

Moretti
CRIME FAMILY

innocent
UNION

IVY DAVIS

Innocent Union

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE MORETTI MAFIA

BOOK SIX

IVY DAVIS

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CHAPTER 1

Mia

Today, my mom tells me I need to make a good marriage match.

“Today?” I say around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

My mom, a very Italian woman named Giulia Moretti, cuts me a look that says she’s not messing around. “Yes, today. I’ve worked with your brother to find you potential suitors. A couple of them are coming over today. I’m going to find you a good husband, Mia. Make no mistake about it.”

Giulia Moretti is a fierce woman. Her personality is at odds with her delicate features, from her small nose to her blonde hair that’s starting to go gray. Though I’m proud to call her my mother, she can be incredibly overbearing.

“I can’t imagine any guy being into you,” Lucia, my younger sister says from across the breakfast table. At eleven, she thinks she’s hot shit. With long dark hair and striking eyes, she’ll be a force to reckon with when she’s older. But right now, she’s only a kid, and she constantly gets on my nerves.

Her twin brother, Luca, also annoys me most days, but today, he seems more withdrawn than usual. I ignore Lucia’s comment and look at Luca. “You ok?”

He picks at his eggs but doesn’t eat them. “Did you know it’s the anniversary of Uncle Franco’s death last year?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch my mom tense. Uncle freaking Franco. After my father passed away when I was eight, Uncle Franco moved in. He took over as boss of the

Moretti Mafia and ruled our household with an iron fist. That is, until my older brother Antonio killed him and became boss last year.

Lucia and Luca were born after our father died, so Franco was the only father figure they ever knew. But I've heard the rumors my older siblings refuse to talk about—our father, Riccardo Moretti, isn't Lucia and Luca's real father. Franco is.

I haven't had the courage to ask my mom or siblings about it. Franco scared me a lot when I was kid, and even now at twenty, his memory still haunts me, even though he never did anything to me personally. But I know he tried to kill Antonio, and I know he hurt my mom in ways I don't even want to ask about because then they would become real.

I was the baby in my family until the twins came along, which meant I was coddled a lot. A part of me wishes I could go back to that and not have to face the harsh realities of adulthood.

Mom takes Luca's hand and squeezes. "I know you miss Franco, honey. But he's gone now. Let's focus on the here and now."

"What?" Lucia says, "Like Mia getting married? I doubt any guy would want her."

I can't help myself this time. I stick my tongue out at Lucia, who does the same in return. Normally, Luca would be joining in, but he's lost in thought.

"Enough, Lucia," Mom says with a sigh. "A lot of men will want Mia. I'm sure of it." But her tone doesn't sound sure.

And I know exactly why.

One of my older sisters, Cecilia, ran off with her bodyguard, Theo, last year. She was supposed to marry this really old guy, Salvatore Fontana, but Theo ended up killing him before they ran away together. Antonio was pissed, but he eventually came around and let Cecilia and Theo get married.

The problem, though, is that Cecilia's marriage left a stain on me. The Moretti girls were seen as good. But Cecilia

changed that when she fell in love with Theo, a man she wasn't supposed to love.

I know my mom and Antonio are worried no man will want me because of what Cecilia did. It's not fair, but that's how Mafia men are. They're all hypocrites who get to sleep around, but the minute a girl in the family messes up, all the younger women are seen as tainted goods.

My older siblings didn't have to face what I do. My oldest sister, Emilia, married well when she entered into a marriage alliance with Marco Aldi, a Mafia boss in LA. Gemma, my next sister, was kidnapped by Viktor Levin, leader of the Russian Mafia in New York. Despite how their relationship started, they fell in love. My other sister Francesca married Leo Benetti, Marco's second-in-command. I rarely see Emilia and Francesca because they live in LA and are busy with their children, but Gemma comes by often; though I think it's just because she revels in this family's drama.

Antonio was the only boy until Luca came around. He married Nina Petrov when he was in hiding from Franco and before he killed our uncle.

And lastly, there's Cecilia, who's closest in age to me. And the reason why I might not find a husband.

"All I'm saying," Lucia says, "is that Mia is going to have a hard time finding men who will find her pretty. I mean, look at her."

I slam my fork down. "You want to go, Lucia? We can go." I've always been a little insecure about how I look. I don't have striking blonde hair like Emilia, Gemma, or Cecilia. I have brown hair like Francesca, but at least Francesca's hair is a luscious dark brown that just makes her even prettier. My hair has always been so mousey. My older sisters all have something so ... special about them. None of my features are striking. Typical nose. Not large, pouty lips. Simple brown eyes.

I know Lucia is only eleven and baiting me because she can, but she's getting at my biggest insecurity—feeling inadequate compared to my sisters.

Lucia's expression turns haughty. "I can take you any day, Mia."

"No, you couldn't. I'm bigger than you. And older."

She makes a show of looking me over with a critical eye. "I can see that."

My blood boils. "That is it!" I stand up and lunge over the table, trying to grab her, but she jumps back just out of my reach.

"Stop it!" Mom shouts. "Mia, you know better than to act this way."

I smooth my hand down my shirt. "Lucia just knows how to get under my skin."

"I know. But you need to be better. You're twenty. Ready to be married. Don't act like a child, please."

I sigh and grumble under my breath.

Mom turns to Lucia. "And you. You need to stop harassing your sister. You were always so sweet, Lucia. Where has this attitude come from?"

Lucia shrugs, crossing her arms.

"I can tell you," I say. "Puberty. She's becoming a teenager, and it's making her insufferable."

"You weren't exactly the sweetest of teenagers yourself," Mom remarks.

"I didn't say mean things to my sisters. I admired them all. Why do you hate me so much, Lucia?"

"I don't hate you," Lucia says.

"Really? Because it sure seems like you do."

Mom stands up and slams her hands down onto the table. "Enough. Just ... enough. Lucia, go to your room."

Lucia's jaw drops. "Why do I have to?"

"Because you're still a child in this household," Mom replies. "And Mia needs to get ready for the suitors visiting today. I don't need you ruining it for her."

Lucia glares at me before storming out of the room.

“That girl needs to check her attitude,” I mutter.

It’s my mom’s turn to shoot me a look. “Mia, I need you on your best behavior today. It was hard enough finding men who would be interested in marrying you after what happened with Cecilia, but Antonio and I worked hard, and we have a few who are interested. So, please, please, please be good today.”

My normal instinct is to say no. But I’m not going to squander my chances at a good marriage match. That’s the only thing a Mafia girl is good for—a marriage alliance.

If I marry well, then I’ll make my entire family proud. Emilia, Gemma, and Francesca all did their duty and married well, providing our family with more strength and power. Antonio did the same with Nina. Cecilia was the only exception. Marrying Theo, our family’s bodyguard, didn’t offer our family any more power or prestige. She defied the rules. A year ago, I supported her because I wasn’t thinking about my future.

But now I’m faced with my future today, and it’s looking less than good because of what she did. It’s not fair she gets to go off with her hunky, bodyguard husband, leaving me with the scraps. I just know the men my mom and Antonio scraped together probably aren’t the most desirable. I know it. They know it.

Cecilia isn’t here, though, for me to complain to her about her actions. She’s off with Theo, happy and in love.

“Mia, go change,” Mom says, drawing me out of my mind. “You need to look presentable and”—she squinted at me—“dirty PJs don’t cut it.”

I look down at my rumpled shirt and sweatpants. “They’re not dirty, Mom.”

She waves a hand, motioning for me to leave. To my mom, a wrinkle out of place is considered dirty.

I head into my room, purposefully ignoring Lucia’s bedroom. I am not in the mood to get into another altercation

with my baby sister.

I pick out my best day dress—it's purple with a flared skirt and short sleeves. I try to do something with my hair, but it's too thin and never holds a curl, so I just leave it down and hope for the best.

When I come back downstairs, I find Luca gone (probably with Lucia plotting ways to embarrass me) and my mom alone in the kitchen.

She looks me over and nods. "A good dress choice. But, Mia, you should really let me buy you more green dresses. Green is your color."

"No, it's not, Mom. I hate green. I've told you this before."

"But it would look so nice with your hair." She reaches out and tries fluffing my hair, but it lands limply on my shoulders. She frowns. "Well, we do the best we can. Wait in the living room. The first suitor will be arriving soon."

And he does.

Within minutes, a man is walking into the living room with my mom at his side. "Mia, this is George Johnson."

I almost want to laugh at his name but hold back. It's clear he isn't even Italian, which goes against the grain. Within the Mafia, most people marry within their own background just ... because. Mom and Antonio must have really scraped the bottom of the barrel to find these guys.

George is skinny with shockingly light blond hair. He shakes my hand a little too roughly. "Hello, Mia." He takes a seat across from me. "I'm honored to be invited today to the home of Giulia Moretti."

Mom smiles as she takes her place next to me. "You flatter me, George. I'm glad you agreed to meet Mia."

"Of course." He scans me head to toe. I try to stop myself from squirming. George is ...ok in the looks department. But I guess I'm just ok, too. Maybe this is what I need—a man more on my level. I'll probably never get a supermodel-looking husband like my sisters.

“So, George,” I say, “What made you agree to meet me?”

“I wanted to meet the last eligible daughter of the Moretti family. Of course, there’s also Lucia, but she’s just a child. Not exactly ready for marriage.” He chuckles awkwardly, which is made even more awkward when neither my mom or me laughs. “Not yet, anyway,” he adds. “One day.”

Mom clears her throat. “We’re here to talk about Mia, not Lucia.”

“Right, right.” George crosses his legs, and I notice he’s not wearing any socks. Weird. “Well, it’s just Mia is well past the age to be married.”

“I’m twenty,” I say flatly.

“Right, right,” he says again. “It’s just ... you know ... the scandal that happened last year. I’m not sure I want to be associated with that.”

“But you agreed to be here,” Mom says, confusion coloring her tone.

“Yes, I did.” George looks me over again before turning to my mom. “You don’t have anyone prettier?”

It’s a complete slap in the face.

Mom glances at me with pity. At this moment, I hate her for it. “I think you need to leave now,” she says, standing up and motioning for him to go.

George gets up, frowning. “Did I say something wrong?”

I can’t even tell this douchebag off. I’m on the verge of crying, which annoys me even more, knowing a guy like George Johnson is the reason I’m crying. And then I cry even harder.

Mom walks George out and returns to sit beside me. “Mia?” She reaches for my hand, but I pull away.

“George is the best you can do for me?” I whisper, not trusting myself to speak any louder.

She sighs deeply. “He was one of the only men who agreed to meet with you.”

I blink back my tears. “Well, is there anyone else?”

“There is. He’ll be coming over soon. Why don’t you collect yourself?” She hands me a tissue. “Your nose gets all red when you cry, and your eyes get puffy. You need to put your best foot forward with these men.”

“George was a freaking pedophile,” I mutter, dabbing at my eyes. “Did you hear how he spoke about Lucia?”

Mom grimaces. “That was unfortunate, but I wasn’t aware. I would never marry Lucia to someone like that when she’s older.”

“I can’t believe this. My eleven-year-old sister has more marriage prospects than I do.”

“We’ll just wait to meet the next suitor. Hopefully, he’ll be better.”

Spoiler alert: He isn’t.

The next suitor is a man named Austin Henderson, another non-Italian. The Italian Mafia men are making it clear they don’t approve of Cecilia’s actions, and I’m paying the price for it.

Austin is at least cuter than George, and so far, he doesn’t seem like a pedophile, which is progress. With ruffled dark hair and dimples, he’d almost be considered handsome.

“So, Austin,” I ask, “why did you agree to meet with me?”

“To become a part of the Moretti family would be the greatest honor. I really look up to your brother, Antonio.”

Ok. Not a bad start.

“That’s great. So—”

“So, I was thinking,” Austin cays, cutting me off, “that we could hurry the wedding up because your reputation isn’t the greatest and all. I don’t want my mom to be embarrassed about who I’m marrying.”

“And I’d be embarrassing?” I ask.

“Well, yeah,” he says in a pretend sheepish tone. “I mean, you have to know no man really wants to marry you. You’re not as pretty as your sisters, and your reputation isn’t the best. But I’d be willing to marry you for a seat at the Moretti table.”

Another slap to the face.

“My reputation?” I say. Mom squeezes my hand, silently telling me to stop before I explode, but I can’t hold it back. “My reputation is spotless. I wasn’t the one who ran off with my bodyguard. You are an utter dickwad for saying those mean things to me.”

Austin has the audacity to look offended. “I was just speaking my truth.”

“Well, your truth can go suck it.”

Mom gasps. “Mia, that’s enough.”

“No,” I say, standing up. “This”—I wave a hand at Austin—“is enough. No more suitors. No one actually wants to be with me. So, let’s just stop pretending otherwise.” I storm out of the room and up to my bedroom.

I barely shut the door behind me before the tears come. I really am unwanted, even by the most bottom of the barrel men. How did my sisters turn out so lucky, and I’m left with nothing?

I’ll admit I was the most spoiled one growing up, being the baby and all before the twins came. I think I was taught I’d have the world at my fingertips.

Now, reality is setting in, and I’m realizing just how untrue that is. I won’t ever make a good marriage match with a man of quality. I won’t be able to bring power and prestige to my family. To Antonio, who’s working hard as boss.

I’ll forever watch my sisters be in love with their husbands, and I won’t have that. In this Mafia world, if you’re not married by the time you’re twenty-five, you’re a spinster. I guess my only options in life are wait until I’m older and no one cares about me anymore. Then, I’ll be able to live my life for myself and meet any man I want to.

But until then, I'll have to be miserable knowing I'm a failure to my family.

IT'S FAMILY DINNER NIGHT, which means Cecilia will be there. We have family dinner nights almost every week that Mom insists on because most of her kids are out of the house. Emilia and Francesca won't be joining us because they're in LA, but Antonio and Nina, Gemma and Viktor, and Cecilia and Theo will be there.

I brace myself to see my sister when I go down for dinner. Everyone has arrived.

"There she is," Gemma says, coming over to give me a hug. When I was a kid, she found me super annoying, but now that we're both adults, she treats me like a friend. I hope that will be Lucia and me one day. "How are you doing? Mom mentioned the suitors to me," she says into my ear.

"It sucked."

Gemma chuckles as she pulls back. "Tell me about it. I remember the time Mom threw an entire ball to find me a suitor." She pauses. "And then Viktor showed up and kidnapped me." She looks over at Viktor, who's talking to Antonio. "It all worked out in the end. Don't give up. It will work out for you, too."

"Yeah," is all I can say without crying.

My seat is right beside Cecilia's. I sit down without saying hi.

"Mia," she says. "How have you been?" With her picture-perfect blonde hair and features, she could be a model. Next to her is Theo, who's the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. They make a beautiful couple. Too bad their actions have screwed me over.

"Fine," I reply.

"I wanted to make sure you're doing ok." She tries grabbing my hand, but I pull away.

"I'm *fine*."

Cecilia knows how to take a hint. “Ok. I just wanted to know how things with your suitors are going.”

“Oh, you mean the suitor who was a pedophile or the one who was just a douchebag? Take your pick.”

Her mouth drops open. “Uh ...”

“Mia,” Theo says in his deep voice. “Cecilia was just asking you a question.”

“I know. But I don’t really appreciate you telling me how to feel, Theo. Not when you and Cecilia have hurt my chances at finding a husband.”

“I was worried about that,” Antonio says, joining the conversation.

“But we worked through it,” Cecilia says. “I thought everything was ok.”

“Well, it’s not,” I snap at her. “Thanks to you.”

Cecilia’s eyes narrow. “I chose to live my own life, Mia. You don’t get to blame me for that.”

“I do, actually. It’s because of you running off with Theo that no man wants me now. Not even the one who was a freaking pedophile.”

Mom sighs deeply. “We’re all hurt by this. But it will be ok.”

“Theo and I found love,” Cecilia says.

“Great. But the fact is, I don’t have a hot bodyguard to run off with. James is about fifty, so he’s out of the question.” James is our new bodyguard now that Theo works for Antonio instead of my mom.

Cecilia shakes her head. “I didn’t want to hurt you, Mia.”

“You did.”

“That’s enough,” Theo says directly to me.

Antonio and Nina look at me with pity, while Gemma and Viktor watch the drama unfold like they could use a bag of popcorn.

Before I can make a snide reply, the doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it,” Antonio says.

The room is silent until Antonio comes back with another man in tow. Killian Brennan. Antonio’s second-in-command. With black hair, a scruffy beard, and tattoos all along his arms, Killian is honestly one of the most handsome men I’ve ever seen.

My mom also hates him.

She stands up the moment she sees Killian. “Shoo. Get out of my house.”

“Ma,” Antonio says. “Show Killian some respect. He’s joining us for dinner.”

“He’s Irish,” she replies.

Killian winces. “I never knew anyone could make the word ‘Irish’ sound like such an insult as when your mom does it.” He has an American accent, but he’s Irish in all the ways that count to an Italian American Mafia woman such as my mom.

“Take a seat, Killian,” Antonio says, ignoring Mom’s glare.

Killian saunters around the table until he takes a seat across from me. “Hey, Mia.” He gives me a charming smile, and it makes me insides feel like mush in the best way possible.

I go tongue-tied and duck my head. No more fighting with Cecilia tonight. Whenever we have a guest, family drama is pushed to the side.

Mom sits down with a huff. “Fine. Dig in everyone.”

I try to eat, but the wad at the back of my throat prevents me from doing that. I refuse to cry at dinner, especially with Cecilia next to me. And with Killian across from me. That would just be humiliating.

So, I try to make my face look neutral and eat my food and not focus on how angry I am with my sister.

I feel like the ugliest girl in the world.

Will I ever get my chance at love?

CHAPTER 2

Killian

I love crashing a Moretti family dinner, mostly because I love seeing how riled up and irritated I can make Giulia Moretti. She hates me, and I'm used to it, but she tolerates me because she knows I helped Antonio when he was in a tough spot.

A year ago, when Antonio was in hiding from his crazy uncle Franco, we teamed up. I helped him take back his family name and business. Now, Antonio has rewarded me as his second-in-command. Which is great, but I have even bigger dreams—I want to become mob boss of the Irish in New York.

And the only way to do that is to take down Patrick O'Connell, the current Irish mob boss. I'll not only need Antonio's help, but I'll have to start finding men who are loyal to me.

But that can all wait because right now, the only person I can think about is the girl across from me.

Mia.

I remember the first time I saw her a year ago, how pretty I thought she was. I never said anything to Antonio about it because I value my life. He's protective of his sisters, both younger and older. I admire that about him. For the longest time, it was just my mom, my brother, and me. Now that my brother's gone, it's just my mom and me, and that can be lonely sometimes.

I love being surrounded by the large, Italian family energy whenever I try to come over for dinner at Giulia's house. She

normally kicks me, and she almost succeeded tonight, but here I am. Eating with them. Sitting across from Mia.

She's cute in an unassuming way. The thing is, whenever I try to talk to her, she looks scared out of her mind. I'm not sure if I should take that personally.

"So, Mia," I say. She jerks her head up, eyes wide, food halfway to her mouth. "How are things going for you? Antonio has mentioned you're looking for a husband."

"Um ..." is all she says.

Giulia leans forward in her seat, cutting off my view of Mia. "We're trying to find her a husband. All is going well." She gives me a smile I know is completely fake.

"Well, huh?" I take a bite of the pasta Giulia provided for dinner tonight. "That's good. Who's the top contender?"

"Why are you asking?" Giulia snaps.

"Maybe he wants to be in the running," Gemma comments, taking a sip of wine.

While Giulia looks like she wants to slap Gemma, Viktor chuckles, and Antonio shifts in his seat, looking uncomfortable as he clears his throat.

"Funny, Gemma," Antonio says. "But I'm not sure Mom appreciates you saying that."

"I didn't," Giulia says. "Not one bit. Mia will marry a good, upstanding Italian man. Not..."

"An Irish one?" I offer. Throwing a smirk at Giulia, I say, "I may not be Italian, but I consider myself to be pretty upstanding."

"I doubt that," Giulia mutters behind her glass of wine.

"What does Mia say about it?" I look at her, and she just freezes again. "Mia?"

"Um ..." She stuffs a bite of pasta into her mouth. Everyone waits for her to finish, and it's as awkward as one can imagine. "The men I saw today weren't Italian."

Giulia's fork clatters to the table. "Mia, be quiet."

Mia makes a face but doesn't speak.

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms. "Well, well, well. If the men courting Mia aren't Italian, then ..."

Giulia holds up a finger. "Don't even say it."

I don't. I let it hang in the air.

Antonio speaks, cutting the tension. "Killian will not be marrying Mia. Don't worry, Mom. I'll find her a good Italian man. Somehow," he adds softly.

"I'm not Italian," Viktor says, raising his hand. "I'm the worst Russian in the world."

"You can't argue with that," Gemma says.

Viktor raises an eyebrow. "Even my own wife is against me."

Gemma nudges him, rolling her eyes. "Everyone knows you're the worst. But you're also mine. Which makes you smart." She pats his cheek.

Theo and Cecilia haven't spoken since I showed up. I wonder why. "How has newlywed bliss been treating you two?"

They share a soft smile with each other, though I notice Mia scowling into her food.

"It's been great," Cecilia says. "Everything has been great."

"For you," Mia mutters.

Cecilia sighs. "Let's not get into this again. I'm tired of you blaming me."

"Mia is just upset," Lucia says, "because no guys like her."

I whistle. Damn, I never knew an eleven-year-old could be so savage. "And how can you be sure of that?" I ask Lucia.

Her face flushes. She wasn't expecting to get called out. "Because look at her. Mia is as basic as you can get."

“Lucia,” Giulia scolds in a tired voice.

I turn to Luca. “And what do you think, buddy?”

“I don’t care about stupid weddings or romance,” he says.

“Typical boy,” I say, nodding. “I was the same way.”

Luca’s eyes light up. “You were?”

“Oh, yeah. I hated the idea of love when I was kid. I found it gross. But when you’re older, you’ll get it.”

Luca slouches in his seat. “I doubt that.”

Giulia ruffles his hair, smiling softly. “He’s right. You’ll understand better when you’re older.”

“Mom,” Gemma says, “did you just agree with Killian?” She makes a show of looking around. “Is the end of the world coming?”

Viktor clinks his glass with hers. “Good joke.”

“Thanks.”

Giulia sits ups straighter, pushing her plate away. “No. I did not just agree with Killian. I ...”

I flash her a smile. “You did. And that’s ok. Going back to what Lucia said about Mia, I have to say I disagree. I don’t think she’s plain in a basic way.”

Mia looks up at me, surprise all over her face. “You ... don’t?”

“I don’t.”

She quickly ducks her head again. “I don’t believe you. You’re just Antonio’s friend and being nice.”

I take a sip of my wine. “I am nice. But I’m not liar.”

She shoots me another look before turning her head. Mia is a mystery to me; one I want to understand better. I glance at Lucia, who looks mad that I didn’t agree with what she said.

“Enough,” Giulia says. “No more talking to daughter. You’re Antonio’s friend, and I will respect that. But I don’t

want to hear you talking about whether you think my daughter is pretty or not.”

