it out of my pocket, I look down and see an unknown number. It's the middle of the night and that means this call is most likely coming in from one person.

Desmond.

I lift my hand, getting everyone's attention, and motion for them to quiet down. Then I steel myself before swiping the bar over and hitting the speaker button. "Desmond," I answer in my coolest voice. "It's time we come to an agreement about our current situation."

Desmond's laugh floats over the line. "It's amusing to me that you think you have a say in any of this, Conor. Correct me if I'm wrong, but your family is scurrying around the city like rats, looking for a new hiding place, while I'm quite comfortable and sleeping in your parents' former bedroom suite."

My blood begins to boil and I'm tempted to say something nasty but, instead, I bite my tongue. Especially when I glance over and see Liam shaking his head at me.

Keep it together, my twin is mentally telling me.

Fucking fine, I think. I can do that. For the moment, anyway.

"Where is she?" I growl, striving for control.

"Where is who?" Desmond asks, playing dumb. Baiting me.

My control is hanging on by a thread, on the verge of snapping, and Liam quickly walks over before I lose it and I hand him the phone. He swiftly takes over the call, pretending to be me. Even though his voice is a bit more raspy, I've been growling the entire conversation, so Desmond shouldn't notice a difference.

"You know exactly who I'm talking about," Liam states. "If you took Emma, you're going to regret that decision."

I wait for his response, holding my breath, fists clenched at my sides.

"Am I?" Desmond asks in a taunting voice. "I don't see how I could ever regret that beautiful, young thing waiting in bed for me."

"Fucking piece of shit!" I yell.

Liam spins around, moving away from me. "Listen to me, Desmond, and listen carefully. We are coming over to pick up Emma right now and she better be down at the gate waiting for us or you will regret ever coming back to this town."

"Well, hello, Liam. And, nice try, but I don't think so. In fact, you are the one who should be listening carefully right now because I'm about to make my lists of demands. Do you hear me?"

"Go on," Liam says between clenched teeth.

"And every single one must be met within the week or you will feel my full wrath come down. Because tonight was nothing. Just a preview of the fire and brimstone to come."

I'm doing my best not to blow up at Desmond, but it's damn hard. I don't know who the hell he thinks he is, but if we don't play along, he's going to hurt Emma. I just know it and I can't let that happen.

So despite wanting to storm over to the family compound, pound Desmond's face into the ground and rescue Emma again, I stand there and listen to my uncle's ridiculous list of demands. For too long, he rambles on about taking over the family empire and it occurs to me that whatever "legal" documents he flashed in my face probably aren't all that solid.

It also occurs to me that if we give in to him then my family will lose everything.

But if we don't, I have no doubts that Desmond will kill Emma out of spite. To teach us a lesson.

In the end, what it all boils down to is Desmond wanting Liam to sign some paperwork that Sean Flannigan wrote up which will officially declare that he's stepping down and handing over all of our father's assets to Desmond.

"And where is this supposed to happen?" Liam asks. "Last time we tried to have a business meeting with you, you had your enforcers open fire."

"I'll send you the details as soon as I decide."

I let out a derisive snort. Arrogant prick. Yeah, once he figures out where and when it will be most beneficial to him. Not gonna happen.

"Fine," Liam says, sending me a warning look to keep quiet.

"And one final warning. If you try that little stunt from before—the whole breaking and entering thing—it won't go off so smoothly. I have armed guards stationed everywhere and they've been ordered to shoot any intruder on sight. There will be no storming this compound to save your sweet Emma. So get that out of your thick skull, Conor."

I bite my tongue so hard, it bleeds.

"Understood," Liam forces out.

"Good. Then I will be in touch tomorrow with the specifics regarding our upcoming meeting and exchange of power. And hear me well, boys. If you

try in any way to fuck with me, I will pull my trigger with zero hesitation. And it would be a shame to have to kill my own nephews.”

Desmond disconnects the call and I drop my head back, look up at the ceiling and realize I’m one small step away from losing my shit.

“Con? Look at me.”

Fighting against the feeling of helplessness sucking me under, I turn my attention to my twin.

“We’re coming up with a plan right now to get Emma.”

“Yeah, okay.” I start pacing back and forth like a caged lion as we all start throwing out ideas. One after the other. But nothing seems good enough. And we can’t risk Emma getting hurt.

“He’s ready for us,” Raff says. “That’s the problem. We need the element of surprise on our side so we can catch him off guard and then swoop in.”

“We need to somehow trick him,” I say.

“Or create some kind of distraction,” Finley says softly.

My head snaps over to my sister. A diversion. She’s right and, suddenly, I have an idea.

One that I think will actually work. But there’s just one little thing.

“I have an idea,” I tell everyone. “But we’re going to need explosives.”

“Where the hell are we going to get explosives on such short notice?” Liam asks.

For a moment, no one says anything. Then, Rory clears her throat. “How about my dad?”

“What?” I ask.

Sofia pops up off the couch. “She’s right. He has some. I’ve seen them.”

“Where?” Rafferty asks.

“That’s the thing. They were in the basement, but I have no idea where he

moved them.”

“They could be anywhere,” I say, beyond discouraged. Time is running out and we are no closer to figuring out how to get Emma without getting shot.

“We could ask him,” Rory says and I think every mouth in the room drops.

EMMA

Being locked up again in the same suite would be enough to send me right over the edge. But I'm not in the master bedroom this time and I'm thinking it's because if Conor decides to come to my rescue again, that's the first place he'll look. If I'm not in there, he won't be able to find me. At least not right away.

Damn Desmond.

I stalk around the small guest bedroom, searching for a way to break out. Meanwhile, flashbacks from the last time haunt me and I'm trying to be strong, but the bruise on my face has just healed. I don't want to face Desmond's wrath or sexual advances again.

It sucks to admit it, but I'm alone, on my own and scared. Right now I'm in a terrible position because I'm at Desmond's mercy. Somehow, I need to flip the situation and gain the upperhand.

But how? I wonder.

Being strong and determined will only get me so far. I need to be clever, too. Outsmart and outmaneuver the monster holding me captive.

Moving over to the window, I gaze out across the dark back lawn and to the woods beyond it. That's the way Conor snuck in last time, but they're ready for that. Floodlights shine on the shadowed trees and I count five armed guards walking along the perimeter.

There's no way he'd be able to come in through that way and not be seen.

They'd catch him in an instant. How else can he get inside the gates? I wonder.

Thoughtfully twisting a lock of my hair, I glance down and hate that I'm in my pajamas. Despite wearing shorts and a t-shirt, I feel half-naked. Desmond was already checking me out and it gave me the creeps.

Sliding my hand over the window and down, I realize it's sealed shut. Like permanently closed and there's no way to open it short of smashing through the glass with a chair. But that's out of the question because it would draw too much attention.

And right now, I'd really like to lay low.

It's really late and even though I'm tired after all the craziness from earlier at the hotel, I'm too wired and on edge to sleep. Besides, I'm terrified that if I did actually fall asleep then Desmond would sneak in while my guard is down.

I refuse to be at that man's mercy. There's a dark, twisted part inside of him that scares me. I know he won't hesitate to follow through on his threats and that's why I need to remain vigilant.

Yet, at some point, I know I'm going to have to sleep. I've already searched through the room for some kind of weapon to use against him and I have two questionable items—the pen I found in the car, still tucked in the waistband of my pajama shorts, and the lamp. It's a heavy light with a metal base that could do some serious damage if wielded properly.

And I won't hesitate to use it. I even have it unplugged, ready to go and within arm's reach.

Dropping down on the bed, propping my back against a big pile of pillows, I sit there and wait, nerves on edge. Listening. Jumpy. Hoping and praying that Desmond will leave me alone for the rest of the night.

My eyelids start getting heavy, the glowing clock numerals begin to grow fuzzy and my head drops as I nod off. Jumping awake, I manage to fight sleep for another two minutes then then I'm out like a light.

I'm not sure how long I sleep, but my dreams are filled with smoke and I'm

running through the hotel, trying to get away from the fire that's nipping at my heels. Over and over, I call for Conor, terror surging through me. He's nowhere to be found and when I finally run into another person, it's Desmond. He's horribly burned and reaching for me. I spin around, but he manages to grab my shirt, pulling me back against him, and I can hear the crackle and pop of his skin as it burns. And then my clothes catch on fire and all I can do is scream.

With a cry, I jolt awake. My eyes squint against the overhead light which I never turned off and I scan the room, looking for any sign of danger.

Nothing.

Heart beating rapidly, drumming in my ears, I take a moment to slow down my breathing and sink back into the pillows. It was just a dream. The clock says it's almost four in the morning and if Desmond were going to come see me, I think he would've hours ago.

For now, I'm safe.

Sending up a silent prayer of gratitude, I close my eyes again, but sleep never comes. At seven o'clock, I roll out of bed and wash up in the attached bathroom. I have no idea what to expect today, but I'm going to be prepared.

I wonder how long it took for Conor to discover I was missing and, even more so, I wonder how he's coping. All he wanted to do was protect me and now I'm gone. Knowing him like I do, I have a feeling he's angry and devising a plan with his brothers to come here, guns blazing.

At least, I hope so.

I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to be waiting around for Desmond.

Turns out, all day. Three small meals have been delivered to my room by a massive enforcer and I also spot another one outside of my door, guarding my room. Desmond must be busy because when he finally shows up, it's just getting dark.

I've had all day to prepare for this visit. The moment he steps into the room, I turn from the window where I've spent hours looking out at the woods, praying to see Conor, and glare at Desmond.

Who does he think he is?

“Sorry for the delay in visiting you, Emma. But, as you probably already know, it’s been a busy day full of inconveniences because of my nephews.” He slips his suit jacket off and lays it over a chair. “I’m going to need you to come over here and ease my stress.”

I automatically take a step back.

Desmond chuckles. “Still a cold fish? You mean my nephew never warmed you up? Come now, I see the way he looks at you, how he protects you. There’s no way he didn’t touch you. Mark you like the animal he is.”

Biting down on my lip, I don’t say a word.

As he stalks closer, pulling his belt free, my heart sinks. But I’m going to fight him. And this time I’m ready.

“No matter,” Desmond says with a flick of his hand. Unzipping his trousers, he eyes me hungrily. “Get on your knees.”

Instead of doing as he orders, I bolt sideways and jump onto the bed, planning to run over it and put it between us, but Desmond moves faster than I imagined he would. Halfway across the mattress, I stumble and fall when he grabs my ankle and gives it a vicious twist.

A cry bursts from my throat and I hit the bed with an oomph, spinning around as he climbs over me. I don’t waste a second and my hand goes for the pen hidden in my shorts. My fingers wrap around it, I yank it out and slam it into his shoulder.

“Bitch!” he screams, falling backwards.

Scrambling out from underneath him while he yanks the pen out of his shoulder, I grab the lamp off the side table, turn and swing with all of my might. WHACK! The heavy base hits Desmond’s skull with a resounding crack and he drops onto the bed.

Stepping back, hands shaking, I wait and stay ready in case he suddenly pops up and I have to hit him again.

But he doesn’t move and blood oozes from the gash along the side of his

head. Clutching the lamp tightly, I slowly circle around the bed and approach him from behind. I know he has to have the key to the door somewhere on him and that means I'm going to need to search his pockets.

Very reluctantly, extremely carefully, I shift the lamp to my left hand and slide my right hand into his pants pocket. First the one side then the other. Dammit. Nothing. Releasing a pent-up breath, I step back.

Where is the damn key?

I rack my brain, trying to remember where he put it and my gaze lands on the suit jacket he tossed over the chair after he walked in. Yes! That has to be it.

Hurrying over, I check the pockets and find the small key in the inside pocket.

Thank God.

With a quick glance at his prone form still lying on the bed, I turn around, unlock the door, shove it open and run straight into the guard.

Oh, shit. I'd forgotten about him.

The big brute turns and looks at me, eyes widening.

"Hurry!" I cry, doing my best to sound distraught and scared, and pointing frantically behind me. "He fell and hit his head and he's bleeding!"

I'm not sure whether I just gave a great performance or the guard just reacts on instinct and bolts inside to check on Desmond out of concern. Or he's just not that bright. Whatever the case may be, I move into the hall, slam the door shut and lock it.

Here's where things get tricky.

Breathing hard, I know that I have seconds to get out of here before that guard calls for backup. Plus, this place is crawling with enforcers and I'm going to have to avoid being seen somehow. I'm not exactly sure how I'm going to pull this off, but escape is my only option and I know I'm only going to get one chance at this.

Heart in my throat, I race over to the back staircase instead of the main one in

the hopes of running into fewer people. Hopefully, if luck is on my side, I won't run into anyone and I can sneak right out the back door.

One thing is front and center in my mind as I jog down the stairs—if I'm caught, there won't be another opportunity to outwit Desmond. He will probably beat me to within an inch of my life, tie me to the bed and then hurt me in the most humiliating ways possible.

And I can't let that happen.

When I reach the main floor, I very carefully open the door that leads to the kitchen and peer inside. Three enforcers sit at the table and, all of a sudden, a radio crackles to life.

“I need backup! Desmond is down and the girl escaped! She's somewhere in the house! Find her!”

Shit!

The men push up from the table, pulling their guns out and, instead of heading toward the main staircase, they turn in my direction, planning to use the back stairs.

I'm about to turn around and race back up the steps when the loudest boom I've ever heard roars through the air outside and the entire house shakes on its foundation.

“What the fuck?” one of the enforcers exclaims.

“That was an explosion!”

Two more loud booms fill the air.

“Hurry! Outside!”

“What about the girl?”

“Fuck the girl!”

Loud boots thunk across the kitchen floor and out the back door. I have no idea what's going on, but I have a pretty good feeling that Conor and his brothers are somewhere on the property.

And I'm going to find my man and escape before those goons come back.