“I do,” I say simply.

“Be careful,” Antonio says. “My mom might slap you.”

“She’s slapped me before,” Gemma comments. “So, Antonio isn’t lying.”

Giulia coughs on her drink as the rest of Gemma’s siblings look at her in a mix of confusion and horror.

“When did Mom slap you?” Cecilia asks.

Gemma shrugs. “Years ago. The night Viktor and I met.”

“Kidnapped, you mean,” Giulia points out. “I’m still a little salty about that.”

“Mom, that was years ago.”

“I would be happier if you provided me with grandchildren.”

Gemma scoffs. “We’re not having kids. You can just dote on Essie and Matteo.” Essie is Emilia’s daughter, and Matteo is Francesca’s son. I know a lot more about the Moretti family than I ever thought I would, but working with Antonio means he vents to me a lot about his family.

“Mia will never give you grandchildren,” Lucia mocks. “Because she’ll never get married.”

Mia slams her fork down. “Stop it, Lucia. Just stop.” Mia’s breath hitches, and she quickly leaves the room.

Cecilia watches her go with a worried expression.

“Why is she upset?” Luca asks.

“Because I ruined her chances of finding love,” Cecilia says.

“And Lucia is being a bitch,” Gemma adds.

“Gemma,” Giulia scolds.

Gemma raises her hands. “And there it is. I’m back home for only an hour, and Mom is already scolding me.”

“I think we’ve had enough for dinner tonight,” Antonio says, standing up. “We should get going.” Nina stands up with him, and they head for the door. “Killian? Come on.”

“See you later, Mama Moretti.” I throw a wink at Giulia, who huffs.

As I follow Antonio and Nina to the door, I spot Mia sitting on the stairs, looking utterly dejected. “Hold on one moment,” I tell Antonio.

He looks like he wants to object but nods. “Nina and I will wait outside for you.”

I walk over to Mia. “How are you really holding up?”

“Why do you care?” She wipes at her eyes.

“Because I’m not heartless. Antonio has been telling me how he’s struggled to find you a good man to marry. How not a lot of men want you after what Cecilia did.”

“She got her happy ending. I should be happy for her, but ...”

“But it’s hurting your chances. Well, just know I really wasn’t lying back in there.”

She finally meets my eyes. “You ... weren’t?”

“I’m not a liar, Mia.” I smile at her, then walk away.

Antonio meets me when I get outside. “Don’t mess with my sister, Killian.”

“I’m not.” I raise my hands in surrender when Antonio quirks his eyebrow at me. “I’m not. You know I wouldn’t do that.”

“We know,” Nina says. “And for what it’s worth, Killian, I think Mia would be lucky to have you.”

“Whoa,” I say. “Whoever said I was going to marry the girl?”

“You practically proposed to her in there,” Antonio says.

“I was just standing up for her against your heartless littler sister. Man, Lucia is savage.”

“She’s young,” Antonio points out. “She’ll learn. But Mia is twenty. Her future is on the line. I need to find her a good husband and soon. I don’t need you coming in and getting her hopes up.”

“Hey, the girl needed a little bit of flattery, ok?”

“Sure. But it should come from someone who’s serious about her. Besides, my mom hates you. Even if you were serious about Mia, my mom would never approve.”

“What are you saying? Your mom loves me.”

Antonio huffs. “My mom hates you, and you know it. So, just leave Mia alone. It’s for the best.” He and Nina get in their car and drive off.

I remain standing on the stoop of the Moretti family home a little bit longer, thinking about just how much I disagree with Antonio. Mia is clearly upset. I don’t think it’s for the best she’s denied affection.

I NEED a second-in-command if I’m ever going to take down Patrick O’Connell. My first choice is a man named Jimmy Campbell.

We meet at an Irish dive bar owned by a friend of mine.

“So, Jimmy,” I say as we take our seats in a back booth. “Are you up to the job?”

Jimmy is known for his stark, red hair and scrawny build. But I know he’s a strong guy. I’ve seen him take down multiple guys in a bar brawl.

“I would love to be your number two. What would that entail?”

“Helping me take down Patrick O’Connell. I’m ready to take over New York. I need all the help I can get.”

“And you’re still working with the Italians?”

“Antonio and I are tight. We can count on him to help us.”

Jimmy sticks out his pale hand. “Then deal. I’m ready for a new leader anyway. Patrick thinks he can boss anyone around who’s Irish, as if we all work for him. Promise me you’ll be a better leader, and I’m on your side.”

“I promise.” I shake his hand. “I have no desire to boss others around. I want loyal men. Simple as that.”

Jimmy smiles darkly. “Then let’s take back New York.”

Once I finish my conversation with Jimmy, I head over to the hospital where my mom is staying.

I find her in the room I help pay for. She has an oxygen tube under her nose. Her hair is starting to grow back in, but despite the bald patches, she’s still one of the most beautiful women on the planet. Erin Brennan, the strongest woman I’ve ever known.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, walking over and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Killian.” She grabs my face and holds me close to her for a moment.

My mom is battling breast cancer. Has been for the past couple years. One moment, there’s hope, and the next, it’s dashed as her cancer comes back.

“How are you feeling today?” I ask, taking a seat beside her bed.

“Better. Not as nauseous. I view that as a good thing.”

“It is.” I squeeze her hand. She’s become so frail.

“How are things at work?”

My mom knows what I do. She’s not part of the Mafia herself and wasn’t happy about me getting involved in it when I was younger, but she’s come around. I think mostly because she knows her end is coming soon, and she wants to be supportive of me.

“Typical. Aiming to take down Patrick O’Connell one of these days.”

She holds up a hand. “I don’t want to hear the details. I’m just trusting you stay safe.”

“You know I’ll try.”

“I don’t want to hear that either. Don’t try. Stay safe for me. Promise me that.”

“I promise, Mom.”

She settles back on the bed, closing her eyes in contentment. “Remember when you and Finn use to run around in circles so fast you threw up?”

I chuckle. “I do. But why bring that up now?”

“Can’t a mom reminisce about her sons?”

“You can. I just want to make sure you’re not doing it because you feel like you won’t make it. You’ll make it through, Mom. Don’t give up.”

“I won’t. But I think I might be coming to the end, Killian.”

“Mom—”

She holds up a hand, cutting me off. “We have to be realistic. I don’t have much more time left. I just want to make sure you’re not alone after I’m gone.”

My throat gets tight. “Mom, I won’t be alone. I have my friends. Antonio.”

“But you won’t have a family any longer. I want to see you happy and married, ready to start a family of your own.”

“That would be great. I just have to find the woman who can put up with me.”

She laughs before wincing. “Mmm. Any woman would be lucky to have you.”

For some reason, my mind slips immediately to Mia. Her pretty face, the burning behind her eyes for more, the fire I sense within her.

“I’d love to be in love, Mom. You have to promise me you’ll stick around long enough to see me get married.”

She holds up her pinkie finger. “Deal.”

I slip mine around hers. “Deal.”

MY YOUNGER BROTHER, Finn, died when we were kids.

I was ten at the time. He was only eight.

It was a typical day. We jumped out of bed, raced downstairs to eat our mom’s famous blueberry waffles, and headed off to school.

Finn was worried about a presentation he had to give about sea lions. “They’re, like, the lions of the sea. I think they’re so cool. I don’t want to mess it up.”

We were on the bus together. I nudged him. “You won’t mess up. Unless you trip and fall on your face, you’ll be fine. So, just don’t trip and fall on your face.”

“Everyone will be looking at me,” he whispered.

“No. Everyone will be looking at me because I’ll show up for your presentation and distract everyone. That way, no one will be able to tell if you mess up.”

Finn smiled up at me. “Really?”

“Really really.”

When the bus bounced over a pothole, some of the rowdier kids screamed dramatically. Finn rolled his eyes.

“At least I’m smarter than that. I never scream over stupid stuff.”

“Getting into a car accident isn’t stupid, Finn.”

He shrugged. “I’m just saying. You’re always telling me I’m strong enough to overcome anything.”

“Yeah, I am. And it’s true. You are strong enough.” We were strong enough when our dad left us a year ago. One moment, he was there, and the next, he’d left the house and never returned. Finn was constantly scared, so I had to most of the comforting because our mom was distraught over our dad abandoning us.

“So, I’m strong enough to survive a car accident.”

I looked down at my younger brother’s face. So innocent. I was only two years older, but ever since I took on more after our dad left, I had to grow up fast.

“I’ll protect you no matter what,” I said.

Finn nodded like he was pleased with my answer. We arrived at school, got off the bus, and headed inside to our classrooms. I had no idea my life was about change all over again.

I DON’T LET myself think about my brother’s death. Especially now as I stare down the impending death of my mother. She’s right. Once she’s gone, I’ll be all alone. The only thing I’ll have to my name is ... nothing. I’m not a mob boss—not yet. I don’t have a strong family name like the Moretti’s. It’s just me—Killian Brennan.

The more I think about being lonely, the more I think about Mia. She’s looking for a husband. My mom wants me to get married.

It’s something I should seriously think about. Antonio told me to not mess around with Mia, and I have no desire to.

I was honest with her when I said I wasn’t a liar.

Now, all I need to do is convince Antonio and, more importantly, Giulia, that I’m worthy of Mia.

I’m up to the task.

CHAPTER 3

Mia

“I have an idea,” my mom says as she barges into my room. “Let’s hold a ball. One where prospective suitors can come and meet you.”

I set my phone down and stare at my mom in complete and utter shock. “Mom, the last time we had a ball, Viktor kidnapped Gemma.”

She waves her hand dismissively. “It all turned out for them in the end. This is the best way I can think to gain the attention of good suitors for you. No Mafia man can resist a ball. Trust me.”

“Why not just call it a party?”

“Because a ball is fancier, and you want a gentleman. Not riffraff. So, a ball it is. I’ll send out the invitation. I was thinking for this weekend.”

I almost choke on my own spit. “This weekend? That’s so soon.”

She shrugs. “Well, better sooner than later. The sooner we can find you a husband, the sooner we can put any nasty rumors to bed. I’m tired of people talking about you and Cecilia. She’s happy with Theo. I might not have agreed with it, but I’ve come around. Now, I need you to find a husband, Mia. So, chop-chop. Let’s go dress shopping.”

A half-hour later, I’m at the mall with my mother, Lucia, and Luca. It’s obviously Luca would rather be anywhere else

than in a dress shop. Lucia, on the other hand, gasps and runs off to admire all the sparkly dresses.

“I remember the last time I went shopping for a ball,” Mom muses as she flicks through dresses. “It was for Gemma, and the twins were just babies at the time.”

“I remember that. They spit up all over her new dress.”

“That’s right.” She reaches over and squeezes my arm. “We’re going to find you a beautiful dress so perfect no man will be able to look away from you. And I promise, no spit-up on your dress. You’re going to look perfect for this ball.” She fluffs my hair, then frowns like she always forgets my hair doesn’t fluff very well.

I start looking for dresses when Lucia saunters over. “Nothing you find will look good on you.”

“Nice talking to you, too, Lucia. Hey, question. When are you going to stop acting like a brat and grow up?”

She huffs and walks away. I smile to myself. Maybe it’s petty to feel like I’m winning over my kid sister, but hey, a win is a win.

“Luca, don’t touch that!” Mom shouts, running over to where Luca’s trying to push over a mannequin. Even though the twins are no longer babies, it seems like they can still act like they are.

I remember when I was a kid. I was the most spoiled little girl. I’m amazed I never pulled the antics Lucia and Luca do. Granted, they have each other. I never had anyone to play with. Emilia, Gemma, and Francesca were all so much older than me. And Cecilia had Antonio to play with, which just left me, alone most of the time.

There was one time I got in trouble as a kid.

I was eight, and my dad had just died.

My entire family was still in mourning, and Uncle Franco had moved in, making everyone uncomfortable.

My family has having dinner, and it was a somber affair. Emilia had already left to marry her husband, Marco. But the

rest of us were still there, still grieving for our dad, and mad that Franco was bossing us around.

“You should act more like your sister,” Franco told Gemma, who was sixteen at the time. “She’s marrying Marco Aldi. She’ll bring more power to this family.”

Gemma shuddered, claiming, “I’m never getting married.”

Franco smirked. “We’ll see about that.” I always marveled at how much he looked like my dad. I knew they were brothers, but still ... It was uncanny, especially because they weren’t twins.

Franco caught me looking at him. “And what about you, young Mia? What do you think of marriage?”

“She’s eight,” Gemma retorted.

“I was talking to your sister.” Franco kept his eyes on me. “So, Mia? What do you think?”

As an eight-year-old, Franco terrified me for reasons I didn’t understand. “I think I’m too young to get married.”

Franco burst out laughing, so loud everyone felt uncomfortable. I could tell from the glances my siblings exchanged. It was like they all had this perfect understanding with each other, and I didn’t understand a thing.

Mom reached over and stroked my hair back. “You don’t have to get married anytime soon, Mia. Not until you’re older. Ok? You’ll make us all proud one day.”

Franco grunted. “The girl better. All your kids better make good marriage matches. They have a duty to his family.”

“You make us sound like cattle,” Gemma said, scowling.

“In a way, you are,” Franco responded.

I turned to my mom, expecting her to say something to Franco, but she stayed quiet. There was a fear in her eyes I’d never seen before. She’d never acted that way with my dad. With Dad, she’d praise or scold him. It didn’t matter. She felt free to do so. But with Franco, it was clear to me, even as a child, that something was off with her.

Seeing my mom like that stirred something inside me. I hated Franco for moving into our house after my father died. It was like he was trying to replace him.

It caused me to become so angry that I grabbed my plate and threw it on the ground, screaming at the top of my lungs. Everyone, except Franco, jumped.

“Mia?” Mom said, pulling me into her arms. “What’s the matter?”

I kept screaming and screaming. Franco’s eyes on me the entire time. I knew if I kept his attention on me, he couldn’t do anything to anyone else.

“You need to punish her for being a brat,” Franco told my mom. “A good spanking will do.” He rolled up his sleeves. “I can do it.”

“No,” Mom growled, pulling me even closer to her. “I will not spank my daughter. She just lost her father. Mia, honey. Stop screaming.” I did, letting my mom bring me into a hug. “Don’t even suggest spanking my daughter.”

Franco shrugged, and the rest of my siblings looked at him with pure unadulterated disgust. “Just punish her.” He stood up from the table and left.

It wasn’t until years later after Antonio killed him that I learned Franco had poisoned my father. He was the reason my dad was dead.

My mom never punished me.

Looking at Lucia and Luca now, I can’t help but wonder why she’s so open to punishing them when she never did it to me. The rumors I’ve heard about the twins being Franco’s children comes to mind. Could that be the reason? Does my mom secretly hate the twins? I know they don’t make life easy for anyone.

Either way, my mom still gives them more attention because they need it, being children. But their misbehavior also calls my mom’s attention to them. Making me lonelier. I don’t even have my mom to coddle me anymore.

I'm a grown woman trying to find a husband. I need to learn to grow up. It's just hard when you've spent a good portion of your life being the baby of the family. I lost that, too, when my dad died and Franco moved in.

Shaking the thoughts from my head, I pull out a purple evening gown. It's absolutely gorgeous. While my mom is dealing with the store attendant, apologizing for Luca knocking the mannequin down, I go into the changing room and try the dress on.

It's a perfect fit.

Off the shoulders. Open leg slit. A bust that hugs my body just right, and a skirt that flares out around my feet, making me feel like a princess. And a deep, dark purple that brings out the brown in my eyes.

I feel beautiful for the first time in my life.

I don't want anyone to take that away from me.

After changing back into my clothes, I find my mom, Lucia, and Luca near the entrance to the store. "I found my dress."

"Wonderful," Mom says. At least she makes the time to smile at me now.

THE BALL TAKES place on Saturday, just as my mom said. She managed to decorate the entire ballroom at the Ritz within just a few days. I'm impressed, actually. I'd be even more so if I was actually excited about attending. I'm more worried the only men who will show will be like George and Austin—pure losers.

When we enter the ballroom, it's empty.

"When is everyone expected to arrive?" I ask my mom.

"They should be showing up within the hour. Don't you worry."

My mom and I are the only ones here. She didn't want to spend the night taking care of the twins, so they stayed home.

Emilia and Francesca couldn't make it because they're in L.A. And Gemma didn't want to steal my spotlight. Antonio is busy being the boss.

The doors open, and I get my hopes up for just a second that a good man will walk through them ...

... until I see it's only Cecilia walking into the ballroom with Theo on her arm.

"What are they doing here?" I ask my mom.

"Moral support."

"They're the reason I'm in this mess right now."

Mom rubs my arm. "I know, honey. But it might do some good if the men coming tonight can see what a good couple Cecilia and Theo make. It might help."

I plaster on a smile as Cecilia approaches me.

"Hi, Mia," she says, giving me a quick hug. "Hope you end up having a good night."

"Me, too."

We stand there awkwardly.

"You didn't have to come, you know," I tell her.

Cecilia frowns. "I wanted to support you."

I can't help myself. I scoff. "Support me? The men will see you, take one look, and would rather be with you than me. It's not fair. You got your happy ending. I supported you with that. Don't ruin mine."

Cecilia flinches. "Mia, I'm sorry my actions have hurt you."

Theo comes over. "Mia, don't talk to Cecilia like that. She's trying to be here for you."

"You were our bodyguard, and then you fell for my sister. That's creepy, Theo." I know I'm being petty. I know I'm trying to hurt both of them.

And I don't care.

Theo sighs deeply. “I didn’t have feelings for Cecilia until she was an adult.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” I brush past them, and I would have walked out of the ballroom, except the doors open again, and a group of men enter.

I stop short. They all see me. For a second, I have hope something good can come of this night.

But then the first man near the front of the group smirks and says, “At least she’s trying to look prettier tonight, gents.” His eyes travel past me to land on Cecilia. He whistles. “Now, that’s a beautiful woman.”

The tears come before I can stop them, and I walk past the men.

“Mia,” Mom calls out. I keep walking until I find the nearest bathroom. Shutting myself into the stall, I let all my tears out.

All my frustration, all my anger, all my embarrassment. Of course, I’m ugly. I tried to look my best tonight, and these men are still cruel about it.

And I acted like a petty bitch to Cecilia and Theo. I know it’s not fair to blame them. They were just trying to find love as I am now. But it’s so hard when I feel so lonely.

I wipe my tears and leave the bathroom. I won’t let these men make me feel horrible about myself.

I stop when I hear them talking in the hallway.

“Did you see her in that dress?” one says. “Damn. I’d fuck her. Still not as pretty as her sister, but I’d fuck her.”

“I doubt she’s a virgin,” another one says. “Her sister was fucking their bodyguard. Who knows who Mia has fucked.”

“No, I think she’s definitely a virgin,” a different man says. “What man would touch her when she’s not even pretty?”

I’m ready to tell these men off. How dare they speak like this about me? About Cecilia?

I prepare myself to confront them when I hear another voice join the conversation. One I recognize.

“Do you guys have no shame? You’re all little fuckers with tiny dicks because you can’t get a woman, so you have to talk shit about a woman. What is wrong with you?”

It’s Killian.

“Well, if you want her, you’re welcome to have her,” the first man says.

“You guys are fucking disgusting,” Killian says. I gasp. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him cuss before. He’s normally so jovial at our family dinner nights—when he gets the chance to actually join, that is.

The men laugh as Killian walks away. Why would he stand up for me? Because he knows I’m Antonio’s sister and wants to make sure I’m ok. It’s sweet but confusing. A man like Killian would never look at me in a million years.

To go back into the ballroom, I’ll need to walk past the group of men. Fine. Let them know they can’t hurt me.

I keep my head held high as I walk past them.

They whistle and catcall.

“Why don’t you stay out here with us, Mia?” a blond man asks. He looks similar to George Johnson, which means I want nothing to do with him.

“Why? So you can badmouth me some more?” I ask, turning to face them head on.

They all ooh and awe, sounding like immature little boys.

“Killian was right. You’re all fucking disgusting.” I don’t normally cuss, but damn, it feels good.

I walk into the ballroom, where my mom, Cecilia, and Theo still are. But now there’s also Killian.

He walks over to me. “Want to dance?”

I stare at his outstretched hand. “Why would you want to do that? My mom is shooting daggers at you.”

Killian shrugs. “Because I want to dance. And you look stunning in that dress.”

I tell myself to not blush, but I can’t help the heat rising in my cheeks. “Killian, you’re just trying to be nice. I appreciate it. But ... don’t make a fool out of me like those men out there.”

“I have no desire to make a fool out of you.” He keeps his hand extended. “I just don’t want you to have your dress go to waste.”

I look over at my mom, who’s still glaring at Killian. “Why not?” I say, turning back to him. I slip my hand into his, and my entire arm lights on fire. I gasp. Killian tightens his hold on my hand as he walks me over to the dance floor. Soft music plays from the speakers.

I almost can’t breathe as Killian pulls me in closer to him. How can a man like Killian look down at me with such intense eyes?

We begin to dance a simple waltz.

“How did you learn to do this?” I ask as he spins me around the floor. Every now and then, I catch a glimpse of my mom, and she is *not* happy.

“My mom taught me. She always said a real man knows how to dance.”

“You’re close with your mom?”

The soft smile that crosses his face makes him look instantly more handsome. If that were even possible. “I am.”

“Thank you,” I say. “For standing up for me with those other men out there.”

“They’re assholes. Jealous of how amazing you are.”

I shake my head. “I’m not amazing. I’m just ... me.”

“That can be refreshing.”

“Yeah. And so can actually being spectacular.”

Killian tightens his grip on my waist, and my mind spins. “Why are you so hard on yourself? You’re a knock-out, Mia.”

“I find that hard to believe. You’re my brother’s friend. He probably told you to be nice to me.”

“Actually, he told me to keep my distance from you.” He spins me out and back into his arms.

“Why?”

“Because he wants you to have a good husband.”

“And you wouldn’t make a good husband?” I ask.

“I think I would, but your mom would disagree.” He nods at her over my shoulder. When I turn to look, she stills glaring at Killian. I stumble, and Killian catches me.

“Sorry,” I squeak.

“No worries.” Killian drops his hands from my waist, instantly making me feel colder. “It was a lovely dance, Mia. Ignore those assholes out there.” He bows to my mom before leaving.

Mom hurries over to me. “Mia, are you all right? That *man* put his hands on you.”

“I’m all right,” I say softly.

And for once, I realize that what I said is true.

I feel all right.

CHAPTER 4

Mia

My mom is still fussing over me as we leave the hotel. “I can’t believe Killian did that. He was out of line.”

“All he did was dance with me, Mom,” I tell her. As we get into our car, our driver starts to take us home. “It wasn’t like he committed a crime.”

“In my eyes, he did. He knows he shouldn’t be touching you. If this gets out to other men, it will ruin your chances even more.”

I sigh, dropping my head back against the seat. “I think the other men already don’t care. I heard them talking about me when I went to the bathroom.”

“What did they say?” She smooths her hand over my dress. Even now when it’s just the two of us, my mom is still trying to make me look more perfect.

“They ... they said some really mean things.”

“Tell me,” she demands.