CONOR

As much as I want to go running in to rescue Emma, my brothers talk me down and remind me this is only going to work if we go in prepared.

“We’ve got one shot at this,” Liam tells me.

“Yeah, I know.” I rake a hand through my disheveled hair and force myself to take a few deep breaths. “I just don’t trust that Matteo will help us.”

“It’s a chance we have to take.” Liam looks over at Rory and Sofia. “Are you ladies ready?”

They nod and we’re ready to set the plan in motion. It might not be the greatest idea I ever came up with and the fact that it hinges on Matteo Marino’s cooperation is unnerving and not something we can even count on. Yet here we are, on our way over to the hospital to see him bright and early.

Once we get to the private room where Matteo is recovering from the three gunshot wounds, it’s clear no one is going to be let in by the hulking bodyguard.

At least not until he recognizes Rory and Sofia.

“We’d like to visit our father, please,” Rory says.

The enforcer looks over her shoulder at me and my brothers. After a brief hesitation, he sends us a glare. “No O’Shea’s are allowed in there.”

“Just us,” Sofia promises.

“Let me clear it with Mr. Marino first.”

The enforcer disappears inside the room and Rafferty mutters a curse.

“No fucking way is he going to let anyone in that room.”

“He might,” Sofia says softly, running a hand up and down her husband’s arm.

This whole idea is starting to look like a bust. If Marino refuses to see his daughters then we’re shit out of luck. And we need those goddamn explosives.

The door opens and the enforcer nods at Rory and Sofia. “Go ahead.”

I exchange a shocked look with my brothers as the girls go inside to talk to the man who said he’d cut all ties if they didn’t leave my brothers and go straight home. Of course, neither listened and now they’re married with babies.

I’m too nervous to sit, so I pace back and forth, telling myself not to get my hopes up. Hell, the last time Matteo was with Sofia, he locked her up in a basement cell and threatened Rafferty’s life.

But we do have one big thing going for us. We saved Matteo Marino’s life.

It would’ve been so easy to run out of that restaurant and leave him after the bullets started flying. But, we didn’t. We helped carry the bastard out, loaded him into the car and drove him here.

Time seems to go by so slowly and we don’t know what to expect or how the conversation is going. But after almost a half an hour, the door opens and the sisters walk out.

I hurry over. “Well?” I ask, desperate for an answer so we can move forward, one way or another.

Rory lets out a deep breath and Sofia’s mouth edges up. “He told us where the explosives are located,” Sofia says.

“Fuck yeah,” I exclaim in a low voice. “Let’s go.”

We leave the hospital and Rory gives us directions to a hideout where the C-4 is supposedly hidden. In the back of my mind, I can't help but wonder if this is a trap.

"How did you manage that?" Liam asks, voice full of awe.

"Yeah, you two just pulled off a bloody miracle," Rafferty states.

"I think a couple of things have changed his outlook. At least a little," Rory says. "One, he almost died. When I was talking to my mom last week, she said he mentioned Griffin and started asking questions."

We all know that Matteo has never met his only grandson. And now with Sofia being pregnant, there's another one on the way.

"And, two," Sofia says, "you guys saved his life and he knows it. He owes you and despite not being the best person, our father has always been a man of honor and one who pays his debts back."

"That's why we figured he'd give us the explosives," Rory says with a wiley smile. "And, third, I think he hates Desmond right now more than he hates you three."

"Oh, that's reassuring," Liam comments dryly.

"It's a good thing," Sofia assures us. "He's furious that Desmond got the upperhand and I think his pride is hurting. Mostly because he thinks Desmond is a fool. But he has a grudging respect for Liam and Rafferty because they both stood up to him."

"No one ever stands up to our father," Rory says solemnly.

Talk about dysfunctional family dynamics. I'm glad there are only two Marino sisters and I didn't marry into that lunatic family like my brothers.

It doesn't take long to reach the address Matteo gave us. It's a warehouse in a sketchy part of town, so we park close. The door has a padlock and Rory steps up to it and punches in the code her father gave her. I'm watching with bated breath as the lock pops and she pushes the door open.

As we step inside, it's clear that this is one of Marino's secret places where he stashes weapons and other illegal goods. After a little searching, we locate

the crate with the C-4 and another one beside it with everything we need to blow shit up: wire coil, switches, initiators, batteries, clay and other goodies.

“This is enough to blow the whole compound,” Liam mutters.

“We just need a little of it to rig the old barn,” I say and start gathering up all the ingredients for our recipe for disaster.

“And how exactly do you guys know how to make a bomb?” Rory asks, tilting her head.

We all exchange a look. “Why don’t you ask the Mayhem Twins?” Rafferty says innocently.

“We had no clue,” I say.

“Yeah, how were we supposed to know it would actually work?” Liam adds.

“Frick and Frack here found an old box of dynamite in an abandoned mining tunnel one summer. We were on vacation out west and these two nearly blew the whole campsite to smithereens.”

Liam and I smother grins. “What can I say? We’re good at making things go boom.”

And that’s exactly what we’re going to do again. It’s been a while, but it doesn’t take a genius to rig some C-4 and then blow it sky-high.

We need to move fast and we waste no time dropping the women back off at the hotel. We’re dressed in all black and ready to cause a big diversion.

Instead of parking in the back field and cutting through the woods again like I did last time—because I’m sure they’re expecting that—we leave my Jeep in the trees a little further up the road then walk over to the rear of the compound near the old barn. The gate is high, but the three of us climb over it easily enough.

Dropping down, we stay low and use the barn for cover as we make our way over. It’s used for storage and doesn’t have anything important in it, so it’s no big deal to destroy it. Once we’re safely inside, we remove our backpacks, unzip them and get to work.

It takes Liam and I less than thirty minutes to carefully rig the barn with explosives and Rafferty keeps watch, informing us with what he can see.

Handing the detonator to Liam, I take my gun out and hope to God I can sneak in and find Emma while my brothers provide the distraction.

“Ready?” Liam asks.

I give a sharp nod. “Let’s do this.”

We all slip back out of the barn and move into the rear treeline. Staying out of sight, we make our way to the opposite side of the woods, avoiding the guards and staying low. Once we’re in position, I nod and Liam hits the button on the detonator.

BOOM!

The first explosion makes the ground rumble and the second has all the patrolling guards running toward the inferno. When the third explosion goes off, the back door of the house flies open and several more enforcers hurry out and race toward the blazing barn.

“Go!” Liam hisses and I take off across the back lawn, low and fast.

Please, let me find Emma, I think. And please let her be alright.

Because if Desmond so much as laid a hand on her, he’s a dead man.

EMMA

After the guards run out, I step into the kitchen and make my way over to the back door which is wide open. Everyone is running over to the corner of the property where the old barn is consumed in flames.

This is exactly the distraction I needed.

I slip outside and start hurrying to the opposite side of all the commotion. No one is paying any attention to the main house and I race across the lawn, staying low and keeping my head down. I'm halfway to the gate when I see a dark figure running straight at me.

Shit!

It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness and I recognize Conor. My heart leaps into my throat and I pick up my pace then slam right into his arms.

"Oh, my sweet Emma," he murmurs.

"Oh, my God, Conor." I wrap my arms around his neck and he scoops me right up into his arms and takes off.

His arms feel so tight around me and I sag against his body, knowing I'm safe now and everything will be fine.

Or at least, that's my thought before we come to an abrupt halt and I turn to see one of the patrolling guards. And he's pulling his gun out of its holster.

But Conor is one step ahead of him and he already has his gun out and ready. He fires off a quick shot and there's a muffled sound as the bullet shoots from the suppressor and the guard falls.

"Put me down," I urge him. "It's okay. I'm fine." The last thing I want to do is make this escape harder because he thinks he has to carry me. He needs both hands free and I'm going to keep right up with him so we can get the hell out of here.

Conor sets me back on my feet and gives me a sharp nod.

"Liam and Raff are gonna blow some more shit up," he warns me.

The fact that Conor's brothers are risking themselves to help us escape makes my chest tighten. God, I love these O'Shea men. I just pray that we're all able to get out of here okay.

As if on cue, another explosion goes off and the corner of the backyard is chaos. It's a cacophony of fire balls and yelling guards. I swear, if I never see fire again it will be too soon.

A radio crackles to life and Conor unclips it from his belt. "I've got Emma," he announces.

"That's great," Liam responds. "Heads-up, the woods are swarming with guards and it's getting awfully hot over here. ETA?"

Conor pulls me over to the wrought-iron fence. "We're going over the fence right now. I'll see you at the rendezvous point."

Clipping the radio back on his pants, he turns around and motions for me to hop up onto his back. I don't argue because I have no idea how I'd manage to climb over this slippery fence without his help. Another explosion rocks the ground and a section of the burning barn blows halfway across the yard in a burst of spark and flame.

After I latch onto him piggyback-style, he warns me to hold tight and then takes a leap up. Conor turns into Spiderman and his feet find all the right holds as he propels us to the top. Once we're up, he carefully swings a leg over and climbs back down, dropping the last couple of feet.

The moment his feet hit the ground, I let go and move up beside him.

“Let’s go!” he says and grabs my hand.

We tear across the side yard, avoiding the front gatehouse, and head for a section of trees. I don’t think I’ve ever run so fast in my life and I do my best to keep up with his long-legged strides.

In less than a minute, we reach his Jeep and somehow, Liam and Rafferty arrive a moment after us.

“Holy shit!” Rafferty exclaims, as we all jump into the car. “Did you see that last one! Damn near singed my eyebrows.”

Conor turns the car on, hits the gas and we peel out of the wooded cover and climb back up onto the road. With a soft, shaky sigh, I drop back against the passenger seat. A warm hand covers mine and I look down to see Conor’s fingers thread through mine.

“Are you alright?” he asks me again.

I nod. “I am now.”

“Good to have you back, Emma,” Liam says and pats my shoulder from the back seat.

“Yeah, and I have to say that was the damn coolest rescue we’ve pulled off yet, boys,” Rafferty exclaims and they all chuckle.

“Did anyone see Desmond?” Liam asks.

“Desmond wasn’t going anywhere,” I announce.

“What do you mean?” Conor asks, looking over at me.

“I whacked him upside the head with a lamp and knocked him out.”

In the back, Liam and Rafferty give a whoop and Conor’s mouth edges up as he says, “Good girl.”

Once we get back to the city and arrive at the new hotel, I see everyone, assure them I’m okay and get a lot of hugs. Then Conor tells everyone I need to rest and whisks me straight to his room.

“If you want me to stay in a different room...” My voice trails off, remembering how he told me it was best if we didn’t stay together.

Conor curses under his breath and stalks right up to me, grabbing my hips. “I was an idiot for saying that. I only did it because I was so scared I was putting you in harm’s way. The last thing I ever want is to have you hurt because of me.”

“Conor,” I say softly and lay a hand against his stubbled, very dear face. “I was in trouble with Desmond before I even met you. You’re the one who keeps running to my rescue and who has done everything in his power to protect me.”

I bite my lower lip for a moment, on the verge of blurting out what I’m feeling when Conor beats me to it.

“Because you mean everything to me, Emma. I’ve tried, but I can’t stay away.”

“I don’t want you to stay away.”

“Good because I’m never letting you go again.” His dark blue eyes lock onto mine. “I love you, Emma.”

A warmth floods my heart and I don’t think I’ve ever smiled so big in my entire life. “You do?” I ask softly, unable to believe I’m hearing these words come out of his mouth.

“More than anything.”

A soft sigh shudders through me and I pull him down and kiss him hard. Then I lean back in his arms and say, “I love you, too, Conor. So very much.”

Something that resembles wonder flashes over his face and then he’s scooping me up into his arms and heading straight for the bathroom. We smell like smoke from all the damn fires and I’m ready to wash away every single lingering Desmond memory.

Conor turns the shower on and our clothes drop to the tile floor. Then he lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist, holding his face and kissing him deeply. The water pounds down, instantly soaking us, as our tongues tangle.

His hand slides through my hair, angling my head back and, as he thrusts his tongue, he does the same with his cock. Teasing me right where I want him.

“I need you,” I say, moaning as his fingers reach down to stroke my folds and circle my clit. “Now.”

He slides a finger inside me, followed by another, and I drop my head back, my hips shamelessly undulating against his hand.

“Oh, my sweet Emma. That’s it. Take what you need.”

I’m so wet and the sensation of his fingers curling inside my slick channel while his thumb presses down on my clit makes me lose my mind. With a cry, I let the waves of pleasure wash over me, my inner muscles tightening then releasing.

Conor is huge and pulsing, and all I want to do is sink down on his steel length. But the moment I start to take him into my still spasming body, he freezes.

“I don’t have any protection,” he tells me. “But I can still make you come, sweetheart. Over and over.”

“I don’t care about protection. I need your cock inside me.”

He hesitates and I grind down, trying to pull him inside. “Please, Con. Don’t make me beg.”

“Never,” he hisses then yanks my hips down as he surges up, embedding me completely with one hard thrust.

I shout, clamping my legs tighter around his waist, and he spins me around. My back hits the cool tiles and Conor begins to pound into me as the water pounds down all around us. Faster and faster. Marking me as his once and for all. And, God, I love every moment. Because I do belong to him.

All of me. Heart, mind, body and soul.

CONOR

I'm not going to lie. Being balls deep inside Emma with no barrier between us is the greatest feeling in the whole damn world. She's slick and hot, squeezing me hard, and I'm losing control fast.

But I refuse to come before her. Adjusting her body slightly, I find her inner sweet spot and go to town. Slamming into her, my hips pistoning, hands flat on the wall, I push up onto my toes and try to get even deeper. In moments, Emma is crying and bucking in my arms. Then she screams my name and digs her nails into my biceps so hard that I think she just drew blood.