My eyes flick to our driver and back to my mom. This is so humiliating. “They made it sound like I was only good for ... having sex with and nothing else.”

Mom gasps. “No. Antonio and I made sure to find good men who would be interested in marrying you.”

“They’re not interested in marrying me, Mom. They also said I wasn’t even pretty enough to have sex with.” Tears prick my eyes, but I hold them back. I’m tired of crying over this.

“That can’t be. Mia, you’re my beautiful daughter. Don’t let anyone make you think otherwise.”

I huff. “It’s kind of tough when everyone acts like I’m ugly. These men. Lucia.”

“Don’t mind Lucia. She’s just going through her bratty teenage phase. Trust me. You and your sisters all went through the same thing.”

“Did we?”

She pauses, then says, “Well, not quite as bad. Lucia is an extra kind of bratty at the moment.”

“Could it have something do with Franco?” I ask quietly. Mom tenses like she always does whenever Franco is mentioned.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because it’s been a year since he died, and he was like the twins’ father. They miss him.”

Mom looks away from me. “I wish they wouldn’t.”

“You always tell them it’s ok for them to miss him.”

“Of course, I say that. They’re my children. But I wish I could put Franco behind me, and the twins make that impossible.”

I hesitate to ask, but it’s been on my mind for a while. “Mom ... are the twins ...” I gulp. “I’ve heard rumors about Franco being their dad.”

Mom sighs, turning back to me. “I guess it’s time you knew the truth. Yes. They are.”

Now, it’s my turn to tense. “But ... how? You always hated Franco.”

“I did. I still do, even though he’s long dead. It wasn’t exactly my choice to be with him.”

“Mom, are you saying Franco ...”

She nods. “He raped me, Mia. All your older siblings know.”

“So, I’m the last to know?” It stings being left out of the loop. But this moment isn’t about me. It’s about my mom.

“You were so young when it happened. You didn’t need to know. Over the years, I’ve come to terms with it. The twins were the product of ...” Rape.

“Oh my god,” I say. I clasp my mom’s hand. “Are you ok?”

“I’ve dealt with it for the past twelve years. I chose to have Lucia and Luca. I don’t regret that, even though those two make it really hard to like them some days. But I always love them. I don’t see Franco when I look at them. I see myself. And that’s what I choose to focus on. But it does pain me knowing how much they’ve missed him over the past year. I was ecstatic when he died, but I couldn’t show that to Lucia or Luca. It would break their hearts and confuse them more.”

“So, they don’t know?”

“No,” Mom says fiercely. “And I’m not sure I ever want them finding out. It will only make it harder for them to marry well if people know the truth. You know how Mafia men are. They don’t care if you were forced; they’d find a way to blame me. Which in turn would hurt Lucia and Luca. Especially Lucia. You’re paying the price for Cecilia’s actions, and it’s not fair. I don’t want Lucia to have to pay for Franco’s actions. That is *definitely* not fair.”

“I get it. Oh, Mom. I just wish I knew.”

“There wasn’t anything you could have done. You were a child when Franco did this to me. He’s gone, and I hope you have a better future now because of it. We just need to find you a good Italian husband to marry.”

I settle back in my seat. “That’s proving especially tough. No one wants me, Mom.” Maybe someone does ... My mind flashes back to how Killian looked at me as we danced. “Why do you hate Killian so much?”

“I don’t hate him,” she says, almost self-indulgently.

“Mom.”

She sighs. “Ok. I just dislike that he’s Irish. I know how the Irish mob can be. Very unpredictable. And Killian isn’t even a boss. He’s still working for Antonio. I want you to be with someone who can provide influence to our family.”

“And what? People like George Johnson are supposed to help me with that?”

“You make a point,” she says, inclining her head toward me. “George Johnson wasn’t the best man we could have found. But I know someone better for you is out there. I just know it.”

“If Killian became boss of the Irish mob, then that would provide our family with a lot of power. It would be a strong alliance.”

Mom waves a dismissive hand. “Now, you’re just talking about fairytales, honey. I don’t want you married to Killian. We’ll find you someone better.”

“But what if there isn’t anyone better?”

“How do you even know Killian wants to marry you?”

I pause. “I don’t,” I admit. “He hasn’t asked me if you’re wondering. But he’s been kind to me. Mom, he stood up to the men saying mean things to me at the party. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Not Killian,” she says pointedly. “So, stop asking. It’s not going to happen.”

I drop it, even though everything within me wants to scream. I deserve more than the men Antonio and my mom have found for me. They don’t respect me. Killian does.

But if my mom says no, then ...

It really isn’t fair Cecilia got to run off with Theo when everyone told her she couldn’t. Why was she allowed to break the rules, but I have to follow them to a T, even though it’s breaking my spirit?

IN THE MORNING, after getting a good night's sleep, I'm ready to see the twins. After what my mom told me about what Franco did to her, it's made me look at them in a different light. It's not their fault, of course. But just knowing their father is Franco and not my dad changes things a little.

As normal, Lucia and Luca are bickering over who gets the bigger waffle when I come down for breakfast.

"You always get it," Lucia grumbles. "I want it."

Luca grabs the waffle and stuffs it into his mouth. "Ha. Now you can't have it," he says around his food.

Lucia pouts and slouches in her seat. I'd find it funnier if I wasn't still reeling from what my mom told me.

Looking at them more closely, I can definitely see Franco within them instead of my father. The hair that's almost black, so different from any of my other siblings. The nose that is slightly more pointed. The eyes that stare intently at you. How could I not see Lucia and Luca are Franco's kids?

I sit across from them. "Hey."

They both turn to me, and Lucia's jaw drops. "Why are you saying 'hey' to me? You hate me."

Luca sniggers as he stuffs more waffles into his mouth. Mom, who is by the sink, tenses as she looks at me.

"Just wanted to see how you guys are doing," I say.

Luca shrugs. "Fine, I guess."

"And you, Lucia?"

Lucia rolls her eyes so dramatically; I'm shocked they don't fall out of her head. "I'm fine, Mia. Go bother someone else with your questions."

Now that I know the truth about the twins, I'm not as bothered by Lucia's behavior. She lost the only dad she knew, even though she doesn't know Franco was her actual father.

I remember when I lost my dad. I was eight and a complete mess.

It's just a shame Franco was never warm with the twins like my father was with me.

My favorite memory of him was when I was seven and in my first play at school. I was playing a talking mushroom, and when it came time for me to say my lines, my mind went blank.

I stared out at the sea of people before me, shrouded in darkness, and I wanted to cry because I couldn't remember my lines. I'd been practicing for weeks with my oldest sister, Emilia, and then it was like it didn't even matter.

The crowd of people was quiet. Someone cleared their voice.

I was about to run off stage when I heard my father speaking. "And how does Mayor Fish feel about that?"

I blinked. That was one of my lines. My dad remembered.

It gave me the confidence to finally speak. The rest of the performance, I said my lines to perfection.

Once the show was over, I ran to my family waiting for me in the hallway. "You did great, kiddo," Dad said, pulling me into his arms for a hug.

"Because you helped me," I whispered into his shirt. He always smelled like mint tea.

"No. You did it yourself." He squeezed me before stepping back. The rest of my siblings congratulated me.

That experience couldn't have been more different from a memory with Franco and the twins.

One time, when the twins were seven and I was sixteen, we were working on homework in the kitchen. I had to do algebra problems and write an essay about the Salem Witch Trials, while the twins were practicing their reading and writing skills.

Lucia was struggling to read the assigned paper when Franco came into the room.

"Having trouble?" he asked.

Lucia slammed the paper onto the table. “It doesn’t make sense.”

He grabbed the paper from her, took a moment to read it, then gave it back to her. “It should make sense. Look at your brother, figuring it out. You need to learn to be as smart as him.”

“But how?”

Franco shrugged. “Figure it out. You’re not a baby, Lucia. It won’t be long until you’re a grown woman.”

“She’s seven,” I pointed out.

Franco leveled his dark gaze onto me. “I’m aware of that.”

“Are you? Because you act like she’ll be an adult tomorrow.”

Franco gave me a tight smile. “Do you think you’re smarter than me, Mia?”

I wanted to say yes, but the darkness in Franco’s eyes made me say, “No,” instead.

“Good.” He turned back to Lucia. “Figure it out.” Then he walked away, leaving Lucia in tears.

“You are smart,” I told her, but I don’t think she heard me over her sobs.

In the present, I let Lucia’s snide comment slide. She never knew what it was like to have a father she could depend on.

That’s one thing I feel exceptionally grateful for—I’ll always have good memories of my dad.

ANOTHER FAMILY DINNER night rolls around with Antonio and Nina and Cecilia and Theo, coming. I have to prepare myself to face Cecilia because the sight of her still makes me a little bit bitter.

When Antonio arrives, Killian is with him. My heart almost jumps out of my chest when I see him.

“No,” Mom says, wagging her finger at Killian. “He’s not allowed in this house.”

“Nice to see you, too, Giulia,” Killian says.

Antonio sighs. “Ma, Killian is staying for dinner. He insisted.”

The grimace on my mother’s face is honestly hilarious. “Fine. But I’m not happy about it.”

“Duly noted,” Antonio says.

Killian takes his seat across from me. “Hey, Mia. Nice seeing you again.”

“Yeah,” is all I can say because he makes me so tongue-tied.

He smiles like we share a secret, and I think my heart almost melts.

Cecilia and Theo show up soon after. I’m so distracted by Killian that I don’t have it in me to be angry with Cecilia.

“How’s the husband hunting going?” Nina asks as she cuts into her food.

My mom answers for me. “Not great. But Mia and I are not giving up. We’ll find her a husband yet.”

“I’ll marry her.”

My heart stops. Did Killian just say what I think he just said?

Mom huffs. “You will not.”

Killian shrugs. “Why not? Mia needs a husband. I’m Antonio’s second-in-command. I’ll soon be boss of the Irish mob.”

“But you’re not yet,” Mom points out. “You still have to unseat Patrick O’Connell from that position, and it won’t be easy. I won’t let my daughter be in danger.”

“She wouldn’t be in danger from me. I’m a good fit, Giulia. Admit it. A marriage alliance between us would ensure

good will between the Italians and the Irish. I don't see the problem."

"The problem is," my mom says, "I don't trust you."

"Because I'm Irish?"

"Yes."

Killian turns to me. "Let's see what Mia thinks about this."

Antonio sighs. "Killian, don't."

All eyes turn to me. I can feel Cecilia watching me, and my petty side wants to prove to her I can find love, too. That she's not the only one who gets a happy ending.

So, I open my mouth and say, "I think it's a good idea."

Chaos descends on the family dinner.

CHAPTER 5

Mia

Mom stands, obviously flustered. “No. It’s not a good idea.”

As Antonio tries to calm Mom down, Cecilia turns to me and asks, “Do you really think it’s a good idea to go against what Mom wants?”

“You did,” I say, making her flinch.

Nina and Theo remain quiet. I’m sure Gemma will be disappointed to know she missed all the drama.

Luca watches the proceedings with wide eyes while Lucia looks disappointed I’m the center of everyone’s attention.

And lastly, there’s Killian, sitting back in his chair and smiling at me. I don’t understand why he would even want to marry me to begin with. Ok, sure. It make sense politically. But there’s a twinkle in Killian’s eye that speaks to more than politics. It’s almost as if he ... *likes* me, and *that*, I don’t understand.

“You,” Mom says, pointing a finger at Killian, “are not marrying my daughter.”

“Ma.” Antonio puts his hand on Mom’s arm. “Just calm down, ok. I can talk this through with Killian.”

“What is there to talk about?” Killian asks. “Both Mia and I think a marriage between us is a good idea. So, why not go for it?”

Mom looks like she’s about to start screaming at Killian when Antonio cuts in and says, “I mean ... I don’t think it’s

the worst idea.”

“What?” Mom whips around to stare at Antonio. “What do you mean?”

Antonio shrugs. “I mean, Mom, Killian is a good man. He’d treat Mia right. And once he takes down Patrick O’Connell, he’ll easily become head of the Irish mob. He’ll have my backing. It would be a good, secure alliance. It’s really not a bad idea at all.”

“How could you?” Mom whispers.

“Ma,” Antonio sighs, “I’m the boss. I know I made some mistakes when it came to Cecilia, and I don’t want to do the same to Mia. If both Killian and Mia are comfortable with getting married, then ... I’m on board.”

“You would do this to me? Your own mother?”

“This isn’t about you, Mom,” he says. “This is about Mia. What does Mia want?”

When everyone turns to look at me, I resist the urge to slump back into my seat.

“What do you want, Mia?” Antonio asks.

“I have to make a decision right now?”

Antonio looks at me with kind eyes. “We do. The sooner you’re married, the sooner we can put everything with Cecilia and Theo to rest. If you’re married, people won’t talk about you anymore.”

I turn to Killian. Do I really want this? I’m still not sure why Killian is interested in me. But he’s my best chance.

“Ok,” I finally say. “I’ll agree to it.”

Killian gives me a soft smile that feels like it’s only for me to see.

Mom slumps into her seat with a groan. “I can’t believe this.”

“It’s happening,” Antonio says. “Mia and Killian will marry. I think it’ll benefit all of us,” he adds with a pointed

stare at Mom.

“Since it doesn’t matter what I want, fine,” she says. “Mia will marry Killian.” She shoots a glare at him. “You better treat my daughter right.”

“Cross my heart,” Killian responds, doing just that.

“I can’t deal with this right now,” Mom says, leaving the room.

Cecilia turns to me. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“You got your happy ending,” I snap. “Don’t ruin this for me.”

Without a word, Cecilia gets up and leaves, and Theo shoots me a look. “You can be nicer, you know.” He follows Cecilia.

Feeling properly chastised, I leave the room, too, but Killian follows me.

“Hey, you ok?” he asks.

“Why did you agree to marry me?”

Killian rubs the back of his neck. “Because I like you, Mia. And as Antonio said, it would be a good political move for us.”

“Why do you like me?”

“Because you’re cute. Does there need to be any other reason?”

I blush at his words. No man has ever told me I’m cute before. But despite Killian sounding so confident about it, I struggle to believe him. “I’m not cute. Just ... plain.”

He leans in closer to me. “You’re cute.”

I step back despite how much I want to lean into him. “So, where do we go from here?”

“I guess we have a wedding to plan.”

“Do ... do we exchange numbers or something?”

He chuckles. “Do you want to exchange numbers.”

“I mean, if you want to.” God, I feel like an utter idiot.

Killian leans back in toward me, and this time, I force myself to stay put. “Ok. We can change exchange numbers.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, handing it over to me. I plug in my number, feeling like an excited schoolgirl with a crush. I went to an all-girls high school, so I never really had crushes on boys back then.

When Killian takes his phone back, he smiles wide. “Looking forward to your call.” With a wink, he leaves the house.

I’m left standing there in complete and utter shock. What just happened?

I’m getting married to Killian—that’s what.

I AM NOT PREPARED for planning a wedding. I don’t even know where to start.

So, I ask my mom the next morning. But she’s no help when she tells me, “I don’t want any part of this.”

“But I don’t know what to do. Flowers? Cake? Dress? There’s so much. How did you plan parties so fast?”

“Because I’ve been doing it for years,” she says, tossing her hair over her shoulder before she begins to cook breakfast.

“So, then, help me.”

“No. I won’t give Killian the satisfaction.”

I sidle up close to her and bat my eyes. “For me, then?”

Mom stares at me before sighing. “Fine. I think flowers are a good place to start. I’ll get you the number for the florist I’ve used in the past. But I’m not going. You’ll have to figure it out on your own. Or see if one of your sisters can join.”

“Thanks.” I give her a quick squeeze before hurrying off.

I call Emilia to see if she can help me, but she tells me she can’t get away from LA. “You know how it is. Essie is in school now, and I can’t just leave.”

After telling her I understand, I try Francesca, who also tells me she's busy being a new mom. "Matteo is taking up all my time. I'm so sorry. I wish I could help."

"It's ok." Next, I try calling Gemma. She's in New York and doesn't have kids. She has to have more time on her hands.

"Will you help me?" I ask.

"With flower shopping?" Gemma laughs. "No way. I hate that stuff. I never had to do it for my own wedding."

"Because Viktor kidnapped you."

"Semantics."

"Don't you want to help me now?" I don't care if I'm begging. I'm beyond begging.

"Sorry, Mia. I just don't care for that stuff. Find someone else." I want to tell her I've asked everyone else, but they're all busy.

Except, there is one more person—Cecilia. But I'd rather gouge my eyes out than ask her to help me plan my wedding.

I could always ask Nina, so I call her up. "Will you help me with flower shopping? Please?"

Nina sighs on the other end, and I just know that's not a good sign. "I'm sorry, Mia. Antonio and I have plans this afternoon. But I'd help if I could."

"No worries," I say, trying to sound cheerful and knowing I'm utterly failing at it.

When I hang up the phone and turn around, I almost jump out of my skin when I see Lucia standing in the living room, just watching me.

"You could make a little noise, you know," I mutter.

Lucia shrugs. "I hear you're having trouble finding someone to go flower shopping with you."

I wait for her to say more, and when she doesn't, it dawns on me what she's really saying. "Wait. Do you want to come

with me?”

She shrugs. “I don’t mind flowers.”

I huff, shaking my head. “Lucia, you’d only make me feel bad.”

“That’s on you,” she says, narrowing her eyes. “I just say things as I see them.”

I roll my eyes. “Ok. Whatever. I have to go flower shopping without any help, so I’m not in the mood for your attitude.” I start walking to the door when Lucia calls out.

“Ok, fine. I do want to go. I think it would be fun.”

I turn back to her. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Fine.” She perks up, but I hold up a finger. “But only if you drop the attitude. If you say one snide remark to me, I won’t let you join me.”

“Deal.”

This probably won’t go very well.

Lucia and I get to the flower shop my mom recommended and talk to the florist—a woman named Crystal with pink hair and a nose ring. I’m shocked my mom would ever work with someone who had pink hair and a nose ring, but I guess that means Crystal is good at her job.

She brings out multiple bouquets for me to look at. Each one is gorgeous, from roses to petunias to tulips.

“I like this one,” Lucia says, pointing at a red and yellow bouquet.

“I prefer this one.” I point at a softer pink and white one.

Lucia scrunches up her face. “Why would you want that one? You’re not an old granny.”

“Lucia,” I say in a warning tone.

She huffs. “This is stupid. Just pick the one I think is pretty.”

“It’s not your wedding.”

“I can’t believe it’s your wedding,” she says in a mocking tone. “What does Killian even see in you?”

I try to not let her words bother me, but I can’t help it. I flinch. “I’m not sure. But it doesn’t matter. We’ll be married, and that’s the end of it.”

She squints at me. “Are you crying?”

I dab at my cheek and realize it’s wet. I quickly wipe it away. “No. I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Lucia.”

“Mia,” she mocks.

“Just stop.”

“You stop.”

I get up from the table in a huff and walk to a quieter corner of the store. My tears are coming out without my permission. I’m flattered Killian would want to marry me, but it hurts to plan this wedding on my own. And to deal with Lucia while I’m at it.

I was doted on as a kid, but now, as an adult, I feel like no one has time for me.

Then an idea occurs.

I pull out my phone and look at Killian’s number. Would he be interested in helping me plan the wedding? It is his wedding, too, after all.

Maybe he would help me feel not so alone.

I try not to feel stupid as I push his number. My heart pounds as I wait for him to pick up. When he does, I can’t speak.

“Hello?” His warm voice is rich in my ear. “Mia?”

“Hi,” I squeak.

“Hi.” I can hear the amusement in his voice. “Glad you called.”

“Yeah.” I roll my eyes, feeling like an idiot. Am I really going to ask a Mafia man to go flower shopping with me?

“Did you need something?”

“Are you busy right now?”

“Not at all,” he replies.

Here it goes. “Do you want to go flower shopping with me?”

He doesn’t answer right away. God, I think my heart is going to burst right out of me. Then, he finally says, “I’d love to. Tell me where.”

Within a few minutes, Killian arrives at the shop.

“That was fast,” I say.

“I was in the neighborhood by sure chance.” He claps his hands together. “Now, shall we find some flowers for our wedding?”

We walk over to where Lucia is bossing Crystal around. “I want to see this bouquet.” She points at a picture. “No. That one instead.”

“Lucia,” I tell her. “Crystal is not here to find flowers for you.” I give Crystal an apologetic smile, which she returns.

Lucia turns, about to make a snide comment, but when she sees Killian standing there, her eyes widen.

“Hello,” he says, waggling his fingers.

Lucia’s face goes red, and her eyes bug out. “Mia, you didn’t tell me Killian was coming.”

“I called him.” I turn to Killian. “Ready?”

He nods. “I was born ready. My mom made sure I was an expert in all thing’s flowers.”

“Really?”

Killian tosses me his signature smile and wink. “Not, not really. But I’m open to anything. So, what were you thinking?”

I point to the pink and white bouquet. He nods. “Sturdy choice.”

“Sturdy choice?” Lucia asks.

“Yeah,” Killian replies. “You can’t go wrong with pink and white at a wedding.”

“I can’t imagine you at a pink and white wedding,” Lucia says.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” he says to Lucia, but he’s looking at me.

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like, I love pink.”

Lucia gasps while I laugh. “You really love pink?” I ask. “You?”

“What does that mean? Can’t a man love pink?”

“Of course,” I say, “but I just wasn’t expecting ... you. Not with all ... this.” I wave my hand around the tattoos on his arms.

“Hey, a man can have tattoos and love pink. I’m complex.”

“Mia isn’t complex,” Lucia retorts.

Before I can slap my sister, Killian responds. “No. I think Mia is complex. There’s a lot I don’t know about her yet.”

I sit up straighter. “What do you want to know?”

“Mmm.” He strokes his chin, and my stomach fills with butterflies. “Like, what’s your favorite animal?”

Lucia snorts. “That’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not,” Killian says, seemingly unfazed by Lucia’s attitude. “A person’s favorite animal can reveal a lot about themselves. For example, mine is a tiger. Because I love how strong they are. How they’d be willing to go the distance to protect the ones they love. They’re also more solitary. I’m not the biggest people-person, so I can relate.”

“I can see it,” I tell him.

He points at me. “See? Now, what’s yours?”

“Ok. Um ... giraffe?”

“Is that a question?”

I clear my throat. “No. Giraffes. I love how elegant they are. There’s nowhere for them to hide in the wild, but they aren’t afraid of most things. They’re so beautiful.”

Killian keeps his eyes locked with mine. “I agree. Giraffes are beautiful.” Even though he’s talking about giraffes, I can’t help but wonder if he’s talking about me, too.

CHAPTER 6

Mia

“I don’t like it,” my mom says, nodding at the mermaid-style wedding dress I’m wearing. “It doesn’t suit you.”

I sigh and walk back to the dressing rooms to try on another dress. I thought wedding dress shopping would be a lot more fun, but my mom hasn’t liked anything I’ve tried on yet.

“I thought that one was nice,” I hear Gemma say as I walk away. She joined me for dress shopping this time, stating she couldn’t miss the drama.