Once she breaks, I immediately follow, unable to hold back and I explode inside her. My release fills her and I shout her name, my entire body shuddering hard. Panting, still twitching with aftershocks, I sag against the wall. Emma hangs onto me and I lift her head, cup her face and kiss her deeply. The fact that I almost lost this woman kills me. Breaking my mouth away, I lift her higher, sliding out of her body, and turn her in my arms so I'm cradling her.

After turning the water off, I grab a fluffy towel, wrap it around her and head into the bedroom. I carefully lay her on the bed and then climb in beside her. Emma comes right into my open arms and I hold her tightly. Pressing a soft kiss to her head, I whisper, "I love you."

"I love you, too," she says.

Her body relaxes and she melts into me. We're both so exhausted and it's not long before we fall sound asleep.

Finally, we're safe and I've never been so damn grateful for anything in my entire life.

A couple of times during the night, I jump awake, terrified that somehow Emma is gone. But she's curled up against me and I lower my face and bury it in her hair, breathing deeply. Telling myself that she's here and everything is okay once again.

I'm so scared she's going to get hurt by staying with me but, at the same time, I can't live without her. And I know we can't live in fear. There seems to be one clear solution to me: marriage.

That way we can always be together and I can take care of her permanently. The more I think about it, the more sure I am. Now I just need to convince her.

Once I make up my mind, I can't fall back asleep and Emma wakes up, sensing my nervous excitement.

"What's wrong?" she asks sleepily.

"Nothing," I instantly reply. "I was just thinking."

"About?"

"Us."

She turns in my arms and gazes up at me with soft amber eyes. "I like the sound of that—us."

"How about making it forever?" I ask, nerves fluttering in my stomach.

She arches a brow, eyes going wide.

"Just so you know, I'm never letting you go. So, I think it only makes sense that we get married." Sitting up, I take her hand and kiss her knuckles. "Emma Shepherd, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?"

Tears fill her eyes and my heart constricts. "Yes! Oh, Conor, a million times yes!"

I crush my mouth against hers and know that I've found my forever. And no

one is ever taking her away from me again.

When morning comes, we inform our family that we're getting married. Cheers fill the air and everyone starts going crazy, hugging us both and offering their congratulations.

Neither of us cares much about a big wedding or long engagement. We explain to her dad and my family that we only want to be together. And, of course, we want all of them to be there when we say "I do."

So we find a last-minute officiant and exchange our vows down in the hotel's garden. Surrounded by flowers and in front of everyone we love, I take Emma Shepherd and make her Emma O'Shea.

After so many scares and threats, my world balances out and is bursting with love as our lips meet and we're declared married.

Emma is my wife. The thought fills me with so much happiness that I feel like I'm going to burst.

After the quick ceremony, we all have brunch in the restaurant and a palpable joy fills the room. But reality always comes crashing back and I notice when Rory slips away from the table to take a phone call.

After a minute, she returns and whispers something to Liam. My brother looks over at me and I raise a brow.

"Matteo wants to see us," he says without preamble.

"Is that a good thing?" I ask, looking over at Rory.

"I think so," she says carefully. "He just moved back into the family brownstone and is recuperating. But he was very adamant about you, Liam and Rafferty going over there this afternoon."

"But why?" Sofia asks worriedly. "Do you think he's up to something?"

"He's always up to something," Rory states.

Despite not knowing what Matteo wants, my brothers and I accept the meeting, and Rory informs her father that we will be arriving, with an armed Sully, at two o'clock.

Right before we leave, Emma throws herself in my arms and kisses me soundly. “Hurry back,” she whispers.

“I will,” I promise.

I have no idea why Matteo wants to see us, but ever since we saved his life, he hasn’t tried to kill us. So, I’m taking this as a good sign.

When we arrive at the brownstone, the door is immediately opened by Anna, Matteo’s wife. She often sneaks over to visit her daughters and Griffin, so we’ve gotten to know her a bit better.

“I’m so glad you came,” she says, ushering us inside. “I’m not exactly sure what is going on, but Matteo was determined to see you. Which tells me he has a plan and wants the three of you involved.”

Anna guides us to the master suite then presses a kiss to each of our cheeks.

“Tread carefully,” she whispers and pushes the door open. “Matteo, they’re here.”

We walk into the bedroom and the man who I once thought was so formidable looks small and harmless in the huge bed. But I know that looks can be deceiving.

Matteo sits up taller against his pile of pillows and motions for us to come closer. He’s flanked by two guards and we have Sully at our side.

Just in case.

“Thank you for coming,” Matteo says. I can see the bandages beneath his button-down pajama shirt and I know he must still be in a lot of pain. Although he’d never show or admit it. Especially not to us. “I have a business proposition I’d like to discuss.”

“What kind of proposition?” Liam asks, voice full of suspicion.

“Before we get to that...” Matteo pulls in a breath and hesitates, giving the impression that whatever he’s about to say is difficult for him. “I feel compelled to thank you for getting me out of the restaurant after I was wounded and rushing me to the hospital. If you hadn’t then we all know I might not be here right now.”

“You wouldn’t be,” Liam says.

“Right.” Matteo shifts on the mattress then gets straight to business. “Here’s the deal. Our family may have a bloody history, but it’s clear you and my daughters have decided to move on from the feud. You’ve found peace and that’s something I never thought I’d see during my lifetime. I admit, I didn’t want to, either.”

“We found more than peace,” Liam states evenly, crossing his arms.

“We found a lifetime of love,” Rafferty adds.

“Good thing you only had two daughters,” I add with a smirk, unable to help myself. When Matteo’s dark eyes narrow and my brothers sigh, I flash the plain gold band on my finger. “I’m kidding. I just married Emma this morning and love her more than life itself.”

Matteo gives a slight nod then continues, “I will do whatever is necessary to preserve my businesses, so when a threat comes along, I’m going to eliminate it. Desmond needs to be stopped. The way I see it, we are more powerful together.”

“You want to work with us?” Liam asks in disbelief.

“I do.”

“How can we trust you?” Rafferty asks.

“Because quite simply, I’m a greedy, power-hungry man who refuses to let a weasel like Desmond defeat me. And, as much as you may not believe this... I want to do right by my daughters and the men they chose to marry. Despite my initial misgivings.”

“Initial misgivings?” Rafferty repeats, voice incredulous. “You beat me, locked me up in a cell and threatened to kill me.”

“I didn’t follow through with it, though, did I?” Matteo waves a dismissive hand through the air. “Bygones, right? From this moment, we need to move forward together and not dwell on the past.”

“I never thought I’d hear you say that,” Liam comments. “Before we discuss this any further, I need to know the truth. Did you put the hit on our father?”

“No,” Matteo responds. “I know you don’t believe me, but I had nothing to do with that.”

“What about when you sent your thugs after me and Sofia?” Rafferty asks. “Maggiano told us they were ordered to shoot on sight. And then he tried to hurt Sofia.”

Matteo shakes his head. “As angry as I was with them, I’d never tell my enforcers to hurt my daughters. In hindsight, I’m grateful to you for helping her escape.”

We’re all studying Matteo closely, wondering if this is some kind of trick. After all our turbulent history, can we actually trust the man?

“How do you propose we overthrow Desmond?” Liam asks, getting down to the business of a truce.

“Now hear me out,” Matteo begins carefully. “First, wouldn’t you agree that our strained relationship is infamous. Everyone knows our families have always fought and hated each other.”

My brothers and I nod.

“I’d hardly say it’s a secret,” I say.

“So, our first order of business is to show a united front and convince everyone that we’re working together. That we’ve moved past old beliefs and we’re stronger together.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?” Rafferty asks.

“A union. One that I approve of from the get-go and fully support.”

I glance over at my brothers, not exactly sure what Matteo means.

“A marriage of convenience between my youngest son, Luca, and your sister, Finley,” he states.

“Absolutely not,” Liam says.

“You’re not forcing our little sister to marry anyone,” I snap.

“Fuck that,” Rafferty agrees.

Matteo takes a moment, choosing his next words carefully. “Let me re-emphasize the word ‘convenience.’ By coming together, our strength will be enough to decimate Desmond. My plan is to have a lavish wedding and announce it to the world that the Marino/ O’Shea feud is over. By fully uniting our families, we can reign this city together and no one will dare threaten us.”

What he says makes sense but, at the same time, we would never force Finley to marry anyone.

As if reading my thoughts, Liam says, “It would be entirely up to Finley. We would never force her to do anything.”

“It would only be temporary,” Matteo adds. “If they don’t fall madly in love like everyone else around here seems to be doing then they can get the marriage annulled after so many months. Once Desmond is taken care of. It’ll be like it never happened.”

“A temporary, fake marriage to unite our warring families,” Liam murmurs. “When the hell did things get so complicated?”

“We’re not strong enough to defeat Desmond separately. Obviously, since you all are hiding out in a hotel and I’m lying here recuperating from being shot. But, together, he doesn’t stand a chance. We’ll crush him.”

I pull in a deep breath and exchange a look with my brothers. “We’re going to need to talk to Finley and she might want nothing to do with your plan,” I inform Matteo. “So, start thinking of a plan B.”

“There is no plan B,” Matteo snaps. “If you want to move back to your compound, defeat your uncle and live happily ever after then this is the only option. Think everything through carefully before you make your final decision. Otherwise, Desmond will strike and I won’t be surprised when we all wind up six feet under beside Nolan.”

His words strike a chord deep within me. I just married Emma this morning and I have no plan of leaving this life any time soon. We have far too much to do together. And my brothers have new families, too, now.

Shit. Even though I hate to admit it, I think we all know that Matteo Marino has a point. And even more annoying, he’s presented a plan that is all in our

best interest.

Well, except maybe for Finley and Luca.

“We can’t make any promises,” Liam says carefully. “But we’ll talk to our sister. The decision is strictly hers.”

“This is our best chance, so explain to Finley that we need her cooperation to unite our empires.”

“Is Luca onboard with this insanity?” I ask.

“He will be,” Matteo assures us. “I haven’t spoken to him yet, but he’ll be returning to town very soon.”

Although I hate to admit it, I think Matteo is right. This could be our best, and last, chance to defeat our uncle once and for all.

EPILOGUE

EMMA

O *ne Month Later...*

Marrying Conor is the best decision I ever made. He is my best friend, my lover and my soulmate and I couldn't imagine living this life without him.

Currently, we've decided to stop hiding. My dad moved back into the small apartment we used to share and he's cleaning it up and packing. His plan is to find a better place and start a new job helping out the O'Shea family which Maeve finagled through Liam. Everyone has noticed how close he and Maeve seem to be getting and I'm happy for them. For the first time in fifteen years, my dad is smiling again and that makes me so very happy.

While Maeve and Finley are living at the hotel still, Conor and his brothers have moved us all into their city digs. They have constant security watching their places at all times, so I feel safe staying above the fight club. Besides, it's nice to have our own little place.

Though things are still up in the air with Desmond, Conor told me that their relationship with Matteo Marino is going surprisingly well. Liam and his brothers have legally contested Desmond's claim on the compound and the family empire, but it's a long, slow process.

For the time being, Desmond is laying low.

In the meantime, Finley has reluctantly agreed to spend time with Luca Marino, but hasn't announced yet whether she'll actually go through with

marrying him. I'd feel bad for her except for the fact that Luca is extremely good-looking and beyond charming. I can't imagine it's been too difficult for her to get to know him a little better.

It's nice to feel safe again, even though it may only be temporary.

Conor is down in the club, working out, and I'm baking chocolate chip cookies. When the oven timer beeps, I flip it off and pull out the tray of warm, ooey-goey cookies that remind me of the ones we shared at the hotel. I got the secret recipe from Maeve and I'm excited to try one. I just hope they're as good as hers.

Because we have some celebrating to do.

I haven't told Conor my secret yet because it was just confirmed this morning, but we're expecting and I couldn't be more thrilled. Sure, the timing is a little fast and things are scary now, but I know that everything is going to be okay. Besides, I have Rory and Sofia to help me through everything. They've become the best friends I never had and I already love them like sisters.

The door opens and I glance over my shoulder to see my big, sweaty man walk in and give me a lopsided grin. "I smell cookies," he says, walking over and dropping a kiss on my lips.

"You would be correct," I tell him and pick one up off the cooling rack. Lifting it up, I offer it to him and he takes the whole cookie into his mouth, nipping and licking my fingers in the process. With a giggle, I pull my hand back. "Well?"

"They taste just like mom's," he tells me, swallowing the cookie. "Absolutely delicious. Just like you."

Pulling me close, Conor kisses me thoroughly and I melt against his warm, muscled body. He tastes like chocolate and is hot to the touch from his no doubt strenuous workout.

"I have something to tell you," I whisper. He begins kissing along my jaw and down the side of my throat.

"Mmmhmm..."

Instead of saying the words, I reach for his hand and gently guide it over my still-flat stomach. Conor freezes then pulls back, cobalt eyes widening.

“Remember when you said you don’t run away? And if I need you, you’ll be here?”

His mouth opens then closes, and he swallows hard. “After the condom tore.”

“Well, we’re going to need you. Now more than ever.” I smile and say, “Me and the little baby we’re going to have.”

“Are you serious?” he asks, his large hand moving over my belly. “You’re pregnant?”

I nod and he pulls me into his arms, mouth crashing against mine. After a very long, passionate kiss, Conor pulls back and awe fills his face.

Awe and so much love that it emanates off him.

“You are the best thing that ever happened to me, sweet Emma, and I love you so damn much.” He presses his forehead against mine. “Thank you for everything.”