“Me, too,” comes another voice. Cecilia. She insisted on coming with us, even though I didn’t want her to. I’m not ready to make nice with Cecilia just yet. So far, Killian has seemed to solve my problems, but that doesn’t mean anything yet. We’re not married. I haven’t gotten my happy ending. Anything could happen from now until the wedding day.

As I take off my dress and try on another one, all I can think about is how unworthy I feel. Of love. Of happiness. It’s like a dream on the tip of my fingers, so close and yet out of reach. I don’t dare trust this is actually happening. That I’m right here, right now, trying on wedding dresses to marry Killian Brennan. He’s still a mystery to me in so many ways. So far, all I know about him is that he loves tigers and the color pink. A strange combination, but I’m fascinated. He seems fascinated with me, too, but I’m struggling to believe it.

What’s so special about me?

I look at myself in the mirror with a new dress on. This one is a more traditional style. But I still feel like an imposter. All my older sisters looked stunning in their gowns, and I feel like a frump. Nothing is quite perfect with me. There's always something off.

I come back out to show off my gown to my mom, who takes one look at it and shakes her head. "You can do better."

I huff, my hands flapping at my sides. "Mom. I'm not sure anything will be better. I just want to find a dress and go home."

"You want a magical wedding, don't you?" she asks.

"Why do you care? You're against this wedding."

"I'm not against you getting married. Just against you marrying Killian. But I still want you to look lovely on your day, so I'm going to help you find the perfect dress, and Mia, that isn't it."

I blink back the tears threatening to fall over. "What do you think?" I ask Gemma.

"I think it looks ... good."

"Even you don't like it?" I ask.

Gemma's face wavers. "Sorry. It's just ... ok. I agree with Mom. You could do better."

I start to walk away when Cecilia asks, "Don't you want to hear my opinion?"

"Not really," I grumble under my breath.

"What?" she asks.

I turn back to her. "Fine. Go ahead. What do you think of the dress?"

"I think it's nice. Very classic."

"Of course, you'd think that," Gemma says, nudging Cecilia. "Little Miss Goody-two-shoes."

"I am not," she responds.

"She's definitely not," I say with a little too much sass.

They all look at me.

Cecilia crosses her arms. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing. I’m going to change.”

“No. Tell me.”

I sigh, shrugging. “It’s just ... most goody-two-shoes don’t run off with their bodyguards. I didn’t expect you to be into the whole classic wedding thing since you didn’t really have a conventional wedding yourself.”

“Mia,” Mom warns.

“No. She needs to hear this.” I take in a deep breath. “I’m tired of you always acting like there’s nothing wrong between us. You’re always dismissing me, saying that I shouldn’t blame you. But I’m frustrated, Cecilia. I feel like you’re a hypocrite. You expect me to follow the rules when you didn’t. You’re arguably the most rebellious of us all.”

“When have I expected you to follow the rules?” she demands.

“When you told me I should listen to Mom about Killian! Why is everyone acting like it’s a huge problem we’re getting married? Killian is a nice person.”

“That you’ve seen so far,” Mom says.

“Ugh. Mom, you know Killian is nice. He helped Antonio when Antonio had no one. I figured you’d love him because of that.”

Mom goes quiet.

I turn back to Cecilia, still on my venting rampage. “I’m just tired. Why does everyone else get their happy ending? Find love? But I’m not worthy of that?”

“Do you feel like you’re not worthy?” Cecilia asks.

“Yes! No man wanted me. I’m sure Killian pities me. That’s why he’s agreed to marry me. But he did agree. And he’s better than the other men. So, I’m taking it. Running with it. Killian and I are getting married. And I just want to find a dress I like, then move on. Can we all agree to that?”

“Sure,” Gemma says right away.

Mom sighs and nods. “All right. You make a good point. I’m not happy about this, but ... as long as this wedding squashes any rumors about you and Cecilia, then ... I’ll try to be happy.”

Cecilia takes a moment before answering. “I never knew you felt that way about me. I knew you were frustrated how my actions affected you, but I never knew you thought of me as a hypocrite. I’m trying, Mia. I’m trying.”

Some of the tension in my body releases. “I know,” I admit. “And I know not everything was your fault. You just wanted your own happy ending. I’m just ... not ready to move on yet.”

“When you do, I’ll be here,” she offers.

I hurry back to the dressing room, my face on fire and my eyes burning with unshed tears. Why can’t I let it go? Why can’t I just be happy for Cecilia and focus on my upcoming marriage to Killian?

I think it’s because deep down I know Killian is only marrying me for political power and not because he likes me. He told me I was cute, but I don’t believe him. No man has ever thought I was cute. All the suitors my mom and Antonio found for me acted as if I were gum on the bottom of their shoes.

When it came to Cecilia and Theo, it was obvious Theo loved Cecilia. He fought tooth and nail to protect her from the old man she was expected to marry. I doubt Killian would do anything like that for me because ... why would he? No one ever has before.

No one except my father.

One time, when I was eight, my father stood up for me. My family loved to take trips to Coney Island. It was the one thing we could count on to do together as a group.

While my older siblings were off on the rides, I stayed back because I was terrified, and my dad offered to get me an ice cream.

I loved being the center of his attention. He was either caught up in work or spending time with my siblings. But having his focus on me, even for a few minutes, meant the world to me.

“Here you go,” he said, handing me my vanilla ice cream cone.

I licked and smiled up at my dad. “It’s super yummy.”

“I bet,” a man said behind me.

Startled, I turned around to see a man who looked to be around my father’s age. He eyed me over in a way that made me uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to explain why. It just did.

“I’d like to see you lick more than that ice cream,” he added.

I didn’t understand. Not at the time. But my father did, and he made sure to let that man know he didn’t approve of what he was saying.

“What did you say to my daughter?” Dad asked, walking right up to the man.

The other man gulped. “I didn’t say anything.”

“No, no. I heard you.” He leaned in closer to him. “If you ever even so much as look at my daughter again, I will slit your throat from one side of your jaw to the other. Is that clear?”

“Yes.” The man looked like he was sweating.

“Good.” Dad patted him on the shoulder, making the man jump. “Now, go.”

The man hurried away, not looking back once.

Dad crouched beside me. “Are you ok?” Even then, he was starting to look sick, but he still made the effort for me.

“I’m ok. Dad, I don’t understand.”

He ran his hand over my hair. “Good. But when you’re older, you will. Just know I’ll always be here to protect you.”

He pulled me into a hug, and everything felt right all over again.

He would die just a couple months later, and my world would be forever changed for the worse.

Now, I blink at my reflection in the mirror. I had an amazing man in my life like my dad. How can Killian even compare? No one could keep me save the way my father did. But he's been gone for twelve years. Franco pretended to be a father figure for much longer than my dad was in my life. The thought saddens me.

Someone knocks on the door to the changing room. "Mia? It's Gemma."

I open the door, letting her in. I can't even look her in the eye, given my embarrassment.

"How are you doing in here?" she asks, looking around at all the other dresses I still have to try on.

"It's hopeless, Gemma."

"Why is it hopeless? And before you say anything, just know I'm not very good when it comes to advice."

I chuckle.

She points at me. "See? I can still make you laugh." She sits beside me, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Everything. Nothing. It's all ... not how I imagined getting married would go."

"You imagined you'd be in love, didn't you."

"Yeah." I rest my head on her shoulder. "Yeah."

"And Cecilia married someone she loves. You're jealous. Plain and simple."

My face grows hot. "Am I really that obvious?"

"Yeah, you are. But here's the thing, when I married Viktor, I didn't love him. Emilia didn't love Marco when she married him. Francesca didn't love Leo when she married him.

And remember, Cecilia was going to have to marry an eighty-year-old until Theo stepped in to save her. You're getting a sweet deal by marrying Killian. He's hot. He's charming. He's sweet. Did I mention he's hot?"

I smile. "He is pretty handsome."

"I think you're going to be just fine. You just have to stop comparing yourself to everyone else. It's eating away at you."

"But how do I do that?"

"Don't have an answer for you there. But just trust in the process. If someone like me, who *loathed* the idea of marriage, could eventually find love, then you can, too."

"Thanks, Gemma. You know, you were never this nice to me when I was a kid."

"That's because I found you annoying."

"That's how I feel about Lucia."

Gemma snorts. "Well, that's because Lucia is a real brat. Both her and Luca. Those two are gonna cause so much trouble when they're older."

I pull away from her. "I appreciate you talking to me."

"What are sisters for? Now, I spotted a dress when I came in here that I think is perfect for you." She walks over to one and holds it up. "Try it on."

I do.

And it's perfect.

Off the shoulder. Lacy bodice. The lace travels down to a skirt that flares out just enough to be more princess-like without being too big or too small. It's elegant and understated and absolutely stunning.

"Let's go show Mom," Gemma says, squeezing my shoulders.

I walk out to my mom, who sits up straighter when she sees me.

“Well?” I ask, giving the dress a twirl. “What do you think?”

“I think ...” Mom wipes a tear away. “I think you look so beautiful, honey.”

“Really?” I could almost cry from happiness.

“Really.” She pauses. “I just hate that it’s being used on Killian.”

Gemma laughs, patting Mom’s arm. “It could be worse. She could be marrying someone like Viktor.”

“Oh, don’t remind me,” Mom says, dropping her face into her hands.

I take in a deep breath and turn to my other sister. “Cecilia?” She jerks up. “What do you think of the dress?”

She looks shocked for a second before her lips smooth into a smile. “I think it’s exactly right. Just you.”

Looking out over my family, I feel a flicker in my heart that things just might turn out ok for the first time in months.

CHAPTER 7

Killian

My mom is getting sicker by the day.

When I visit her, I can tell how much more the cancer is taking from her. “Mom, how are you feeling?”

She’s barely strong enough to hold my hand. “I think my time is coming soon, Killian,”

The panic that goes through me rips my heart in two. “You can’t give up. You told me you didn’t want me to be alone. I’m getting married.”

“You are? Who’s the lucky girl?”

“Her name is Mia. She’s one of Antonio’s sisters. It’s a good marriage for political reasons.”

“Political reasons.” She scoffs. “Killian, I want you to marry for love. Do you love this girl?”

“I don’t know much about her yet. But I will. And then love can come. I’m not worried.”

“I want you to find love,” she says. “I need to know you’ll be happy before I go.”

“Then hold on longer. Please.” I don’t care if I’m being selfish. I lost my brother too young. I’m not going to lose my mom, too.

She smiles, though it’s strained. “I’ll try. For you, I’ll try.”

My phone rings, and I look down to see who’s calling. Mia. I cancel the call. Normally, I’d answer, but my mom

needs me right now.

“How have the *Housewives of Beverly Hills* been doing?”
My mom loves watching those reality shows.

“Good, good. Drama as usual. It’s a good reminder of how simple my life is. Just battling cancer. That’s all.”

I chuckle. “Your dark sense of humor is a little disturbing.”

“I have to find the positives in it, Killian. Otherwise, I’ll break down and crumble. And you still need me.”

“You’ll get to know Mia, and you’ll see how nice she is. I can be happy with her.”

“Is she cute?”

“Yes,” I say. “She’s pretty cute. I can make things work with her. There might not be love between us. Not yet. But I believe there can be in time.”

My phone rings again. Mia.

“I have to answer this,” I tell my mom. “Mia?”

“Killian?” she says on the other end. “I wasn’t sure if you were avoiding me.”

I frown. “Why would I be avoiding you?”

“You ... you didn’t pick up when I called earlier. But I’m in my head. Sorry. I’m rambling.”

“It’s ok. Did you need something?”

“Uh, yeah. I have to do a cake tasting for the wedding. Want to join me?”

I glance at my mom. “Sorry, Mia. I can’t today.”

“Oh.” She goes quiet. “Understood. I didn’t mean to bother you.”

“You’re not bothering me. I just ... I can’t.” She doesn’t know about my mom yet. I need to tell Mia, but a part of me is afraid to. If I speak the truth about my mom dying, it will make everything a reality.

“Ok. Well, I guess I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye.” I hang up.

Mom gives me a sympathetic smile. “Was that her?”

“It was,” I say, clearing my throat.

“Why do you look like you were just run over by a truck?”

“Mom, I haven’t told her ... about you. Yet. I’m not ready.”

“I won’t be around much longer, Killian. You need to tell her soon.”

“I know, I know. But enough about marriages and love and all of that. I just want to spend time with you.”

“Well,” she says, grabbing the remote and turning the TV on, “let’s see what the Beverly Hills housewives are getting up to this week.”

I settle into my chair and enjoy the time with my mom.

“HI, GIULIA,” I say when she answers the door. “I’m here to Mia.”

Giulia frowns. “I guessed that.” Sighing, she opens her door. “Fine. Come in. Mia! Killian is here to see you.” She points at me. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “I promise.”

Mia comes down the stairs, eyeing me warily.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi,” she whispers.

Giulia remains standing there until Mia asks her to give us some space.

“Nothing you’ll regret,” Giulia says warns me once more before leaving the room.

“Wow, your mom is scary sometimes,” I say, which earns me a smile from her.

“What are you doing here, Killian?”

“I wanted to see you. Sorry I didn’t get the chance to join you yesterday. I would’ve loved to eat some cake.”

She holds her arms across her body, almost like she’s trying to hide from me. “I get it. You have a job. You’re busy. You don’t have all the time for me or our wedding.”

I frown. “Are you upset I didn’t make it yesterday?”

“No,” she says too quickly.

“Ok, then. I’m sorry.”

“I heard you. I get it. I’m not mad at you.”

“But?” I offer.

She sighs, letting her arms drop to her sides. “But I am disappointed. I would have liked you there.”

“I get it.” I scratch the back of my neck. “I just ... couldn’t.”

“Are you embarrassed of me?” she blurts out.

“Woah, what makes you ask that?”

Mia lets out a rough breath. “I just ... I haven’t had the best of luck with men. As you know. And it’s easy for me to get in my head about stuff.”

“It’s not you, Mia. It’s ...”

“Are you sure it’s not me?”

I never realized just how many insecurities Mia dealt with until now. “It’s not you, trust me. It’s crazy to think it’s you.”

She frowns, stepping back. “So, I’m crazy?”

“No.” Damn. This is not going how I planned at all. “Of course not. I ...”

“I think you need to leave,” Giulia says, walking back into the room. “You don’t get to call my daughter crazy.”

“Mom, you were listening in?” Mia asks. “That’s not ok.”

“When it comes to my daughter, it is.” Giulia turns to me. “You should go.”

“I was with my mom,” I blurt. “That’s why I couldn’t be there for you yesterday.”

Mia’s eyes lighten. “Oh. Why didn’t you just say that? I understand.”

“No,” Giulia cuts in. “He should be prioritizing you. Not his mother.”

Which is rich, considering Giulia expects everyone to put her first. I keep my mouth shut, though. No need to upset my future mother-in-law even more.

“I’m not sure,” Mia says, looking troubled.

“Yes. That’s what makes a good husband. One who will devote his entire being to you.” Giulia tosses me a look. “And clearly, Killian, here, has shown he doesn’t care enough about you to do that.”

Mia looks more uncertain by the minute. I see why she was in her head so much over me not showing up for the cake tasting.

But Giulia is insulting me for no good reason.

And I can’t stand it anymore.

“My mom is sick,” I say before I can stop myself. This isn’t how I wanted to tell Mia, but here we are.

That shuts Giulia up.

Mia turns to me, eyes wide. “She’s sick?”

“Breast cancer. She’s in the hospital. I was visiting her yesterday.”

Mia looks at her mom pointedly. “Mom, see? Killian wasn’t abandoning me.” She walks over to me. “I’m so sorry. How is she doing?”

“Not well.” I let out a shaky breath. Mia squeezes my hand, and it warms my heart to see the empathy in her eyes.

“Can I meet her?”

“You want to meet her?”

Mia smiles. “Of course. She’ll be my mom-in-law. I want to meet her.”

“She’d like that.”

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I take Mia to the hospital.

“My mom will like you. Trust me,” I assure her as I take in her nervous expression.

“So, she’s not like my mom?” Mia jokes as we walk down the hallway.

I chuckle. “No. Well, your mom is a force to be reckoned with. So is my mom. I guess they’re similar in that way. But my mom will like you.”

“Ok.” She lets out a quick breath. “I’m excited to meet her.”

I lead Mia into my mom’s room. “Knock, knock,” I say, walking inside.

My mom looks away from the TV and glances at me before focusing on Mia behind me. “Ah. You must be Mia.”

“It’s ok,” I tell Mia, nudging her toward my mom. Mia’s expression is one of awe and confusion.

“Hi, Mrs. Brennan,” she says, standing by my mom’s side.

“Erin, please.”

“Ok. Erin.”

I motion for Mia to take a seat beside my mom.

“So, you’re marrying my son.”

“I am.”

Mom nods knowingly. “Do you love him?”

A sound between a gasp and a laugh escapes Mia. “Um ...”

“You don’t have to answer that,” I tell Mia. “Mom, she doesn’t have to answer that.”

“Killian and I are still getting to know each other,” Mia explains.

“Mmm. My son said something similar the other day. Well, I hope you two find love before I go. I want to see it.”

Mia looks at me with uncertainty in her eyes, and I step in. “Mom, it’s ok. Mia and I have a lot to learn about each other, but things will be ok.”

“Can I see the wedding? Will you film it for me? As you can see, I can’t really leave my bed.”

“Of course, we can,” Mia says.

“Or we could have the wedding here,” I offer.

Mia whips around to stare at me. “Killian, my mom would never agree to that.”

“She didn’t agree to you marrying me, but here we are.”

Mia glances at my mom before turning back to me. “Let’s talk about this outside?”

I give my mom a smile, then follow Mia into the hallway. “What’s wrong?”

“I just ... I kind of planned on having a bigger wedding. Not one ... in the hospital.”

“But it would mean a lot to my mom to see it firsthand. We could have the wedding here in the hospital. It would mean a lot to her to see me married.”

Mia grimaces. “But what about what I want?”

“But my mom is sick. She can’t attend the wedding. Let’s just have it here.”

“My mom won’t be happy.”

“I think Giulia will be fine. Your mom doesn’t understand hardship. She’ll be fine.” That comes out harsher than I intended.

Mia steps away from me. “You don’t know anything about what my mom has been through. She’s been through a ton of hardship. You want the wedding to happen here, but I don’t.

And unless you plan the wedding with me, you don't get a say." She walks past me. "Tell your mom it was nice meeting her."

"Mia," I call out, but she keeps walking.

I'm genuinely confused about what just happened. There's a lot I still need to learn about Mia, but one thing's clear—this marriage won't be as simple as I thought.

CHAPTER 8

Mia

When I walk through my front door, my mom is waiting, ready to interrogate me about what happened.

“How was it? Is she nice? Is she really sick?”

“Mom,” I say, holding up my hands. “Slow down. Killian’s mom is nice, and yes, she’s actually sick.” I brush past my mom and head for the living room. “You should have seen her. She looked so brittle and thin. It was ... I wasn’t expecting that.”

Mom lets out a breath. “Ok. So, I know Killian wasn’t completely lying about that. He does have a valid excuse for not being there for you. Maybe I was being a little harsh.”

I raise an eyebrow. “A little harsh? Mom, you’ve had it out for Killian since you met him. You were being harsh.”

“I just want to make sure my little girl is safe.” She sits beside me, running a hand over my hair. “Is that so wrong?”

“No. It’s not. It’s just ... can you trust me to make my own decisions?”

“Of course!”

“Really?” I ask, dubious.

Mom sighs. “It’s hard, ok? You’re my baby. You’ll always be my baby.”

“I thought the twins are your babies now.”

She cups my cheek. “You’ll always be my baby. It’s not a competition between you and Lucia and Luca. Know that. You have to know that.”

“I know.” I lean into her, letting her wrap her arms around me. “Erin, that’s her name, was very sweet. She seems to have a positive outlook on life despite being sick. There’s just ... one thing.”

“What?” Mom is stroking my hair.

“Erin asked if we could film the wedding so she could see it.”

“I don’t see why that would be a problem. We can do that.”

I sigh, shifting away from her. “There’s more.”

“What?” she asks again in a wary voice.

“Killian suggested we have the wedding at the hospital instead of the venue I picked.” Mom tenses before I’m even finished speaking. “I don’t—”

“No,” she says, cutting me off. “No way. You deserve to have a wedding where you want. None of this hospital nonsense.”

“Killian really wants his mom to see us married, and I ... can’t blame him for that.”

“No. No.” She pulls away from, standing up to pace around the room. “Just no.”

“I mean ... I don’t really want the wedding at the hospital, but I also don’t want to make Erin feel excluded. Killian makes a good point.”

“No.”

“Mom, he does.”

“Why do you want to have the wedding at your venue? Tell me?”

“Because,” I say, “I want to feel ... special. I sometimes feel ... inadequate when it comes to my siblings, and I want a big wedding. I don’t want my wedding held at the hospital.”

But I don't think Killian will understand. His mom is dying of cancer. Of course, he wants to have the wedding there so she can see. This will be her only chance. I mean ... I can offer to have two weddings?"

"No," Mom says instantly. "You get the wedding you want. We can record it so Erin can see. But my daughter is not having her wedding in a hospital. Just no. You tell Killian that."

Footsteps descend the stairs, and Lucia and Luca come running into the room, playing a game of tag.

"You're it," Luca says, shoving Lucia so hard she falls against the mantle. She immediately starts crying.

Mom sighs. "Luca, don't shove your sister." She gives me a sympathetic smile. "I have to deal with this. You talk to Killian and tell him you want your wedding your way. End of discussion."

She walks over to Lucia and comforts her. Through her tears, Lucia shoots daggers at Luca.

Luca just shrugs and walks off like it's no big deal.

Watching my younger brother and sister reminds me why I'm happy I don't have a brother closer in age to me to torment me. Antonio is so much older, so he never bugged me when we were kids. And Luca is so much younger, so that's out of the question.

But despite that, I think it would be nice to have a twin. Someone who, even when we fight, would still be there for me. I'd feel slightly less alone.

As I walk through the foyer to get to the stairs, the front door opens, and Cecilia enters. Each of my older siblings still has a key to the house. Mom likes knowing her kids can come over whenever.

I stop when I see her. "What are you doing here?"

"Mom made some pie and told me to come over and get it. Theo and I are hosting a dinner party."

"Oh."

Cecilia smiles, but there's tension behind it. "Yeah. Our first dinner party as a married couple. It's some of our friends."

"Right."

"Mia." She takes a step toward me, and I force myself to stay in place. "Are we ok? After dress shopping, I'm still not sure."

I'm not ok. I'm filled with guilt over wanting the wedding of my dreams while also feeling frustrated Killian doesn't understand me. And Cecilia has this picture-perfect marriage where she's hosting dinner parties. It's like salt in the wound.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly. "I just ... can't talk right now." I hurry up the stairs, feeling her eyes on me the entire time. I only get relief after I make it to my bedroom and shut the door.

I'M WORKING on the wedding invitations when Killian shows up to my house. I know it's Killian because my mom answers the door, and the annoyance in her greeting makes it obvious.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"I'm here to see Mia."

Mom sighs audibly. "She's in the living room."

I hold my breath as Killian comes into the room. He looks so handsome, but my conflicted feelings make me feel weird.

"Hey, Mia. We didn't get the chance to talk after you left the hospital. I wanted to see how you were doing." His eyes flick to the wedding invitations on the coffee table. He picks one up. "Venue, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel." He looks up at me. "I didn't know we agreed to that."

"Would you be ok with having the wedding here and filming it for your mom?"

He sets the card down. "I was really hoping you'd agree to having the wedding at the hospital."

“Well, we can do both, couldn’t we? Have the wedding at the hotel as well as the hospital?”

“I mean ... it’s not a bad idea, but isn’t that a waste?”

“Typical men,” I mutter.

His eyebrows raise up. “What does that mean?”

“You don’t understand the importance of this wedding, do you?”

“Tell me, then.”

“It’s important to me to have the wedding I want because ...” I feel silly mentioning how inadequate I feel compared to my sisters, so I say something else. “Because I’ve always dreamed of a big wedding. I want that.”

“It just doesn’t seem like a big deal to me. My mom is dying, Mia.” His voice hitches. A stab of guilt hits me. “Why can’t we just do the wedding at the hospital?”

“Why can’t we do both?”

“Because, as I said, I think it’s a waste.”

I huff and stand up, shoving the initiations away. “You’re not willing to compromise on this. It’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair sometimes, Mia.”

“I’ve had my dream future stripped away from me because of what my sister, Cecilia, did. I won’t have you to that to me, too.”

“I’m a part of this marriage, too.”

I scoff. “Well, I’m the one doing all the wedding planning. I want what I want.”

“Don’t act like a little brat,” he says, his brow furrowed.

“I’m not.”

“You’re acting like one right now. I didn’t agree to marry you just so you could act like a brat.”

I flinch back. “Is that why you agreed to marry me? Out of pity? Because no one else wanted me?”

He sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. “Of course, it wasn’t out of pity. I do like you, Mia. Just ... maybe not right at this moment.”

“Why?” I hate how pathetic my voice sounds. “Because I’m deciding to be selfish?”

“You are being selfish. My mom is dying. Why can’t we just have the wedding for her?”

“And why can’t we just have two weddings? One for me and one for you. It solves the our problem. You know money isn’t an issue.”

“I just don’t see the point.”

I suck in breath. “Do you not want to be seen with me? Is that why you’re so opposed to a large wedding?”

“No. it’s because I just don’t see the point of a large wedding. I’m a down-to-earth kind of guy. That’s not really my speed. Let’s do this for my mom. Please.”

“You don’t get it. You just don’t get it.”

“Get what?” he asks.

“How much this means to me!” I shout without meaning to. Killian steps back. “It means everything to me. And you don’t understand that. You’re dismissing it.”

My mom enters the room. “Is everything all right \?”

“We’re fine, Giulia,” Killian says.

Mom stands at my side. “I’ll let my daughter tell me if everything is all right.”

Killian shakes his head. “Unbelievable. Did you put Mia up to this? It’s you, isn’t it, Giulia? You don’t want Mia to have the wedding at the hospital.”

“Of course not,” Mom says, crossing her arms.

“You don’t get it, Giulia. You don’t get what hardship is and what this means to my mom.”

“Don’t talk to my mother like that,” I say, cutting in. “You don’t know what she’s been through, so don’t you dare say

that. My mom has been through a lot of hardship. More than you could ever understand.”

Killian looks between my mom and me. “I take it I’m not winning here. Fine, Mia. We can have the wedding how you want. I’ll just show up.” He leaves the room, and soon after, I hear the front door shut.

A sob escapes me before I can stop it.

“Oh, honey,” Mom says, soothing me as she pulls me into her arms. “It will be all right.”

I don’t believe her.

I’m not sure things will be all right at all.

CHAPTER 9

Killian

The day my brother died, I was in class. I was working on a project about dinosaurs (because what kid doesn't love dinosaurs), and I didn't think anything of it when the police showed up in the classroom.

I didn't even notice them at first because I was too busy working. At ten years old, I was a single-minded kid.

My teacher went over to talk to the police, then came over to my table. "Killian, could you come with me, please?"

It was then I first felt fear.

I followed her down the hall and into the principal's office, where they told me I needed to wait because my aunt would come to pick me up. I only saw my aunt at Christmas, so I was confused why she would come pick me up and not my mom.

"Am I in trouble?" I asked, glancing at the police.

"There's been an accident," my teacher, Miss Evans, said. "Your brother ... he ..."

"Is Finn ok? He was scared about a presentation he had to give. It was about sea lions."

Miss Evans shared a look with the principal before turning to me. "He got hurt. He's at the hospital now, and your mom is with him."

My heart beat so fast, I couldn't make sense of anything. "Hurt? How?"

The principal, Mrs. Clark, leaned forward. “He was walking up to give his presentation when he tripped, and ...” She swallowed hard. I could see the way her throat moved. For some reason, I would never forget that. “He hit his head on one of the desks. His teacher called 9-1-1.”

“He hit his head?”

Miss Evans grabbed my hand. “I’m so sorry, Killian.”

“But I told him he’d be ok. That he had nothing to worry about today.”

“Sometimes,” Mrs. Clark said, “things happen for no reason. Your aunt will come pick you up and take you to the hospital. Hopefully, Finn will be all right.”

I waited a good hour before my aunt showed up. The entire time, my heart was pounding. I thought for a minute I was the one who was hurt. There was no way Finn could be hurt. I was supposed to protect him.

I even told not to trip and fall on his face. Did I cause it? Somehow?

When my aunt Sharon arrived, she told me she was taking me to my house.

“But I have to see Finn at the hospital,” I said as we walked to her car.

“No. Your mom wants you at home, so that’s where I’m taking you. Get in the car, Killian.”

I stopped at the passenger door, rooting my feet to the ground. “No. I won’t go with you until you take me to see Finn.”

“Just get in the car,” she said, getting in herself. “I’m just doing what your mom wants.”

I wanted to fight it. I wanted to run all the way to the hospital myself, but I had no clue how to get there.

So, I got in the car and let my aunt take my home, even though the longer I was away from Finn, the less I believed he’d be all right.

I SPEED away from Mia's house and head to the nearest bar. I need a drink after getting into a fight with her.

Why can't she understand I want to have the wedding so my mom can attend? My brother won't be there, and my mom is the last of my family.

Mia has her entire family. Five older siblings and two younger siblings. She has her mom. Yes, she lost her father, but that happened when she was eight. She has so much love in her life. I don't understand why she's being so selfish.

I walk into the bar, which is a lot more upscale than I imagined from the outside, and order a beer.

The longer I nurse it, stewing in my thoughts, the more I notice how busy it is. It's the middle of the day. Not exactly drinking time. So, why are so many people coming and going? Sure, I'm here drinking in the middle of the day, but I have a good reason for it.

"Hey," I say to the bartender. "What's going on?" I nod toward the back of the bar where I see the men entering and leaving.

"You don't know whose bar this is?"

I pause. "No."

"It's Patrick O'Connell's."

Shit, shit, shit. Patrick is the man I need to take down so I can take over. This is the last place I should be. In my distracted state, I didn't even realize where I'd gone.

"Here." I toss a couple of bucks on the counter to pay for the beer. I need to get out of here now.

I'm almost at the door when I hear someone say my name. "Killian, is that you?"

I tense. The door is just a few feet away. I could make a run for it. But I'm caught.

I slowly turn around and come face-to-face with Patrick. He's middle aged with a ruddy face and a large stomach.

“Patrick,” I say, trying to sound jovial. “How are you?”

He eyes me over. “How come you’re in my bar?”

“It was a mistake. Honestly. I didn’t realize.”

“Huh.” Patrick looks over at the man behind him. “He didn’t know. Can you believe that?” He turns back to me. “I find that hard to believe, Killian, when I know you’ve been trying to take me down.”

“Just rumors,” I say. And it’s true. I’ve been slowly growing my team of people to take Patrick down, but nothing concrete has come of it yet. “Not true, of course.”

“Of course.” There’s a dangerous glint to Patrick’s eyes. “Well, if you want to join us for a drink, you can.”

I know if I go into that back room, I probably won’t come out of it. “I’m good, Patrick. But thank you. I have a wedding to plan.”

“Oh, is that right? To whom?”

I let out a sigh. This won’t go over well. “To Mia Moretti.”

Murmurs fill the room, and Patrick approaches me. “To Mia Moretti? I knew you were working with Antonio, but now you’re telling me you’re making a marriage alliance with his family? That’s huge. If you took me down, you’d be looking at a lot of power.”

“Then good thing I’m not looking to take you down,” I respond. My hands are clammy, and my neck is sweaty.

Patrick looks into my eyes for a long time. It feels like minutes pass, even though it’s probably only seconds. “Mmm. Good thing. You run along now, Killian. You don’t want to play with the big boys. I don’t think you have the stomach for it.” He dismisses me by walking away.

I hurry outside while trying to keep my composure. Taking down Patrick won’t be easy, but if I’m ever going to be worthy of someone like Mia, I need to become a boss one day. I need to provide more to Antonio, who’s helped me out so much. And I want to create a lasting legacy for my mom and brother.

And then I'll be on my own.

If Mia and I can't come to some conclusion about our wedding, then what hope do we have for our marriage? I need to talk to her and get to the bottom of everything.

Getting in my car, I head back to Mia's house. I refuse to be alone in this world. I refuse to be unhappy. I couldn't save my brother, and I won't be able to save my mom. But if I can save the burgeoning relationship between Mia and me, then I'll damn well try.

I KNOCK on door of the Moretti household and wait.

It's Giulia who answers. Of course, it is.

I give her my most charming smile. "Hi, Giulia. I know I left, and things weren't the best between Mia and me, but I'm here to change that."

She shuts the door in my face.

I'd almost laugh if I wasn't so anxious, I knock again.

And once again, she answers. "Kilian, Mia doesn't want to talk to you."

"Let me talk to her. Please. I was being ... uncompromising with her. I want to hear her side of things. Come on, Giulia. Mia and I are getting married. Wouldn't you rather your daughter be happy than unhappy?"

She crossed her arms. "And you can make her happy?" Her dubious tone cuts like a knife.

"I'm trying. And I know I failed earlier today, but I need to try."

Giulia eyes me for a hot second before opening the door wider. "Fine. You can talk to her. But no promises she'll want to talk to you."

"Thank you," I say, walking into the house.

Giulia lingers in the foyer. "How ... how is your mom doing?"

“Not well. But thank you for asking.”

“You must think I’m a monster for how I’ve treated you,” she says.

“No. I don’t think that. I just think you’re a mom who’s protective of her kids.”

Giulia nods before leaving the room. A few minutes later, Mia comes walking down the stairs.

“Hi,” I offer.

She keeps her distance, and I can’t exactly blame her. “Hi.”

“My brother died when I was ten,” I blurt out. “And now my mom is dying of cancer.”

The hesitancy in Mia’s eyes disappears in an instant, leaving only warmth. “Oh, Killian, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know that about your brother.”

“Why would you? I haven’t told anyone before. Even Antonio doesn’t know. But I needed to explain why I was acting like an ass before. I’d give anything to have my brother on my wedding day, but he won’t be. It’s impossible. But I’d really love to have my mom there.”

“I get that,” she says, closing the distance between us. “And I’m ok with having the wedding at the hospital. But I still want a wedding at the venue I picked out. We can have both. It’s not a waste, and it can make us both happy.”

I let out a breath. “Ok. I can agree to that. But I need to know why having a normal wedding is so important to you?”

“I ...” She looks away from me.

“Mia, talk to me. We can’t make this marriage work if you don’t talk to me.”

“I feel insecure, ok?”

“Insecure over what?”

She gives me a look like I’m crazy for even asking. She mumbles something under her breath.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m not as pretty as my sisters,” she says without taking a breath. “Ok? I feel insecure about that. That’s why I wanted my dream wedding, so I could actually feel special for once.”

“Why wouldn’t you feel special?”

“Because no one wants me. You’re only marrying me out of pity because you’re friends with my brother.”

I frown. “Who said I was marrying you out of pity?”

She looks away from me again and shrugs. “I mean ... no one said that. I just ... assumed.”

“Mia, don’t assume that. You know what they say about assuming. I’m not marrying you out of pity.”

“Then, why? Because you can make a good alliance with my brother?”

I shrug. “That’s part of it, yes. But do you even know that I like you? Not to sound like I’m in high school, but I like you *like* you, Mia.”

Her eyes widen. “You really do?”

“Yes. That’s why I suggested we get married. I knew you were having trouble finding a match, and I thought to myself, ‘This girl is pretty. I like her. Why not marry her?’ It’s a win-win for both of us.”

“I just struggle to believe anyone could be into me. I never used to feel this way, but after what happened with Cecilia and how so many men treated me because of it, I started to feel insecure. That’s why having my dream wedding is important to me. And that’s why it hurt when you dismissed that.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, truly meaning it. I never wanted to hurt Mia. My intention of marrying her was to help protect her from being hurt. “I guess we’re just a bunch of screw-ups, huh?”

She laughs slightly. “I guess.” She grabs my hand. “I do want your mom to attend our wedding. We can have the wedding in the hospital.”

I give her hand a squeeze. “And we can have your dream wedding, too. I was being uncompromising. I want you to know, Mia, that I want to see you happy. I have no intention of hurting you.”

She looks up at me with her wide, brown eyes. I could get lost in them. “I don’t want to hurt you, either.”

“Then, good. We’re on the same page. But there’s something I want to do to show you I mean what I say.”

“What?”

I lean down and kiss her. Mia immediately pulls back, her shock clear. “I ... didn’t expect you to do that,” she says.

“It’s ok. I just never had anyone pull back from kissing me so fast. You humble me, Mia.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to. I just wasn’t ready. If you want to try again ...?”

I cup her face with both my hands. “We can try again.” I kiss her once more, and this time, she doesn’t pull back.

The kiss starts off light and simple. Gentle. I know this is new for Mia. I don’t want to scare her away again.

Mia soon responds, and our lips move together in a good rhythm. Kissing Mia is like drinking a cool glass of lemonade. Refreshing and sweet.

I pull back, smiling down at her. “There. That wasn’t so bad, right?”

“No,” she says, her voice breathless and her cheeks flushed. “That ... wasn’t bad at all.”

“Glad I have your stamp of approval.”

She ducks her head before looking back up at me. “Glad I have yours, too.”

Looking into Mia’s eyes, I believe things will be all right. If we were able to talk this through, then I have hopes we can get through anything else.

The only problem will be convincing Giulia of our wedding plans.

As if on cue, my future mother-in-law walks into the foyer, scowling.

CHAPTER 10

Mia

“It seems you two have made up,” my mom comments as she walks into the room.

“We have,” I say. “Though you don’t look too happy about it.”

Mom sighs, her frown slowly disappearing. “No. I’m happy if you are.” I know she’s just saying that and doesn’t actually mean it.

“Killian and I have agreed to have two weddings. One at the venue I picked out and one at the hospital for his mom.”

Killian places his arm around my shoulders, making me feel like I’m on cloud nine. Our kiss is still making my lips tingle. A part of me can’t believe he’s actually into me, but I’m telling myself to start believing.

“All right, then,” Mom says. “I’ll attend the one you want.” She looks directly at me as she speaks. “But I won’t be attending Killian’s. I don’t agree with my daughter getting married in a hospital.”

My heart deflates. “You won’t be there for it?”

“No.” She doesn’t offer any more explanation.

With a sigh, I turn to Killian. “Thanks for coming here to talk to me, but I think you should go. I need to talk to my mom alone.”

“All right.” He kisses my head. The way he does it so nonchalantly sends butterflies straight to my stomach. “I’ll see you later.”

Once he leaves, I turn to my mom. “What’s going on?”

“What?” she asks innocently, but I know it’s a bunch of bull.

“Mom, come on. Talk to me. Why are you so opposed to me marrying in the hospital? As I said, we’ll still have the wedding I want.”

“I know. But, Mia, I had to keep my opinions to myself for years when Franco was here. I’m done staying quiet. If I don’t approve of something, I’ll make it known. If this is what makes you happy, then so be it. I’ll be happy for you. But I don’t have to pretend I like it when I don’t. Take it or leave it.”

I want to scream at my mom to tell her to support me, but ... I can’t. She has a point. She’s allowed to feel how she feels. And given what she went through with Franco, I can’t blame her for putting herself first now.

“Well, Killian and I will get married first at the hospital. I want to make sure his mom is still around for it. I hope to see you there, but if I not, I understand.”

Mom doesn’t stop me as I leave the room, but I feel her eyes on me as I walk away.

IT’S MY WEDDING DAY.

Well, the first one, I suppose.

Because the hospital wedding will be much simpler, it doesn’t require as much planning. Killian and I will stand there with the priest in front of his mom.

I drive myself to the hospital because I don’t have anyone else to go with. I’m in my wedding dress, and it’s strange to be driving a car, heading to a hospital, as if it’s any other day when it’s not.

Killian and I will be married.

We’ll have my dream wedding later, but for now, I’m focused on Killian and me. I want to make this work with him. I want to give him this. For his mom and for him.

I walk into the hospital to a waiting room full of strangers. They all turn to look at me. If I wanted to feel special, I guess this is it, but I only feel like a weird spectacle.

A tiny, older woman talks to me as I walk past. “You look beautiful, dear.”

I almost cry on the spot. The genuineness in her voice is incredibly sweet. “Thank you.”

“Who’s the lucky guy? Shame you have to spend your wedding day at the hospital.”

“Actually, we’re getting married here today,” I tell her.

Her eyes light up. “Oh, can I come?”

“Um ... I guess. I don’t even know you’re name.”

“Lillian.” She holds out her hand, and I shake it.

“Nice to meet you, Lillian. If you want to join us, you can.” I can’t bear the thought of breaking this sweet old lady’s heart.

Lillian gets up slowly and shuffles next to me as we head for Erin’s room. I hold my arm out to her, and she takes it, giving my forearm a pat.

When we reach Erin’s room, Killian is outside waiting for me. He looks incredible in a black tux. His eyes linger on me as I approach, and for the first time, I actually start to believe he’s attracted to me.

He looks over at Lillian. “Who’s this?”

“Lillian. We just met, and she wanted to join us.”

Killian chuckles as he takes Lillian’s hand and kisses it. Lillian acts demure. “Nice to meet you, Lillian. The more the merrier.”

“Lucky girl,” she whispers to me, nodding at Killian.

“I guess I am.” I say, my eyes locked with Killian’s. I’ve been focusing so much on the negatives in my life—from Cecilia to my horrible marriage prospects to my own

insecurities—I haven't noticed I've gotten pretty lucky. Killian is a good man. What more could I ask for?

“Let's get married,” Killian says, opening the door.

Erin is inside with Father Enzo. When she sees her son, her eyes begin to water. “Oh, Killian. You look so handsome.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He kisses her cheek.

Erin looks over at me. “Mia. Oh, honey. You look stunning.” She holds out her hand to me, and I take it. “Thank you for this.” It's at this moment I know I made the right decision.

“You're welcome. I'm just happy you get to see Killian married before—” I stop.

Erin smiles warmly. “It's ok. You can say it. Before I die. I'm happy. I just hope you two find love.”

“Shall we get started?” Father Enzo asks.

I help Lillian sit down before standing next to Killian. “Let's.”

“Hold on!” someone says from the doorway. I recognize the voice. It's my older sister, Emilia.

I turn around and stumble back at the sight before me. My entire family is here. All my sisters and brothers. Even my mom.

“What are ...”

Emilia walks forward, looking gorgeous with her blonde hair in an updo. “We weren't going to miss this for the world.”

“But Killian and I are still going to have another wedding,” I remind her.

“I know. But this one is important, too.”

“How did you guys hear about this?”

Gemma walks into the room. “Mom told us. She was freaking out, and Emilia calmed her down and convinced her to come. So, here we all are.”

“Mom?” I look to her.

She steps around Antonio and comes over to me. “Gemma is right. Emilia did convince me I should be here. So, here I am.” She looks over at Erin. “I’m glad you get to see your son married. All mothers should get to be there for that.”

“Thank you,” Erin says.

It dawns on me then why my mom was so concerned about wanting to see me married. It’s because she’s missed quite a few of her children’s weddings. I know she missed Antonio’s because he got married when he was still in hiding from Franco.

Antonio claps Killian on the back. “I wouldn’t want to miss my friend’s wedding either.” Killian claps his back in return.

“You look amazing,” Francesca tells me. She’s carrying her son in her arms.

“You all look great,” I tell them.

Cecilia steps forward, looking like a model, and I try not to get jealous. “I’m happy for you, Mia.”

I know it’s time I move on from my bitter feelings toward Cecilia. It’s just hard to let it go. But I force myself to smile. “Thank you.”

She reaches her arms around me and pulls me into a hug. After a moment, I hug her back.

Father Enzo clears his throat. “Are we ready now?”

Cecilia lets me go, then stands beside Francesca.

Killian grabs my hand and squeezes it.

Father Enzo begins the ceremony. Surrounded by my family (and Lillian), I feel lucky. I haven’t felt this way since my dad died.

When Father Enzo gets to our vows, I know I’m ready to marry Killian. I’m ready to no longer be the baby of the family but a young woman on my own journey.

“Do you, Killian Brennan, take Mia Moretti to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Killian looks straight into my eyes as he answers. “I do.”

I suck in a quick breath. This is it. I’m going to be married. I’ll be on my way to a happily ever after of my own. Killian winks at me.

“And do you, Mia Moretti, take Killian Brennan to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do,” I say without hesitation. I know in my gut this is right.

Father Enzo smiles, closing his bible. “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Killian does just that.

My family cheers us on. Even Lillian claps. Erin can only smile, but I see the warmth in her eyes when Killian and I pull back.

A nurse walks into the room at that moment. “Wow. We have a party going on in here.”

“My son just got married,” Erin says.

“Congratulations,” the nurse says, walking over to inspect Erin’s IV.

“You did it,” Emilia says, coming over and hugging me. “Our baby sister, finally married.”

“Aren’t I the baby?” Lucia asks.

“Mia was the OG baby,” Gemma says. “And she never let us forget that.” Everyone laughs at that.

“That was wonderful,” Lillian says.

Gemma looks at the old woman. “Who are you?”

“An unexpected guest,” I tell them. “I ran into Lillian in the hallway, and she wanted to join us.”

“Huh.” Gemma shrugs. “Welcome to the family, Lillian. We’re a bunch of crazy people, for the record.”

Emilia gently slaps Gemma on the arm. “No, we’re not. Gemma is just talking nonsense.”

Lilian smiles and claps her hands again. “I just love weddings.”

“So, do I,” my mom says. She turns to Killian and holds her hand out to him. “Well, you finally married my daughter.”

Killian shakes her hand. “I know you still don’t approve.”

“So, win me over,” she says. “And we won’t have a problem.” She walks over to Erin. “Mother to mother, tell me the truth. What’s your son really like?”

Erin gazes at Killian with so much love in her eyes, it steals my breath away. “He’s the best son. He helped me through a tough time when I lost my other son. Your daughter is lucky. Trust me. Killian will treat her right.”

My mom’s eyes get misty. “I didn’t know you lost a son.”