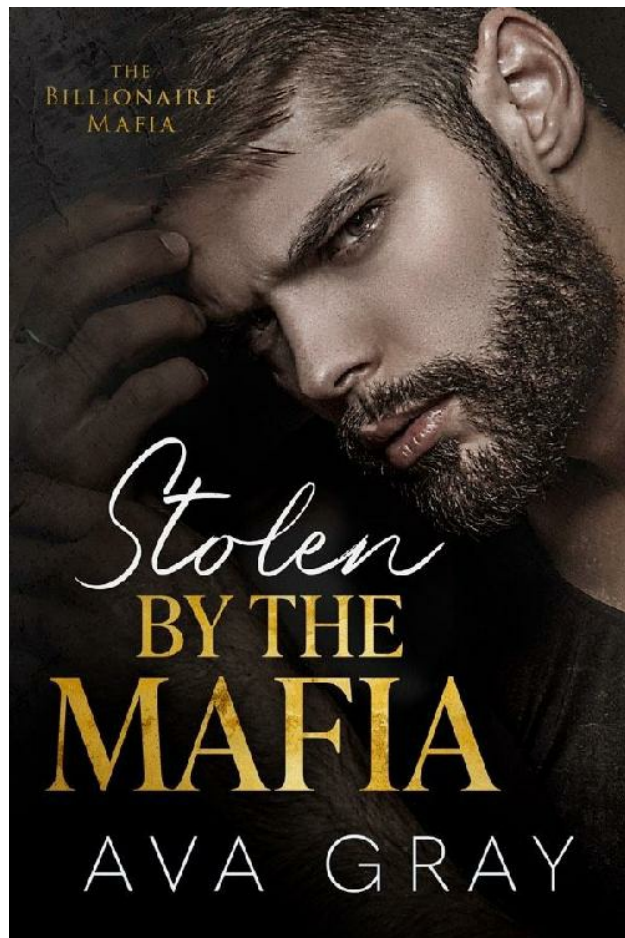
“Oh, Conor,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around his neck. “You’re my everything and I love you more than anything in this whole world.”

Even though we both know that a new battle with Desmond is coming, right now we have each other and that’s all we need. Together with our families, we’re going to work together and defeat him. Hopefully, we can trust Matteo Marino and win this war once and for all and find peace.

In the meantime, I have everything I need. Everything that I’ve ever wanted and dared to dream. Pulling my husband down, my lips brush his ear as I whisper, “Take me to bed, Con.”

And Conor sweeps me up into his arms and does exactly that.

EXCERPT: STOLEN BY THE MAFIA



He was my father's prisoner, our handsome, irresistible enemy...
Now I'm his unwilling captive.

I should have stayed away from Rafferty O'Shea. But I felt compassion for the monster trapped in a cage in my father's dungeons. I shouldn't have trusted Rafferty. He was always planning on using me to get away.

By the time I realize his cruel plans, it's too late. He's not the valiant, strong fighter I thought he was... he's the bastard my father warned me about, with good reason.

One mistake is all it takes for him to own me for *nine months*.

Nine months of carrying his child and the consequences of my sins.

Nine months of paying for my betrayal because I could not resist temptation.

And no hope of ever hearing him say he loves me back...

***Stolen by the Mafia* is the second full-length novel in The Billionaire Mafia dark romance series. Borrow for free with KU and binge this spicy novel today!**

Sofia

I look down at the cooing infant in my arms and can't help but smile even though I'm on the verge of crying. My new nephew Griffin O'Shea smiles up at me like the happy baby he is and I wish my family could act more like him.

My older sister Aurora, better known as Rory, recently married Liam O'Shea

and their baby is only a month old. We were hoping Griffin could help mend old rifts, but that hasn't quite happened yet. My family, the Marino's, and his family, the O'Shea's, have been rivals for hundreds of years, going all the way back to Prohibition.

At this point, I'm not even sure what the feud is about. I know Rory and I are on the same page and all we want to do is bury the hatchet. But nothing is ever that easy. There's so much history and hate which makes me wonder if it will ever be possible for our families to let go and move on.

I hope so. New blood and marriages and forgiveness will be the answer, I tell myself. Even so, I have my doubts. Our father, for example, is so set in his ways and his hatred for the O'Shea's that it's disconcerting. Our families declared war on each other so long ago and the rivalry hasn't eased up.

However, ever since Nolan O'Shea was gunned down and Liam took over the family business in his father's place, things have begun to change. He eliminated their old school enforcers and hired private security. He and his siblings have also been shutting down the various underground businesses, trying to focus on their legal, multi-billion dollar enterprises instead. You'd think less competition in that area would make my father happy, but he's never been more on a rampage than he is now, and I know it's because Rory defied him and fell in love with the enemy.

The enemy who loves her with a fierce loyalty and protectiveness like I've never seen before in my life. Liam would die for Rory and when they're together, I can see the stars in his eyes, and the way he dotes on her and Griffin is heartwarming. If only I could be so lucky to find a man who would love me the way Liam loves my sister.

The enemy...what a joke.

My father hasn't spoken to Rory since she married Liam and gave birth to Griffin. And that makes me incredibly sad because this little miracle made from love in my arms should bring our families closer, not separate them further.

With a soft sigh, I see Griffin has fallen asleep and Rory motions for me to hand him over.

“Be right back,” she whispers and heads down to the nursery to lay him down for his nap.

I sit back and look around the house where she and my new brother-in-law live. It’s located on the O’Shea compound around a half an hour outside of Chicago and it has everything they need. It’s also next door to Conor, Liam’s twin brother, and the main house where their mother Maeve and younger sister Finley live. Then a little further back is where their younger brother Rafferty lives in his own place.

Their home is everything I’d like to have one day. Not too big, but very cozy and welcoming, and I immediately notice all the little, personal touches my sister has added—the candles, pillows and a few framed pictures.

Rory reappears a few minutes later. “He’ll be out for a while. Do you want some tea?”

I nod, stand up and follow her into the kitchen. It’s modern and bright, and I walk over to a stool and sit down at the granite-topped island.

“So give me the full scoop,” Rory says, moving over to the stove and lighting the flame beneath the tea kettle. “And don’t hold back.”

“Oh, geez, where do I even begin?” I let out a sigh and watch my sister bustle over to the cupboard, pull out a couple of mugs and find tea bags. She looks amazing for just having given birth not too long ago. I’m sure she’ll have her old shape back in no time, but Liam keeps saying how much he loves her new curves. “I suppose I can start with Dad going on an absolute rampage when he found out about you getting married.”

“Does he know about Dante?” she asks.

I nod. Dante Rivera, the man my father wanted Rory to marry, stormed over here in a jealous, angry rage, waving his gun around. During his tirade and threats, he shot at Liam and grazed his upper arm. Conor immediately fired back and killed Dante before he could hurt any of the other O’Shea family who had all been at the dinner. I can’t imagine how scary that must’ve been, but thank God Conor protected my sister and unborn nephew, along with his family.

“The whole story got back to him and I honestly don’t think he was too

surprised that Dante went off the deep-end. He's promoted another enforcer named Tony. It's just a never ending cycle," I say wearily.