“Years ago, but it hurts every day.”

“I can only imagine. When I lost my husband, I was a mess. I can’t imagine losing any of my children.”

Erin grabs my mom’s hand. “And I hope you never have to.”

“Wow, our moms are getting along,” Killian murmurs to me.

“I know. That’s a good sign.”

“Maybe I underestimated your mom.”

I shake my head. “No. She’s easy to underestimate. But my mom has layers. She just doesn’t always show them to people.”

“So,” Gemma says, drawing everyone’s eyes to hers. “What are we gonna do about food?”

A FEW MINUTES LATER, my entire family is in the hospital’s cafeteria. Erin remained in her room to rest. The wedding took a lot out of her.

“This is surprisingly good,” my mom admits about the meatloaf. “But nowhere good as mine.”

“Of course not,” Emilia says, flashing me a smile. “So, Mia, how does it feel to be married?”

“It feels ... good. I feel special.” As I take a bite of my mashed potatoes, Killian gives me a smile over his own plate of food.

“I’m glad,” Emilia says. “You deserve it. You know, you were always the one I worried about the most.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you were the youngest. You were so vulnerable when Dad died. I always hoped you’d be ok. I’m glad you have Killian now.”

“Hey, Lucia,” Gemma says, nudging our baby sister, “now you can’t pick on Mia because she’ll be moving in with Killian.”

Lucia pouts. “I know. There goes my fun.”

That makes everyone laugh, including me. I never knew a wedding at a hospital could be so much fun, but sitting around the table with my family, I’m realizing it was never about a dream wedding. It was never about the venue or the cake or the flowers. It was about my family. Having my family with me makes the world a whole lot brighter.

Sitting here, eating hospital meatloaf, surrounded by my family and with Killian at my side, I think I can be happy. For once, looking over at Cecilia, I don’t feel that burning resentment.

I can see a happy future for myself, and I don’t want to lose it.

I turn to Killian. “Thank you for convincing me to do this.”

“And thank you for agreeing to it. We made my mom’s day today. She’ll never forget this. And sometimes, happiness like this can help people last longer.”

“We gave your mom more time? No pressure or anything.”

He chuckles and nudges me with his shoulder. “I’m not sure. But I do know you made her happy. She wants to know

I'll be all right, and I think I will be."

I smile back at him. "I think I will, too."

CHAPTER 11

Mia

Killian brings me to his home after the hospital. We did technically get married, even though we'll still have a larger ceremony and reception later. It's such a strange thought that I'm married to Killian now. After the past year of feeling incredibly insecure, I'm married to a man who's kind and handsome.

It does feel like I got my fairytale wish.

So, why do I still feel so nervous, like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop?

"Ready?" Killian asks, pulling into the driveway.

"I can't believe you live in the suburbs. I pegged you for a city man."

"I like the quiet."

When I step out of the car, I see Killian's house fully. And it's ... beautiful. A two-story home with columns and red brick. Colorful flowers decorate the walkway, which leads up to a robin's egg blue front door.

It really is something out of a fairytale.

"I never expected for you to have this kind of house," I say as we walk to the front door.

"I'm a man of many layers."

"It's just ... you look like a man who loves grunge, but your house is literally the picture-perfect dream you see on TV."

Killian chuckles as he unlocks the door. “As I said, I have layers.”

Stepping inside, I’m greeted by an interior decor that is utterly ... cozy. Just pure coziness. Light tan walls and a couch you could sink into and dark wooden floors and a kitchen straight out of magazine.

“Definitely not what I expected.”

“Come on.” Killian nudges my arm. “Let’s have a drink to celebrate our new marriage status.”

We walk into the kitchen, where he grabs out a bottle of champagne. “I know our wedding today was unconventional, and I really appreciate you doing that for my mom, so I thought we could have at least one traditional thing today.” He pops the cork and pours us each a glass.

I take a sip, which helps to ease the nerves fluttering through my stomach. “This is great.”

We stay quiet for a minute or so while we drink. In that time, my nerves build again. I know what happens on a wedding night.

Killian and I have only shared a couple chaste kisses. Am I even ready to go further?

The more I look at Killian and take in his dark hair and striking eyes and tattoos, I think I could be ready to go further. He’s an exceptionally handsome man.

And I’ve never experienced what it feels like to be completely desired before. It would be nice.

On the other hand, what if Killian sees me naked and hates what he sees?

That would crush me.

Killian sets his glass down and wraps his arms around my waist. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I’m nervous,” I blurt out.

“You don’t have to be nervous. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“What if I want to do it, but I’m not sure if you’ll like me?”

Killian rubs his thumbs against my waist, making my skin tingle. “I like you a lot, Mia. I’m very attracted to you. There’s nothing you could do that would make me not like you.”

I let out a fast breath. “I don’t know. I’ve never had sex. What if I’m bad at it?”

He leans in close and presses his forehead to mine. “Then I’ll teach you.”

Standing so close to him, there’s one thing I know for sure I want to experience.

I kiss him before I lose my nerve.

Killian kisses me back straight away. Our lips meld together perfectly, so at least I know that’s one thing that works. This kiss is a lot more passionate than our previous ones. It’s like the dam holding us back has broken now that we’re married. We can just ... be together if we want. Which is an incredibly freeing thought.

I gasp when he presses me against the counter, his body flush against mine. Even through his tux, I can feel the ridges and grooves of his muscles. Feeling more confident, I slide my hands up to his shoulders and pull him even closer.

Killian’s hands slap against the counter as he catches his balance.

“Sorry,” I whisper, pulling back slightly.

“You don’t need to be sorry.” He kisses me again before I can even think.

When Killian’s hands slide lower to graze my butt, I feel a fire pass through me that is electric. I’ve felt turned on before, but nothing like *this*. This is ... what floating feels like. Being so high in the sky, you can’t even imagine coming down.

“I need more,” I admit, my breath coming out heavy.

Killian’s eyes have darkened, which only serves to make that fire within me grow. “Then let’s go upstairs.” He takes my

hand and leads us up the stairs and to his bedroom.

My nerves are now a full-grown swarm of butterflies in my stomach, mixing with the simmering fire. I've been wanting to feel more adult like my sisters. I am an adult. It's time I cross the barrier and try something I've never done before.

I don't know how all this will feel exactly, but I know I want to kiss Killian again and again for ever. And if I want to kiss him forever ... then I can't even imagine what sex is like with him.

He pulls me toward the bed. "We can stop whenever you want."

"I'm not sure I want to stop."

His smile lights up his face. "If you need to, let me know, But right now, all I can think about is kissing you again." He grabs my face and presses our lips together.

As we kiss, he lowers me onto the bed. My heart thuds so hard in my chest. It hurts, but I don't mind. The way Killian is kissing me ... he's making it clear he's into me. I tell myself to have no doubt, but there's still some. I'm not sure when that will go away.

Killian reaches behind me and unzips my dress. "Is this ok?"

I nod.

He lowers the bodice of my dress, exposing my lacy white bra. Somehow, his eyes darken even more. This is the first time in my life I've ever felt ... sexy.

The fire within my core burns brighter.

Killian finishes taking my entire dress off and carefully laying it on the floor. I try not to fidget as he looks me over.

"What about you?" I ask, nodding at his tux. "It would make me feel better to know I'm not the only one half naked here."

He chuckles as he takes off his jacket. “As you wish.” Soon, he’s standing before me in black briefs that don’t leave anything to the imagination. The bulge in his underwear speaks to his arousal.

“Do you really find me attractive?” I ask.

Killian leans over me, his glorious body so close to touching mine. “I really do.” He kisses me deeply again.

I clutch his shoulders for support. When Killian takes off my bra, I know this is it. The more we go, the less we’ll likely stop. I may be nervous as all get out, but I want to experience sex for the first time, and I know I want to do it with Killian.

He kisses down my chest as he tosses my bra away. I gasp when his lips brush against my nipple. My legs clench together to help cool the fire, but it’s a raging inferno inside me now. I don’t think anything can cool it.

Killian sits up as he touches the edge of my underwear. “Ready?”

“Yes,” I manage to say.

He slides my underwear off, and that’s it. He can see all of me. No more hiding. No more insecurities.

His fingers tingle as they touch my outer thighs. “Can I?”

“What if you don’t like the way I look down there?”

He gives me a peck on the lips. “Trust me. I’ll like it.”

With a deep breathe, I let him open my legs wider. Killian keeps his eyes locked with mine as he slides a finger between my legs, touching the area where I’m most achy. Where I’m on fire.

My hips buck up instinctually as he gently rubs me with his finger. I’ve explored a little in the past with my own hands, but this is nothing like that. My own touch felt like nothing. Killian’s touch feels like everything.

He rubs me faster, his thumb now brushing against my clit. The entire time, he never looks away from me. It’s powerful and all-consuming.

“Killian,” I gasp when his index finger brushes against my opening.

“Too much?” he asks.

“No. It’s just ...” I can’t even finish what I’m trying to say.

Killian smiles like he understands and rubs me harder.

Like an explosion happening within me, the tension building inside my core dissipates, and I’m free.

I hold my breath for a second because of how spectacular the feeling is. Once I fully let go, there’s no holding back.

Killian continues to touch me as my body comes down from its high. “Ready for more?”

“Was that an orgasm?” I’ve tried making myself come before, but it was always so lackluster. With Killian, it was like a bomb going off in the best way possible.

“It was.”

My eyes flick down to his waist where his erection has gotten even bigger. “I’m ready.”

He slides off his underwear, and I can finally see all of him. Standing before me naked, Killian is even more handsome.

He lowers himself on top of me, nestling his erection against my opening. We’re so close; we’re almost like one person.

Then Killian thrusts his hips forward and enters me.

There’s a slight twinge of pain, but it disappears within seconds. My body adjusts to his length being inside me, and on instinct, I wrap my legs around his waist.

Killian holds me close to him, kissing me gently as he lets my body grow accustomed to the new sensation.

“You can move,” I whisper against his lips, shifting my hips.

Killian lets out a little growl as he begins to move his body. He’s slow and gentle at first. Our eyes remain locked in

a heated gaze as Killian entwines our hands together. I've never felt more beautiful than now, given how he looks at me.

My body responds to his naturally. I didn't expect that. I let myself go with Killian. There's no point in holding back. He knows about my insecurities. I know about his mom and brother. There are no more secrets between us.

Killian grips my thighs together as he increases his pace. Our lips entwine in a kiss so passionate; it takes my breath away. Our hands cling together.

It's as close to perfection as I can imagine life getting.

And soon, it's over.

His erection hits a sweet spot within me, and that explosion from before hits me all over again. Killian's pace becomes frantic before he lets himself go, too.

I feel his release inside me, and I whisper his name as he whispers mine.

We stay like that for a long time, neither one of us wanting to let go.

AFTER MY EVENING WITH KILLIAN, I know I can't remain in the past forever. I've become a woman. I'm married. I'm not living with my mom any longer.

All this means I need to really consider making amends with Cecilia.

I can't hold onto my bitterness toward her for the rest of my life.

So, I call her. Killian is taking a shower, and I'm alone in the bedroom. My heart is pounding as I wait for her to pick up.

"Mia?" Her voice is crystal clear as she answers.

"We should meet up and talk," I blurt out before I lose my nerve.

"Ok. Where and when?"

"Today? At the café near mom's house?"

“Sounds great. But I thought you’d want to spend the day with Killian now that you’re married.”

I do. Of course, I’d much prefer to spend the day with him than my sister, but I need to do this. I can’t wait any longer.

“I just want to make amends,” I say.

“Well, then, I’ll see you there.”

“See you there.” I hang up before I say something I might regret.

After explaining to Killian I’m meeting my sister, I head to the café. He was understanding, which made my heart warm up to him even more.

I settle into a table at the crowded café and wait for Cecilia to arrive.

As I wait, my ears pick out more of the distinctive conversations happening around me. I hear one woman complain to her husband on the phone about how he never does the dishes. A mom and her young daughter discuss what tea options they want.

And a group of men, four of them, are talking about women.

“Did you see her? I can’t believe anyone would actually marry her.”

I frown as I listen to their conversation. How can men talk so casually about women in such a disgusting way?

“I know,” another man says. “Killian is going to regret his decision, trust me.”

I gasp. Are they ... talking about me?

I glance over at them, and they’re staring directly at me. They all look away when I catch them watching me.

“Yeah,” one of them says, even though I’m still staring. “No man wants used goods. After what her sister did, I wouldn’t trust Mia not to run away with my bodyguard.”

I spin back around in my seat, the tears in my eyes threatening to fall.

I don't even know these men, but they know me. Clearly, they're Mafia men. And they know what Cecilia did with Theo. Despite me being married to Killian, these men still think I'm disgusting. They still think they can talk about me.

Which means ... my marriage to Killian hasn't changed anything. Men still find me repulsive. How long before Killian finds me that way, too?

I don't wait for Cecilia.

I practically run out of the café, hearing the rude men laughing as I go.

CHAPTER 12

Killian

I meet up with Jimmy, my new second-in-command, at one of the bars I own. He's seated near the back when I walk in.

Leading up to the wedding, I slacked on my duties as future boss. My main goal is to take down Patrick. Now that things are better between Mia and, and there's hope there, I can focus on my other duties.

Jimmy looks twitchy as I sit down across from him. His leg is jiggling, and his fingers won't stop tapping the table.

"What's going on?" I ask. "Is there a problem with the money?" I've been having Jimmy collect money from some of the business that owe me. First step in taking over—I need money behind me to have even an ounce of power to take down Patrick.

"No," he says too quickly.

"Jimmy," I say in a warning tone.

"Ok, fine." He rakes his hands through his hair. "I went to collect the money from Joe's, but he didn't have it." Joe is one of the business owners in the neighborhood who also owns his own bar. I've been getting money from him for the past few months now.

"Why? Joe and I have a deal. He gives me money, and I give him protection."

"I know, but ... Joe told me he didn't want to work with you anymore."

I tense. “What?”

“He’d rather work with ... Patrick,” he whispers.

“What?” My hands slam down onto the table. “No, that won’t work for me. You need to go back to Joe and talk to him about this.”

“Ok, ok. I will. Sorry, Killian. It’s just ...”

“Just what?”

Jimmy blows out a rough breath. “It’s just that Patrick has a lot more influence than you. I think he’s getting to your contacts and trying to sway them to his side.”

“Dammit.” I run my hand over my face. “Dammit.” I look at Jimmy more closely. “You seem awfully afraid today, Jimmy. It wouldn’t have to do with Patrick, would it?”

“What do you mean?” he squeaks.

“I mean, did Patrick try to get to you, too? Are you working for him?”

“Of course not! I’m tired of Patrick. He’s too stuck in his ways. I was just nervous about how you’d take the news. That’s all.”

I stare at him for a moment. “Fine. I believe you. But if you double-cross me, Jimmy, you won’t like the outcome.”

“We need you here, boss. You’ve been too distracted lately.”

“I’ve been busy getting married,” I tell him.

“Still. We need you present. If you ever want to take down Patrick, you need to commit more.”

I stand before he can scold me anymore. “I’m busy with my marriage. My mom is sick. I have a lot on my mind right now. But don’t worry. I’ll take Patrick down. Have faith in me.”

Jimmy’s nod is like a little squirrel—fast and nervous. “I do.”

“Good. Get me that money from Joe. I don’t care how you get it.” With those words, I leave the bar behind me.

I MEET up with Antonio at one of the bars *he* owns. All this damn bar business is hard to keep track of sometimes.

“So, how’s everything going?” he asks once we’re seated at a back table.

“With?”

“Well, I was asking about Mia, but you look like you have other things on your mind.”

I sigh as I take a sip of my beer. “Who knew trying to lead would be this hard.”

Antonio snorts. “Tell me about it. I almost ruined my relationship with Cecilia because I was trying to force her to marry a man in his seventies. All because I was thinking about how to be the best boss.”

“Taking Patrick down won’t be easy, will it?”

“It took me five years to take Franco down. You’ve only been at this for a year now. Give yourself time. Focus on making Mia happy. Trust me on that. Happy wife, happy life.”

“Is that how it is with you and Nina?” I ask, settling back in my seat. “Make her happy?”

“Of course. Nina means everything to me. And you know, I almost lost her, too.”

I do remember. A year ago, when Antonio was still in hiding, Nina was being forced to kill him by her father. When Antonio found out, he was so angry with her. I thought that was it for their marriage, but they worked through it, and now, I’ve never seen a couple more in love.

“So,” Antonio says, “how are things going with Mia? Newlywed bliss and all that.”

“Seeing as we just got married yesterday, it’s still new. I should hope it’s still going well. Otherwise, I’m fucked.”

That makes Antonio chuckle. “If you need advice on how to manage a marriage and manage men who think they know better than you, then this is it: Focus on the people who mean the most to you. I didn’t do that, and I almost lost my wife, my sister, and my father’s legacy. But when I focused on the people who matter, everything fell into place. They gave me the strength to succeed.” He shrugs. “Just something to think about.”

“I care for Mia. I want to do right by her. I can tell she still has a lot of insecurities, but I hope we can work through them. And thanks.” I clink my beer with his. “For letting me marry her.”

“Hey, I wasn’t going to make the same mistake I did with Cecilia. I figured, if you and Mia wanted to marry, I was all for it. Still am. I like knowing my good friend is now a part of the family.”

“Here’s hoping everything works out.”

Antonio smiles. “I can cheers to that.”

WHEN I GET HOME, I find Mia crying.

My chest immediately constricts at the sight. “Mia?” I rush over to where she sits on the couch. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“I can’t do anything right,” she says through her tears. “I’m so ugly, Killian. I don’t understand why you’re even into me.”

I sit there dumbfounded for a few seconds. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m ugly,” she cries. “No man would want me. Why would they? Not when they could have had one of my more beautiful sisters. What do I have to offer?”

“Mia, where is this coming from? I thought we parted at a good place this morning. I mean ... after what we shared last night ... you know I’m attracted to you.”

“How? How can you be?” She wipes at her tears, her face red and puffy. “How, Killian?”

“I wouldn’t have had sex with you if I wasn’t attracted to you, Mia. Simple as that. I married you because I like you. Yes, it offers me the chance to make an even stronger alliance with your brother. But I married you for *you*. I’m surprised you can’t see that by now.”

“It’s just hard when—” She stops suddenly.

“What? Mia, talk to me.”

“There were these men at the café today,” she says, looking away from me.

Panic seizes my heart. “What happened?”

“They clearly knew who I was. They were Mafia men, but I didn’t know them. And they were talking about me like I wasn’t even there; though they were doing it deliberately because I *was* sitting there.”

I pull her into a hug. “Mia, what did they say?”

“I don’t want to say,” she mumbles into my shirt.

“Tell me. I need to know.”

She sighs. “They ... they said you’ll regret marrying me. That they couldn’t understand why you would want a girl who’s used goods. They implied I was sleeping around with every man who crossed my path.”

I hold her tighter. “Oh, Mia. I’m so sorry you had to go through that. If you want, I can find those men and tell them off?”

“You would do that?” She lifts her head up to look at me. “You’d make them feel bad?”

“Oh, I’d do more than make them feel bad. I’d make sure they didn’t say shit like that again to any woman ever again.”

She stares into my eyes. “You really do care for me?”

“I do.” I wipe the last of her tears away. “Never doubt that. I understand why you did after hearing what those men said,

but you don't need to doubt me, Mia. I want to be married to you. I want to kiss you." Leaning down, I do just that. She smiles against my lips. "I want to kiss down your neck." My lips make a pattern on the skin of her neck. "I want to kiss all the way down your body. Do you want me to show you?"

"Ok," she gasps as I trail my lips farther down.

I lean Mia back on the couch and take off her pants. "Do you trust me?"

"I do," she says like she wasn't aware of that fact until just this moment.

"Then trust me to show you that you never need to feel ugly around me." I slip her panties off and spread her legs wide. Mia's breath is shaky. I slide my fingers through her folds, warming her up.

It doesn't take long before my fingers are coated in her arousal.

I kneel on the ground, so I'm eye-level to her pussy. "You're fucking beautiful, Mia," I tell her.

She blushes. It's obvious even from where I sit.

"Just feel," I say. "Just close your eyes and feel. Let me make you feel beautiful."

Mia does what I tell her after taking a deep breath. Once her eyes are shut, I lean in and use my tongue to lick her nub. She gasps as her hips buck up. I place my arm across her waist and hold her in place.

Then, I start to show her just how beautiful I find her.

I take my time, using my tongue to swipe over her clit and folds. Mia's breath becomes more and more ragged as I continue. She's panting.

I grip my hands into her thighs as I continue to go down on her. I need her to feel good. I need her to know I want to be with her.

And once I'm done with making Mia feel great, I'm going to find the men who made her feel ugly and hurt them. I'm

tired of Mia feeling insecure because of how others make her feel. She has a right to feel beautiful.

Mia begins rolling her hips around as I kiss over her folds. The way her breath is hitching, I know that means she's getting close.

I increase my pace and spend more time on her clit, licking it, getting her ready to come.

As if on cue, Mia let's go.

"Killian," she gasps out as her orgasm washes over her. I continue kissing her pussy as she rides it out.

Once she's calmed down, I sit back on my heels. "Feel better yet?"

She stares at me for a moment before laughing. "I definitely do."

"Good. Because I want you to feel beautiful."

She nods at my waist. "Do you need help with that?"

Within minutes, I have my pants down and am leaning over Mia on the couch. "Are you ready?" I ask her.

"I want you to make me feel special again. I need it right now."

I lower myself on top of her before thrusting my hips forward and entering her in one smooth motion.

A long moan escapes me as I begin to fuck her. Mia wraps her legs around my waist, drawing me in deeper. Her inner walls clench down on my cock.

"God, Mia." I thrust into her. "You are special. Trust me."

She clings to me with a desperation she didn't have before when we had sex for the first time. I hold her tightly to me, wanting her to know she never needs to feel ugly again. Not with me.

Once we find our rhythm, our bodies move as one.

I sit up back slightly and grip her thighs, thrusting into her roughly. Mia takes it, though. She meets my gaze and holds it

as we fuck.

“Killian,” she gasps.

I stare so deeply into her eyes, infusing all my emotion into her. “God, you feel so good around me.”

I fuck her harder, and Mia moans as our pace increases.

“Killian!” she cries out, clutching me, her body shuddering.

I groan as my own orgasm hits me. Together, we cling to one another as we ride the wave of our pleasure.

I don't immediately move out of her, even after my cock has gone soft. I spend time kissing her. Gently but passionately.

“Feeling ugly still?” I ask.

She smiles ruefully. “No. You manage to make me feel beautiful. Thank you for that.”

“Good. Now, give me a few minutes, and I'll be ready for round two.”

The pleasant sound of her laughter fills me with happiness.

CHAPTER 13

Killian

Mia and I go to the same café the following day in the hopes of finding the men who talked to her as they did.

“That’s them,” she says, pointing out a group of men sitting the corner. “I don’t think I could forget their faces.”

“All right. You stay here. I’m going to confront them.” I walk over to the group of men. They look up with curious expressions.

“How are you guys doing today?” I ask them. They seem vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it.

“Fine,” one of them says.

Another one snorts, and then all four men are laughing like little schoolboys. Already, I’m annoyed.

“I’m Killian. You may have heard of me.”

One of the guy’s eyes widen. “Oh, uh, hi. I’m John.”

“Henry.”

“Sam.”

“Liam.”

I give them all nods. “Nice to meet you, guys.” I place my hands on the table. “Now, I’ve heard you boys have been going around talking about my wife.”

“No,” John immediately says. “We don’t know your wife.”

“My wife, Mia Moretti? You’ve never heard of her?”

“We swear, man,” Henry says. “We don’t know your wife.”

“Huh. Well, ok, then. My apologies.” I start to walk away when I turn back to the table. “You know what? I forgot to say something.” I lean in close to John, who seems like the leader of this little group. “If you, any of you, so much as mention my wife’s name on your lips again, you’re not going to like the outcome. Trust me.”

John chuckles, but it’s strained. “You don’t need to worry, man. We don’t know your wife. How can we talk about her if we don’t know her?”

I give John my most menacing glare, which has been known to scare the shit out of other men. He shifts in his seat. Finally, I pull back. “Well, just remember that. Have a nice day.” I walk back to Mia, and we head outside.

“They said they didn’t know you,” I tell her.

“They’re lying. I recognized them.”

“I know. And I believe you. But there’s not much more I can do at the moment. They did look oddly familiar, but I can’t place it. It’s like I know them from somewhere. They’re definitely Mafia men, though. From the way they’re dressed and their fucking attitude. I would have punched them if I weren’t in a crowded café.”

Mia places her hand on my cheek. “I still appreciate you standing up for me. That means a lot.”

“Let’s head back home.” I slide my arms around her waist. “I’m ready to spend more time with my wife.”

She laughs, her cheeks turning pink. “I think I’d like to spend more time with my husband.”

On the drive back to my house, I notice a car following us. I keep my eyes on it for a while. When I take the turn close to my house, the car keeps pace with me.

“Mia,” I say. “Not to scare you, but there’s a car following us. I think it’s the men from the café.”

“How do you know?” She turns to look.

“Because I can see the driver, and it looks like one of them.”

“What are we going to do? Why are they following us?”

“Let’s just get home. We’ll get inside. We’ll be safe.”

I pull into the driveway when I reach my house. “Ok. Let’s go. And hurry.”

Mia quickly unbuckles her seatbelt and heads for the house. The car pulls into the driveway behind us, and the four men get out.

“Mia, get into the house.” I nudge her to hurry up.

“Not so fast,” John says, pulling out a gun.

I freeze. Mia yelps and clings to me.

“What do you want?” I ask, holding my hands up.

“We didn’t like the way you talked to us,” Sam says, sauntering closer to us.

“Yeah. It was disrespectful,” Liam says.

Henry walks around on the other side of us. “You treated us like we’re boys. But we’re men. And we don’t take orders from you.”

“If we,” John says, waving his gun between his friends and himself, “want to talk about your wife, we have the right to.”

“And we want to,” Henry adds. “We don’t know why you’re protecting her. She’s probably slept with half the staff of her household.”

“You guys are playing a dangerous game,” I warn them, keeping my hands up. Mia burrows closer to me. “You don’t want to do this.”

“No, we do,” John says, walking closer. “And we’re going to have fun with your wife while we do it.”

Sam grabs Mia and wrenches her away from me. Her scream rips straight through my heart.

“Let her go!” I shout. Liam tries coming up from me from behind, but I kick him in the shin, making him fall to the

ground. Using my knee, I bash his face in. He crumples to the ground, passed out.

“No!” Mia screams as Sam and Henry tear her shirt down.

I run for them, but John stops me when he places his gun against my temple.

“You don’t want to do that, friend,” he says. “We’re going to have fun with your wife. And you’re going to learn a lesson. You don’t mess with the Moretti Mafia.”

I freeze. The Moretti Mafia? “Do you ... do you work for Antonio?”

John puffs his chest out. “We do.”

“You’re new, then. That’s why you looked familiar, but I couldn’t place you.”

“We’re his men now. You no longer work with him. You’re on your own now.”

Mia struggles as the men try to take her jeans off. My blood is boiling, and I’m starting to see red.

“What do you think Antonio will think when he finds out his own men assaulted his sister? He’s going to kill all of you.”

“He won’t find out. You’ll be dead.”

I have to act fast. I have a gun in the back of my jeans. I just need to get to it, but John’s gun is pressed against my temple. But the longer I wait, the more at-risk Mia is. The utter terror in her eyes kills me.

“You’ll have to stop me first,” I growl. I smack John’s wrist, and the gun falls out of his hand. I catch it. His eyes widen, and he starts to run away, but I shoot him in the head. The other two look over.

Before they can even move, I kill both of them. Then I shoot Liam, who’s still passed out on the ground. Four bodies all with bullet holes in their heads in my driveway.

Mia crumples to the ground.

I pick her up and take her inside. “You’re safe now. But I need to go deal with the bodies.” I hurry back outside and drag them around to my backyard before anyone can see them. Then I call Jimmy to come clean up the bodies for me.

I go back inside to Mia, who’s curled into a ball on the floor of the living room. All the progress we made and for nothing. Those men tried to assault her. There’s no way this doesn’t affect her.

I crouch beside her, and Mia curls herself into my arms. I hold her while she cries, wondering what I’m going to do next.

I just killed Antonio’s men. That goes against Mafia code. Antonio and I have an alliance, bound through marriage. He won’t take kindly to me killing his men. I can only hope when he finds out what they tried to do to Mia, he won’t be mad at me.

The one thing I am certain of—I’m not letting Mia go. Not once tonight. I’m going to make sure she’s safe, even if it kills me.

I GOT the news my brother died when my mom took me to the hospital to see him.

I stayed at the house with Aunt Sharon for hours until my mom came for me. Finn was still alive at that time but in critical condition. He hit his head so hard; he was in a coma.

When I got to the hospital and saw him lying in the bed, so tiny and alone, I broke down crying. My mom held me the entire time.

“I did this to him,” I whispered.

“What do you mean?” Mom asked.

“I told him not to trip and fall and get hurt. I said if he didn’t do that, he’d be fine. He could give his presentation.”

“Oh, honey. This isn’t your fault.”

But how could it not be? How could I not be at fault for my brother getting hurt? I was supposed to protect him, and I

didn't.

My mom and I stayed by Finn's beside until he died. It wasn't peaceful. It was violent.

Finn started shaking and convulsing. The doctor ran in with a couple of nurses. Then I heard the sound that would haunt me for a long time after—the lone, low single sound of Finn's heart monitor as it stopped beating.

The doctors tried reviving him, but it was too late.

My brother was dead.

All because I couldn't protect him as an older brother should. Once the shock wore off that my brother was gone, once the funeral process was over, once my grief had eased somewhat, I made a vow.

I promised I'd do everything in my power to protect the ones I love.

It seems I'm still doing that. And I'm going to honor it.

I'm going to protect Mia from anything, no matter how big or how small. I'm going to keep my promise.

I'm going to keep her safe.

CHAPTER 14

Mia

“**W**hat are we going to do?” I ask Killian over the kitchen table the next day. The bodies of the men who attacked us have already been taken away. “Those were Antonio’s men.”

“I know,” Killian sighs, sighing deeply. “They must have been new. They aren’t in his inner circle. But still, Antonio won’t be happy I killed some of his men. That’s an act of war.”

“But you won’t go to war with him, right? He won’t go to war with you? You’re friends.”

“We are,” he agrees. “But Antonio still won’t be happy about this. This could jeopardize our alliance. It could put you at odds with your brother. With your family.” He grabs my hand. “And I won’t let you get hurt any more than you’ve already been.”

I let out a slow breath. “I know you’ll protect me, Killian. You killed those men for me. To save me. I just hope Antonio sees it like that.”

Yesterday, when those men attacked me, I thought that was it. That they’d rape me, then kill me.

But Killian saved me.

He showed me how much he cares for me in the little time we’ve known each other. Killian makes me believe there are good people in this world. He makes me believe I’m deserving of love.

“We need to have Antonio come over,” Killian explains. “That way, he’ll be alone and more likely to hear us out.”

“I can call him,” I offer. “He might find it less suspicious if I do.”

Killian nods.

With a deep breath, I dial Antonio’s number. He picks up after a couple of rings.

“Mia? What’s going on?”

My heart constricts. “Why would you think there’s something wrong? Can’t a sister see her older brother?”

Antonio pauses. “She can. You just don’t normally call me for anything.”

“Killian and I would like to invite you over today. For ... lunch.” I shrug when I look at Killian. “Does that sound good?”

“I can do lunch,” Antonio says. “I’ll bring Nina with me.”

“Great. See you, then.” I hang up before I lose my nerve. “We can tell him in a couple of hours.”

Killian runs a hand down his face. “I just hope this doesn’t end in chaos.”

ANTONIO ARRIVES for lunch with Nina in tow. They look like the beautiful power couple they are as they stride into the house.

We settle down at the table. Killian bought some sandwiches from the local deli and gives one each to Antonio and Nina.

“It’s nice to see you two looking happy,” Nina says, taking a dainty bite of her sandwich.

Killian and I exchange a look.

“We are,” Killian says, answering Nina’s unspoken question,

“Good,” Antonio replies. “I want my sister and friend to be happy. I’m tired of family drama, let me tell you.”

I know he means everything that happened with Cecilia a year ago.

We eat in silence for a while. Killian and I keep sneaking glances at each other, both of us working up the courage to tell Antonio what happened.

Killian finally clears his throat. “There’s something I need to tell you, Antonio.”

My brother looks over at my husband. “Tell me what?”

“Yesterday, a group of men followed us home and attacked us,” Killian explains.

Nina gasps. “That’s terrible. Are you guys all right?”

“We’re fine,” I say. “I mean, as fine as we can be.”

“Who were these men?” Antonio asks.

“I’m getting to that,” Killian says. “So, the men tried ... assaulting Mia.”

Antonio tenses, his eyes flashing at he looks at me. “Are you ok? Truly?”

“Killian saved me,” I whisper, taking a small bite of my sandwich for something to do.

“One of the men,” Killian continues, “held a gun to my head. But I managed to grab it, and I killed him with it. Then I killed the other three. I had one of my guys handle the bodies.”

Antonio keeps his eyes on me. “Are you ok? Really, Mia.”

“I’ll be fine, Antonio. Killian really did save me.”

“But there’s something else,” Killian says, drawing Antonio’s attention to him.

“What?”

A low sigh escapes Killian’s mouth. “They were your men, Antonio.”

My brother tenses all over again. It's like watching water freeze into ice. "They were *my* men?"

Nina looks uncomfortably between all of us. "How is that possible?"

"I didn't know they were your men until they started attacking us," Killian says. "But by then, I needed to stop them. You can understand that, can't you, Antonio? I had to save Mia. You would do the same."

"Of course, I'd do the same," Antonio replies in a chilling voice. "But those were my men you killed, and you weren't supposed to do that."

Killian sits up straighter in his seat. "I understand. And I'll face any punishment. But I had to save Mia."

"What do you think my other men will think about me when they find out any of my friends can just kill them and not face consequences? Killian, you fucked up."

"I know I did. Let me make it up to you."

"How?" Antonio stands up from his chair in a rush of anger.

"Antonio," Nina says in a calming voice.

"No," he growls. "Killian needs to answer for what he's done." His eyes turn to me. "And you, Mia. It seems no matter where you go, a bad reputation follows you."

I gasp. "But this ..."

"Don't blame Mia," Killian says, standing up too. "You know this isn't her fault."

"Oh, I know. But that doesn't change the fact this will only hurt Mia more. If word gets out her husband killed my men, then the rumors and speculation when it comes to my sister will be catastrophic. I can't have that."

"What are you going to do to Killian?" I ask.

"I haven't decided yet. But for now, you two should remain here. I don't want word of this spreading. I'll handle it." Antonio storms out of the room.

Nina gets up slowly. “Uh, thanks for lunch.” She hurries after Antonio.

Killian slumps in his seat. “That went about as well as I expected.”

I hold his hand. “We’ll get through this. Together.”

All he can do is smile tiredly back.

IT ONLY TAKES a couple of hours before my mom comes banging on our door for answers.

“What happened?” she asks as we let her in. “Antonio told me something went wrong but wouldn’t give me the details.”

“This can’t get out,” Killian says.

My mom huffs. “What? You think I can’t keep a secret? I’ve kept more secrets than you can possibly imagine.”

I step forward and tell her everything, from the men to the assault to Killian killing them.

Mom looks at me in stunned silence. “Are you ok?” she asks as she pulls me into a hug.

“I’ll be fine, Mom. But we don’t know what Antonio is going to do.”

“What we should do.” Mom turns to Killian. “You’ve put my daughter in danger. You’ll have ruined her reputation even more if these murders are linked to you.”

“I saved Mia,” Killian reminds her. “How am I the bad guy here? You’re so intent on hating me, Giulia, you’re not seeing what’s right in front of your face.”

“And what’s that?”

“That I care deeply for Mia.”

Mom’s eyes widen a fraction before her typical disapproving look settles on her face. “You still put her at risk. I can’t forgive that.”

“Mom,” I call out as she leaves the house.

“Mia, if you want to come back home with me, do so now,” she says, standing in the driveway.

I hesitate. I don’t want my mom to hate me, but I can’t leave Killian.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, standing beside Killian. “This is my place now.”

Mom sniffs “So be it. But I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you’re ok. I won’t let Killian ruin you.” She gets into her car, and her driver starts the car, taking her back home.

I turn to Killian and rest my head on his chest. “This is a mess, isn’t it?”

He just holds me closer.

THE DAY of my dad’s funeral, I remember standing in my room in my black dress, trying to clip a bracelet around my wrist, and it just wasn’t working. I was only eight. The emotion of knowing my dad was gone was too much.

I screamed and threw the bracelet on the ground. It was made of beads, and they shattered upon impact.

My mom came running into the room. “What happened?”

I took one look at her and started crying. Mom’s eyes softened as she pulled me into a hug.

“I can’t do this,” I whispered. “I can’t look at him.” We were having an open casket ceremony for him.

“You can, and you will,” Mom said. “You’ll have me. And you’ll have your siblings you can lean on.”

I believed her.

When we got to the church and my siblings and I had to look down at our dead father, I felt more scared than I ever had been before. Emilia helped take care of me as Mom cried, inconsolable.

Through the ceremony and reception, I was surrounded by my family. Even though I'd just lost my father, I felt love. I felt comfort. I felt support.

But now, seeing my mom's car drive away and knowing how upset Antonio is, I don't feel like I have my family.

The only person I have now is Killian.

And I can only hope he will be enough.

CHAPTER 15

Mia

I try to talk sense into my mom by going over to her house the next day.

“I can’t believe Killian put you in this position,” she says the moment she opens the door and lets me inside.

“What position is that, Mom?”

“He’s put you in danger! By killing Antonio’s men, he’s at odds with Antonio, which only hurts your reputation even more. If this gets out, people will talk. Others will think they can do to you what those men did.”

I grab her arms to get her to stop pacing the room. “Mom. Killian saved me. If this gets out, it will only serve as a warning to other men. You don’t mess with Killian Brennan. Hopefully, it makes other men back off when it comes to me.”

She sighs. “You know that’s not how this works, Mia. Not in our world. In our world, men will find every excuse to blame women. I know that. I’ve faced that myself. That’s why the last thing I want is news about who the twins’ real father is coming out. Men would find a way to blame me, and it would hurt Lucia and Luca’s reputation. I’m worried Killian is only hurting your reputation more.”

“How? Men already think I’m some harlot because of what Cecilia did. Now, they’ll just think I’m a harlot with a murderous husband.”

To Mom’s credit, she smiles a little at that. “I just don’t like any of this.”

“But what other choice do we have? You didn’t want Killian for me, but he’s proven to be a good husband. Mom, he saved me from those men. Can’t you understand that?”

“I do!” she snaps. “I do understand. I’m just so protective over you. You were my baby for the longest time. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

I pull her into a hug. “And I appreciate that. But Killian can protect me now. You’ve done your job. You protected me from Uncle Franco. You protected all of us. You don’t have to worry, Mom. Killian will handle this. Everything will be all right.”

“How are you so calm? Last I knew, you were upset.”

“I’ve been upset for a long time. But Killian has shown me he’d do anything to make sure I’m ok. That changes a person. I’m starting to learn I don’t have to compare myself to my sisters. I can stand beside Killian because he’ll ensure my safety.”

Mom’s eyes water. “Oh, honey. I like knowing you have a husband who’s there for you. Your father was there for me through so much. I only wanted that for you.”

“So, why are you fighting Killian so much?”

“Because I don’t think I was ready to lose you,” she admits. “I’m still not. But I have to accept it, sooner or later.”

“Hopefully sooner rather than later.”

She huffs as she pulls me into another hug. “I’ll try to get there. But give me time. I’ll talk to Antonio, too, make sure he’s looking out for you as well. I hate knowing those were Antonio’s men who did that to you. I just want you safe.”

“Killian will make sure of that,” I say, giving her a squeeze.

She tightens her hold on me.

Lucia comes walking into the room. “What’s going on? I heard you got into trouble Mia. Not surprising.”

I let go of my mom and turn to my sister. “You know, Lucia, there will come a day you’ll regret acting like such a brat. But I still love you. I need you to know that.”

Lucia’s jaw drops. “Um ... whatever.”

I walk over and hug her. She tries fighting it but soon gives in. I may be annoyed with my baby sister, but I’m tired of all this family drama. I need to learn to forgive her for her attitude. If I can do that, it means I’ll be on my way to forgiving Cecilia.

At this moment, things are looking up. My mom, I can tell, isn’t fully sold on Killian yet, but I can only hope in time, she will be. Lucia isn’t happy with the hug, but I know sometimes you need something you weren’t always aware you needed. I have my family with me.

As for me, I’ll need all the help I can get through this undoubtably upcoming hard time.

AFTER MY TALK with my mom, I decide to visit Erin in the hospital. I haven’t seen her since the wedding. It’s funny—I haven’t even thought about my dream wedding. The original date is still a couple of weeks out, but Killian and I got married early so Erin could see it. I’ve been learning there’s more to life than showing off at some big party. It was never a party I needed. It was someone who was there for me when I couldn’t always be myself.

And that’s been Killian.

Even though things are still new between us, things feel natural with Killian. He makes me feel special. He makes me feel safe.

I never thought I’d have that, not after Cecilia ran off with Theo, leaving me to pick up the pieces. I thought no man would want me, but Killian has shown me otherwise. Our wedding at the hospital, while not what I dreamed about, was something special and beautiful.

I find Erin in her bed, looking weaker and frailer than last time.

“Mia,” she says, smiling wide, despite her condition. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Hi, Erin. I wanted to check on you. See how you’re doing.”

“Not great, I’ll admit.” Her voice is strained, barely above a whisper. “My doctor tells me things have taken a hard turn since the wedding. I won’t be around much longer.”

“Don’t say that.” I grab her hand. It’s so tiny and brittle. “I’ve barely gotten to know you. You’ll have more time.”

“Oh, Mia. You’re sweet. I wish I could have gotten to know you better, too. But you have my son, and we’re a lot alike. Make sure he’s taken care of just like I know he’ll take care of you.”

The sting of tears in my eyes surprises me. “He’s taking care of me, don’t worry. I’ll make sure I do the same for him.”

“Good. I have one question. Do you love him?”

I almost jerk back. Do I love Killian? Things are still new between us. You can’t love someone you’ve only known for a couple of weeks.

But when I think about Killian, I think about how strong he is. How he’s never wavered when it comes to us. Sure, we disagreed for a moment about our wedding, but we quickly resolved the issue. Other than that, we’ve been fairly rock solid. I know it’s because Killian is so sure of himself. He’s so sure of me.

And it’s making me believe I don’t have to be so insecure anymore. I’m allowed to find my confidence again. I can love myself again.

So, do I love him? I think I do. But I’m scared of telling him in case he doesn’t say it back. He might care for me, but that doesn’t mean he loves me.

I couldn’t handle more rejection, especially from him.

I can only tell him how I really feel until I feel a lot more confident in myself. I'm starting to get there, but there's still more work for me to do.

Erin looks up at me expectantly, still waiting for an answer. I decide to tell her the truth.

"I think I do love him, but please, don't tell him. I need to do that."

"I understand," she says. "And thank you. I can rest knowing he's loved."

Her breath becomes shallower.

"Erin?"

Her eyes roll back into her head, and she slumps against the bed. The monitors she's hooked up to start going wild.

I run out into the hall. "We need help!"

A couple of nurses run into the room.

"You need to leave," one of them tells me.

"But—"

"Honey, leave. We got this."

The other nurse is starting chest compressions, which can only mean one thing.

I stumble out of the room. Is Erin really dying, right at this moment? And Killian isn't here to say goodbye?

I quickly call him. "Killian, it's your mom. You need to come now."

"I'll be there." He hangs up.

I wait in the hallway, wondering what's going on. This can't be the end, not when everything is just starting. It's not fair Erin won't get to see her son be happy. It's not fair my mom will be the only one left, and she actively hates Killian. I know she's trying, but I also know my mom. She can be stubborn. It's not easy to change her mind.

The nurses and doctors leave the room, shaking their heads. I gasp.

“What happened?”

The doctor, a young-looking man, pulls me to the side. “I’m sorry. She passed away. Her heart gave out.”

I can only gape at the doctor. “So, she’s dead?”

“She is. I’m sorry for your loss.” He pats my arm awkwardly. “You can go in and see her.” With that, he walks away.

I’m frozen. Stunned. I knew Erin was sick, but I never thought I’d be the one with her when she died.

Killian comes running down the hall toward me, startling me out of my stunned state. “What’s going on?” He rushes into the room. “What’s going on?”

I follow him into the room. “Killian—”

“What’s going on?” He looks between his mom on the bed and the remaining nurse in the room. “What?”

The nurse gives him an empathetic look. “I’m sorry for your loss, Killian. Your mom passed away.”

He stumbles back, clutching at his chest. “But ... but ...”

“I’ll give you two a minute,” the nurse says, leaving Killian and me alone in the room.

He walks over to his mom’s bed and slumps over it. “Mom?” His shoulders begin to shake. It takes me a second to realize he’s crying.

“Killian.” I place my hand on his shoulder, and he leans into my touch, which is encouraging. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“What happened?” he rasps.

“I don’t know the details. We were talking. Your mom and me. And then she just ...”

He nods as he stares down at her. “I knew this day was coming, but I was holding out hope for as long as possible.”

“I know. She was happy knowing we’re together. She looked happy, Killian. Know that.”

“I do.” He wipes at his eyes. “I do. She wanted to see me in love before she passed. She got to do that.”

My heart skips a beat. “Love?”

He turns to me, an intensity in his eyes I’ve never seen before. “Mia, you make me happy. Despite everything, I’m happy. But my mom—” He stops, catching his breath.

I pull him into a hug. “It’s ok. You don’t have to speak. I know this is tough for you.”

“First my brother. Now my mom.”