In my opinion, Tony Maggiano is worse than Dante ever was, but that's because Dante left me alone. He was far too obsessed with Rory to pay me any attention. But Tony, on the other hand, is a completely different story. I can't help but notice the way he looks at me and it gives me the creeps. It's not sexual in any way like Dante had been toward Rory. Tony's stare is cold and predatory. Calculating. The way a serial killer looks at his victim. Behind his dark eyes, there's a brutality capable of untold horrors. And I have the very disconcerting feeling that he'd like to hurt me.

"I was hoping things would get better. Dad is going to have to accept the fact that Liam is my husband and I love him."

I've noticed that Rory has stopped referring to him as papà. Matteo Marino, I fear, has lost his oldest daughter due to his stubbornness and refusal to move on past old hurts and beliefs.

And it's an utter shame.

"He forbade me to see you," I tell her softly. "Called you a bad influence."

Rory's brown eyes widen. "What?" With a sad nod, I watch as my feisty sister crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. "Why is he doing this? How can he be so cold? Doesn't he want to meet his grandson?"

Not wanting to hurt her feelings or fuel her fire, I hesitate before telling her the rest. But then I spill it because she deserves to know. "He said he's cut you from his life and that you don't exist to him any longer."

With a look of disbelief that quickly morphs into sadness, Rory leans back against the counter as the tea kettle whistles. "Well, then I guess that's it." She turns, picks up the kettle and pours the hot water into our mugs.

"I'm so sorry, Rory. I didn't want to tell you, but you have to know how he's behaving and the horrible things he's saying."

Rory sits down next to me on a stool and slides my tea over. "It's certainly not your fault. If he wants to be petty and continue this asinine rivalry, even at the cost of losing his relationship with me and his grandson, then so be it.

There's nothing I can do about it."

Her words make me sad, but she's right. What can we possibly do? Feeling helpless, I can't stop the tears that start falling from my eyes. "It's getting harder and harder to sneak away," I tell her, turning the mug around and watching the steam rise. "He's increased security and they're everywhere."

"This is all my fault. I've caused so much chaos since falling in love with Liam. But I don't regret it. He's the love of my life."

"I know and I'm so happy for you."

"I'm sorry to put you through so much sneaking around, though." Rory takes a sip of tea then sighs. "I hate to say it, but maybe we shouldn't see each other for a little bit. At least until Father cools off."

"I don't know if that will ever happen. I've never seen him so angry all the time. And this guard he promoted..." My voice trails off.

"What?" Rory presses, studying me closely.

"He's so threatening and cold. And when he looks at me..." A little shiver runs down my spine. "I don't know. It gives me the creeps."

"He scares you?"

"Yeah." I admit. "Looking into his emotionless eyes is like looking into a bottomless well. Just dark and deep and scary."

"Stay away from him, okay? I never trusted any of those enforcers, especially after seeing what they were capable of and their utter lack of empathy."

I know she's referring to the time she walked in on Dante beating up a man to the point of death. Rory had begged him to stop, but he didn't.

We drink our tea in silence for a moment, both of us wishing for a solution to the chaos that exists between our family and the O'Shea family. It's sad because I've met several of Liam's siblings and they're kind and funny. The exact kind of people I'd choose to be friends with.

"For now, it's probably best if you don't visit for a little while," Rory says again. "I'm sorry, Sofe. I hate putting you in the middle like this."

I let out a groan. “I’m going to miss you and Griffin so much,” I lament.

“I know because we’re going to miss you, too. But that doesn’t mean we can’t talk on the phone every single day and text, too.”

“Do you honestly believe things will ever get better?”

Rory thinks over my question for a minute before answering. “Right now, tensions are just extra high, but I really do believe with all of my heart that one day they will get better.”

Maybe after Dad dies. Though neither of us says it, the mutual thought seems to be hanging in the air between us.

“This sucks,” I say.

“I know, sis, but we will still talk all the time, okay?”

I nod. “Every day.”

“Every day,” she assures me.

We exchange smiles and then hugs. Rory is my best friend and not coming over here to spend time with her is going to be difficult. But I hope she’s right and if we give it some time then things will start to cool off and, best case scenario, they will eventually heal.

The way things are going right now, though, that’s a big “if.”

With a heart that’s growing increasingly heavier, we finish our tea and then I go upstairs to whisper a goodbye to Griffin. He’s still sound asleep and looks like a little, chubby cherub. I lightly curve my hand over his dark, fuzzy head and smile. “See you soon, handsome.” Then I blow him a kiss and I wave goodbye.

Rory walks me outside where a car waits to drive me back to our family brownstone in the city. To be honest, I’m getting tired of living in Chicago and dealing with all the noise and traffic. The more time I spend out here, the more I’m falling in love with the quiet countryside.

After more hugs and promises to talk every day, I climb into the back seat of the SUV and wave goodbye to her as it rolls away, taking me back home.

Back to a place that I don't want to be any longer.

But if I leave, where would I go? And what would I do? My father may have cared for us, sending us to posh boarding schools and made sure that we all received an excellent education, but I've begun to wonder about that. All the subjects we studied have proven useless in our everyday lives. Who wants to hire me when I have a background in subjects like Latin, Art, Greek Mythology and Ancient Civilizations?

Utterly useless. The more I think about it, the more I wonder if he planned that. I wasn't encouraged to study chemistry or politics or law. In fact, those subjects and any others that actually could lead to a real career were discouraged. Unnecessary, my father used to say. And since he paid for my tuition and boarding, he always had the final word on the matter.

It never bothered me too much, though. I always enjoyed school and had a few close friends. Much like Rory, though, I was always a good girl and obeyed the rules. I never snuck out or broke curfew and I certainly never had a boyfriend. I was kissed once, though, and I didn't find it very exciting. Just wet and sloppy. Eww.

Now, I'm 23-years-old and finally starting to question things. Before, I just blindly believed and accepted everything I was told. But I don't want to be that naive, young girl anymore.

Pushing my long, wavy chestnut hair back off my shoulders, I look out the window at the passing countryside and wonder what my future holds. Rory was so brave to stand up for herself and the man she loves. I wonder if it came to that, would I be able to do the same?

I have no idea.

Not that I have a love interest or even a possibility of one. Ever since returning from abroad, I've been a hermit in the family brownstone. I haven't really gone out much unless I was sneaking off to visit Rory. And, as much as I love my sister and new nephew, that's hardly exciting.

God, my life is dreadfully dull. I need some action, some adventure. Dare I say, some spice? An attractive man who will sweep me off my feet and teach me what it's like to love and be loved.

Whelp, I'm not going to hold my breath. If anything, I'll just hope not to get caught by my father when I'm sneaking texts and phone calls to Rory.

Sighing, I press my forehead to the glass and have a feeling that it's going to be a very long and boring summer.

[Read the full story HERE!](#)

SUBSCRIBE TO MY MAILING LIST

I hope you enjoyed reading this book.

In case you would like to receive information on my latest releases, price promotions, and any special giveaways, then I would recommend you to subscribe to my mailing list.

You can do so now by using the subscription link below.

[SUBSCRIBE TO AVA GRAY'S MAILING LIST!](#)