I hold him tighter. “I understand loss. The day my father died, I felt crushed under the weight of grief. I understand, Killian. I’m here for you.”

He clings to me tighter. “I know. I know.”

We hold each other until Killian is ready to say goodbye to his mom. He kisses her head before leaving. I hold his hand, silently giving him strength, as we leave the hospital and return home.

WHEN WE GET HOME, Killian surprises me by kissing me in the foyer. I don’t fight it, even when he pushes me up against the wall.

It isn’t until he starts kissing down my neck I say something. “Killian. Are you sure? You just lost your mom.”

“I’m sure. I need you, Mia. I don’t want to feel what I’m feeling right now. I want to forget for a few minutes. Help me forget.”

I’m not sure if that’s exactly healthy, but I don’t argue. I understand the need to forget the pain of losing your parent.

So, I nod and let Killian have his way with me.

I gasp as he lifts me. I wrap my legs around his waist. He presses my back into the wall. Our kiss is desperate, passionate, and full of things we don’t have to say.

I unbuckle his pants and pull out his still-growing erection.

He pushes my skirt up and pulls my panties down just enough for him to slide his length against my folds.

Our eyes lock in a heated gaze before he thrusts into me. I cling to him and let out a moan as our bodies begin to move. Killian isn't as gentle as he's been in the past. This time, there's a roughness there that can only come from emotional pain.

Killian grips my thighs so tight; I wonder if they'll bruise. I don't care, though. All I care about is making sure he's ok.

He thrusts his erection deeper into me. My inner walls clench around him, making him groan. I gasp as his pace picks up. It's rough, wild, and a little scary.

But despite that, I still trust Killian explicitly.

Our hips grind together. I clench my legs and bring him closer to me. Our heated breath mingles together as we kiss.

"Mia," Killian groans, shuddering as he comes.

That sends me over the edge, and my orgasm soon follows. When it does, I whisper his name.

Killian continues to hold me, even after our orgasms have passed. I hold him back, and together, we stay like that, comforting each other.

CHAPTER 16

Killian

My mother's body looks so frail in her coffin. The makeup on her face helps her look more alive, which is unnerving. I'm starting to regret having an open casket ceremony.

Mia stands beside me, offering me support. There's no one I'd rather be here with. Of all the people I know, she understands the best what it's like to lose a parent. Antonio does as well, but things are still little tense between us after I killed his men.

The people in attendance at the ceremony are some of my other men, including Jeremy, who's looking twitchy and nervous as usual.

I'm not expecting anyone else, so it surprises me when Mia's mom, Giulia, arrives at the ceremony. She sits quietly near Mia during the funeral.

When the priest asks anyone if they have a few words they'd like to say, I freeze. I want to sing the praises of my mother, but all I can think about is the day my brother died.

He had a closed casket because it was unbearable for my mom to see his lifeless body. Most of that day is a blur. I only remember my mom crying unconsolably and my body being filled with tension. My heart was heavy, and I never thought I'd get out from under the weight of it.

When Finn's coffin was lowered into the ground, I knew that was the last time I'd ever be close to my brother. He was

gone, all because of an accident. He tripped and hit his head. That was it.

I was frozen that day, too. Neither my mom nor I stood up to speak. Other family members did it for us.

My aunt Sharon, who attends my mom's funeral today, stands up to speak. I haven't seen her much over the years. Not since she took me home from school that day Finn died.

"Erin was a light that could never be put out," Sharon says. I don't listen to the rest. It won't be good enough.

When Sharon finishes, the priest offers the floor for anyone else to speak.

"Killian?" Mia asks me. "Do you want to say something?"

I'm still frozen. I can't even feel my fingers. My entire body feels suspended in another realm, and I can't reach it.

Mia stands up and approaches the microphone. "I didn't know Erin for long, but the little bit I did get to know her, she had a warmth about her that was undeniable."

Mia's words make me sit up straighter in my chair. I start to pay attention.

"Erin will live on in her son, Killian. He's the best man I've ever known. He's been strong for me, and so I'm going to be strong for him. Erin will be missed. She will be remembered. I can say that confidently."

Once Mia finishes, she sits back down beside me.

I can finally move again, and I take her hand to show her my thanks.

I want to speak for my mom. I couldn't for my brother's funeral, but I was just a kid back then. Now, I'm a man. I need to do this for her.

I get up and approach the microphone, my heart pounding as I go. "My mom—" I stop, my voice catching in my throat. The people in the crowd look at me with pity. The poor son who lost his mom.

“My mom,” I start again, “was a force to be reckoned with. She usually got what she wanted. And what she wanted most was to see me happy. And ...” My eyes find Mia’s. “And I’ve found that happiness in my life.” Mia gives me a genuine smile. “I’ll miss you, Mom. But just know I’m happy. I will be happy.” I hurry away from the microphone and back to my seat. Talking about my mom is too hard. One day, it will be easier, but today is not that day.

The funeral ends, and everyone gets up to go to the reception.

Before I can leave, though, Giulia approaches me. “Those were nice words, Killian.”

“Thanks, Giulia.” I’m wary. Giulia has never been nice to me before. Usually, it wouldn’t bother me, but today, I know I’d crack.

She sighs deeply. “Mia, I’d like to talk to Killian alone.”

Mia glances my way. I give her a nod, and she gives us space.

“What do you want to say to me?” I ask Giulia.

“I wanted to say ... I’m sorry.”

I blink. “You’re sorry?”

“I am.” She wrings the program in her hands. “I haven’t been kind to you. I know. I was stubborn. The truth is, I just wasn’t ready to say goodbye to Mia. But I know you’re a good man, Killian. I’ve seen it. The way you talked about your mom ... I can tell you loved her. You were a good son. You’re a good husband to Mia. I don’t like the mess you’re in, but I don’t blame you for saving me. I applaud you for that.”

“Thank you, Giulia.”

“You see,” she says, lowering her voice. “When Franco used to live with my family, he did unspeakable things to me.”

I tense, understanding what she means.

“I put up with it to protect the kids. It made my heart hard in some ways. But my love for my kids has never wavered.”

That's why I'm so protective of Mia. She was my baby before the twins came. But knowing you saved her from being assaulted—" She stops, her breath hitching. "Well, that means a lot. I had no one to save me. She's lucky to have you."

I stare at Giulia in awe. I never expected this from her, but learning these things about her, it all makes a lot more sense. I also feel like an ass for judging her.

"Mia is lucky to have you, too," I say. "Let's put everything behind us and start anew. I'd like to have a good relationship with my mother-in-law."

Giulia nods, smiling slightly. "That sounds good."

I open my arms to her. "How about a hug?"

"Now you're pushing it."

I chuckle. My first laugh since my mom died.

Giulia waves at Mia as she walks away. Mia joins my side. "How did that go?"

"It went ... surprisingly well. Your mom is a woman of many layers."

Mia slips her arms around me. "I just want everyone to get along. Which reminds me, I still need to make amends with Cecilia."

"You will. Time is too short to not get along with your sister. I'd do anything to get my brother back."

She tightens her arms. "I'm here for you, Killian. You know that."

"I do."

We arrive at the reception, which is being held at a recreational center. I could have had it at my house, but I couldn't stand the thought of so many people walking through it. I needed a place where I wouldn't be reminded of my mom.

The place is full of food and people mingling.

I'm ready to go sulk into a back corner and wait for the day to be over when the doors to the rec center open, and

Patrick O'Connell strolls on in.

I stand up straighter. "What the hell is he doing here?"

He's with a few other men, who walk off to join the other guests.

Patrick sees me and walks over. "Killian, so sorry for your loss. Your mother seemed like a kind woman. Shame she had to die so soon, wasn't it?"

I tense. It almost sounds like Patrick is saying he did something to my mother to make her die earlier. But that can't be. I may be after his power, but he wouldn't murder my mom.

Would he?

I'm trying to take over, and he's in my way. What better way to distract me than to make me deal with my mother's funeral.

I face Patrick head on. "What did you do?"

"I did nothing. Just wanted to say my condolences again. But do you have somewhere private we can talk?"

"I don't want to talk to you."

"Oh, trust me. You do."

I look around the room, seeing all my friends and family. I can't risk them getting hurt because of Patrick.

So, I follow Patrick out of the building. I can feel Mia's eyes on me as I go.

CHAPTER 17

Mia

I watch Killian leave the building with man I've never seen before, but judging from Killian's reaction, it's not a man he likes.

"Do you know who that was?" I ask my mom.

"I recognize him. It's Patrick O'Connell. I've never liked the man."

"I want to know what he wants with Killian." I start to leave, but Mom grabs my arm.

"No. Leave that business to the men."

"I'm tired of leaving everything to men," I snap, pulling away from her. I walk outside and see Killian and Patrick on the sidewalk.

"... might want to think about backing off," Patrick says to Killian. "I'm not going to give up my position any time soon."

"You need to leave, Patrick," Killian responds. "This is my mother's funeral. Show some respect."

"Respect, huh? Like you've shown me? You're vying for my job. I can't have that." Patrick looks over at me. "It seems we have company."

Killian jerks when he sees me. "Mia, go back inside."

"No, Mia, join us."

I look between the two men, knowing I should leave, but I want to show Killian he has my support. I stand by my

husband's side. Killian lets out a small, almost imperceptible sigh.

Patrick smiles. "It's a family affair now. This is a reminder, Killian, to not go after me. You won't like the outcome."

Gunshots go off inside the rec center.

I drop to the ground as Killian protects me with his body. Soon, the gunshots stop.

Killian glares up at Patrick. "What did you do?"

"Just reminding you of your place."

The men who came with Patrick stroll out of the rec center. I catch a glimpse of one of them slipping a gun into his back pocket.

Patrick whistles as he leaves.

Killian and I run inside. The place is covered in blood from the people who were shot.

My mom.

I don't see her.

What I do see is a room full of dead people, bullet holes decorating their bodies. Killian stumbles back, clutching at his chest. "Oh my god."

"He just killed everyone," I say, feeling numb. Where is my mom? I start to search the dead bodies, but I don't find her.

My foot slips on someone's blood, and I land on my butt. Killian rushes over to help me. I begin panicking. My breath comes out short. The blood rushing in my ears makes it hard to hear.

All of Killian's men and family members are dead. On the day of his mother's funeral.

"Killian?" I turn to him, clinging to his shirt. "What are we going to do? Where's my mom?"

He looks around the room. A deadness enters his eyes, like the kind man I've gotten to know has disappeared.

I leave him and begin searching the rec center. My mom has to be here somewhere. I find the bathrooms down a hallway and check every stall. But she isn't there. I check the men's bathroom for good measure, but still, no sign of my mom.

I can't lose her. I just can't.

I find another door at the end of the hall and try it.

It's locked.

I pound on the door. "Mom? Mom!"

The door is wrenched open, and there she is.

My mom looks at me with wide eyes before pulling me into a hug. "Mia. Oh, thank god. Mia."

We cling to each other.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I was coming out of the bathroom when I heard gunshots. I hid in here. I didn't know what was happening."

"Everyone is dead, Mom. All of Killian's people. They're dead."

Mom gasps. "And Killian? Is he ok?"

"He's fine. This was because of Patrick. He doesn't want Killian taking over. He sent him a message."

She hugs me again. "That's horrible. I'm just so relieved you're all right."

"Come on. We need to get out of here."

We find Killian, frozen in place, staring at all the dead bodies.

He'll need me more than ever now.

"Killian, we have to leave." I grab his hand, jerking him out of whatever trance he was just in. "We have to go. Now."

He eventually nods, and the three of us leave the rec center.

"The police will investigate," Mom says.

“I have someone I can call who can clean up the mess,” Killian says in a monotone voice as we drive away.

I want to comfort Killian, but he looks like he’s beyond that now. He doesn’t even look angry. He just looks ... dead.

He drives us to our house and, once there, calls the people he knows who can clean up the dead bodies. I know it must pain Killian to call his other family and friends that —“bodies.” But he’s holding up remarkably well given what just happened.

“Good thing Antonio wasn’t there,” Moms says to me. “In a strange way, this feud between him and Killian might have just saved his life. Those two were close. I know he would have been at the funeral, otherwise.”

“You’re right. But Antonio should have been there,” I respond. “He might be mad at Killian for killing his men, but he should have been there for his friend on the day of his mother’s funeral. I’m going to call him.”

I do, but his phone goes straight to voicemail.

That’s it. I’ve had enough with men telling me what to do. For blaming me for things that aren’t my fault. For getting me dragged into other people’s drama.

Killian needs Antonio right now, especially to help take down Patrick after what just happened.

“I’m going to see Antonio,” I tell my mom.

“No. It’s safer to stay inside right now.”

“Killian is busy with the deaths of his family and friends. Antonio wasn’t at the funeral when he should have been. Someone needs to talk sense into my brother. Tell Killian I’m going to see Antonio.”

As I head for the door, I see Killian in the kitchen, still on the phone, dealing with more pain and death. It’s not fair. It’s not fair a good man like him is be punished like this.

All I want to do is comfort him, but I know that’s not what Killian needs right now. He needs to kill Patrick for what

Patrick did. And the only person who can help him with that is Antonio.

I leave the house and head for Antonio's office. I know he spends his days there, holding meetings with his men. He's talked about it before.

I find Antonio in the conference room of his office building, standing before his group of men, talking about ... whatever Mafia men talk about.

I burst into the room.

Antonio stares at me slack jawed for a moment. "Mia?"

"It was Killian's mother's funeral today, and you should have been there."

He glances at his men. "We should talk in private."

"No." I keep my head held high as I storm up to my brother, stomping past his men. They watch me with amusement. Fine. Let them think I'm just some funny little girl. I'm tired of being defined by how other men see me.

It's time I stand up for myself.

"You should have been there," I tell Antonio. "And you weren't. Patrick O'Connell just shot the place up."

Antonio tenses. "Is everyone all right?"

"No. Everyone is dead. Mom was there. She could have died. Fortunately, she's ok," I add before Antonio can freak out. "But the point is, you should have been there. I get you're mad at Killian for what he did. But those men—your men—were going to rape me. He saved me. He should have received a medal from you. Not your disappointment."

While Antonio only stares at me, some of his men chuckle.

"He doesn't have to listen to you, little girl," one of them says.

I spin around to face the group. "I've had it. I'm done hearing all of you shit talk me. I'm done hearing you act like I'm a piece of meat you can just say whatever you want about. Call me crazy. Call me insane. Call me whatever. But I'm

innocent here. I've done nothing wrong to warrant any of the behavior you've thrown my way this year. I'm not going to listen to you boys badmouth me again."

They all stare at me in shock.

I turn back to Antonio. "I am your sister. You should care whether I'm ok or not. Killian saved me. He ... loves me." I realize how true it is the moment I say it. "He was there for you when you were in hiding. He helped build the empire you have now. He needs you know. He needs both of us. So, don't punish him. Be an ally to him. And if you don't, I'm going to keep coming back here and scolding you in front of your men until you do as I say. I'm done being bossed around. I'm done being bullied. Antonio, go help Killian. You know it's the right thing to do."

Antonio's eyes harden once I'm done speaking. "I think you need to leave, Mia."

I deflate a little bit but hold strong. "Ok. I will. But I'll come back if you don't change your mind." I turn to his men. "And all of you should be ashamed of how you act. Treat women with respect. Don't treat us like we're toys you can do whatever you want to with us." With those words, I leave the room.

I can feel everyone's eyes on me.

I made an impression. I know it.

And I don't even care anymore if they say shit about me.

I've discovered my self-worth because of Killian. I'm going to be the wife he deserves just like he's been the husband I deserve.

I'm not going to cower any longer. I'm not going to cry any longer over what random men say about me.

I'm going to stand confident at my husband's side as we make it through this trying time.

CHAPTER 18

Killian

After the shock of the funeral wears off, I know what I have to do. No more playing nice.

I need to go after Patrick and kill him for trying to threaten me. He killed some of my men. He killed my last living family members.

Fortunately, Mia was outside with me, or she would've been killed, too.

There's one person who works for me that wasn't at the funeral—Jimmy, my second-in-command. I knew he couldn't make the funeral because I had him doing some other work.

I meet him at one of my bars to discuss our next plans.

“Killian, I'm so sorry for what happened,” he tells me as he takes his seat. Like normal, he's twitchy and has a frantic energy about him. But it's stronger today.

“I'm not here to talk about that. I'm here to take down Patrick. It's time. No more trying to grow my empire before I go after him. We're going after him today. And that's final.”

Jimmy breaks out into a sweat. “Are you sure? I mean, he's so powerful. He won't be easy to kill.”

“I know he won't be. But I'm done playing nice. What I don't get, though, is how he knew it was my mother's funeral. How did he know to be there that day?”

“Spies?” Jimmy suggests.

“I guess.”

“How do you plan on going after him?”

“I say we hit up the bar he’s known to enjoy, and if he’s there, shoot him. Simple as that.”

Jimmy scratches the side of his face. “Are you sure, Killian? That seems risky.”

“It is risky, but he hurt my people on the day of my mother’s funeral. My wife could have been killed. I’m pissed. So, let’s go.” I stand up.

“What? Right now?”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

Jimmy scrambles after me as I leave the bar.

“Get in the car, Jimmy,” I tell him.

“Killian, this isn’t smart.”

“Get in the car.”

Jimmy gulps and gets in the damn car without me having to say it again.

I drive over to Patrick’s bar and walk right on in. I don’t even care anymore if I die. I’ve lost so much already.

But then I think of Mia, and I hesitate. If I die, what happens to her? Who will take care of her?

There’s no going back now, though. I came here to kill Patrick, and that’s what I’m going to do.

I find Patrick near the back of the bar, conversing with two men. “Patrick,” I say, drawing his attention to me. I point my gun at him.

“Killian? What are you doing? You’re not about to do something so stupid, are you?” he asks.

“You need to die for what you did.”

Patrick’s eyes flit behind me and then back to my face. “I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

I feel the pressure of a gun being pressed to my head.

“Drop the gun,” Jimmy says, right behind me.

I freeze. Jimmy is on Patrick's side? He's been working for me for the past few months now. That can't be.

"Jimmy," I say, "What are you doing?"

"I'm stopping you from making a mistake. I also stopping you from killing my boss."

My breath hitches. "You work for Patrick?"

"Yeah. Why do you think it was taking you so long to find other men to work with you? We all work for Patrick. Now, leave, Killian. Or I'll have to kill you."

I turn around to face Jimmy. He doesn't move his gun, so now it's pressing against my forehead. "You betrayed me."

Jimmy shrugs. "That's the way of the game, Killian. It's not my fault you were too busy dealing with a new wife and a dead mom to even consider this as a possibility."

I see red. Without even realizing it, I lunge for Jimmy and wrap my hands around his throat. He pressed the gun harder into my head.

"Do you want to die? Because I can pull this trigger right now."

I want to kill Jimmy. But I need to be smarter about this. Mia still needs me.

I let Jimmy go and hurry out of the bar before I really do get killed. As if I'm on autopilot, I head back home.

When I pull into my driveway, I see someone I wasn't expecting to see for a while.

Antonio.

I step outside and approach him warily. "What do you want?"

"To say I'm sorry. I never should have tried to punish you for what you did. You were only trying to save Mia."

I step back, not expecting that. "Well, uh, thanks."

"I also heard about what Patrick did. You helped me, Killian, when I was in a rough spot. Now, it's my turn to help

you.”

“I just tried killing Patrick, and it didn’t go my way. My second-in-command turned on me.”

Antonio claps his hand on my shoulder. “I’m here to help. Mia talked some sense into me. With my help, Patrick will go running for his mommy. Let’s take him down. Together.”

“Mia really asked for your help?”

He chuckles. “She did. And she stood up to all my men while she did it. You’d be proud. Hell, I was proud. Now, what do you say? Want to work together again?”

For the first time since my mother’s funeral, I feel a sense of hope. “Absolutely.”

CHAPTER 19

Killian

“How are you feeling?” Mia asks me later that night when we’re lying in bed together. “You could have died today, Killian. I want to make sure you’re in a stable place when you go after Patrick again.”

“I am. I have Antonio with me. I’ll survive.”

She pulls away from me. “Did you even think about me when you were going on a suicide mission today?”

“Mia, I only thought about you. Patrick could have killed you. If you hadn’t left that building, you’d be dead right now.” I trail my fingers down her arm. “I was thinking about you when I went after Patrick today. Yes, it was impulsive, and I promise to not do something like that again. But I had to do something. Patrick thought he could come in and hurt me even more on the day of my mom’s funeral. Now, I’ve lost even more family. My aunt. My men who I hired. Who trusted me. I can’t let him live because of this.

“And besides,” I continue, “I want to be a husband who’s worthy of you. Who has the power to be in charge. That’s what you deserve, Mia. That way, any man who thinks he can badmouth you will have to go through me. You’ll be safe if I’m in charge. I just need to get there. And it’s finally time.”

She sighs as she leans against me. “I understand. I do. I just don’t want to lose you, Killian. You’ve helped me grow so much. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Our second wedding is coming up. Do you remember?”

“Of course, I do. And I promise I’ll be alive to make it down the aisle with you a second time. I’m going to give you the wedding of your dreams.”

“You already did.” She gives me a peck on the lips. “But it would still be nice to celebrate our marriage with you *alive*.”

I chuckle. “I’ll survive this. And we’ll go on to have a happy marriage. No one else will ever get in our way. I promise you that.”

“I’m holding you to it.” She pauses like she wants to say more but doesn’t.

So, I kiss her goodnight and plan my take down of Patrick in the morning. I won’t die. I have to make it to Mia’s dream wedding. I owe it to her. She deserves it.

And I love Mia, even though I haven’t said it out . I love her.

I’m going to make sure I return home to her.

ANTONIO and I are parked outside Patrick’s mansion in the suburbs. He has guards rotating the perimeter. It won’t be easy to get past them to get to Patrick, but with Antonio by my side, we should be able to do it.

“My men will cause a distraction,” he explains. “Once they do, we’ll run for the house, break in, and kill Patrick.”

“And I, for sure, have your support once this is all over?”

“Of course, Killian. I never should have been angry with you for killing my men. I understand why you did it. I’d have killed them myself for doing what they tried to do to Mia. Once this is all over, you’ll be in charge. And hey, maybe my mother will finally be proud of you.”

I chuckle. “Giulia and I have come to a tentative truce after my mom’s funeral. But any brownie points I can get with her, I’ll take.”

Antonio sits up straighter in his seat. “Ok. It’s time.”

I watch from the passenger seat as two of Antonio's men throw Molotov cocktails at the guards out front. They purposefully don't hit them because the goal isn't to set the house on fire. It's to draw the guards away.

And it does.

The two guards at the front of the house run in the direction of Antonio's men to investigate. But I know Patrick. He has more guards around back. Those are the ones we'll have to be careful about.

Antonio and I slip out of the car and head for the house, keeping low and staying to the shadows. We're almost at the front door when a guard from around back walks into view. He doesn't see us, but he's only a few feet away.

I raise my gun and fire. The silencer on it helps muffle the sound as the bullet goes through the man's head. He lands on the porch with a hard thud.

That draws the attention of even more guards.

Two come walking around the house. When they see the fire on the lawn and the dead body of one of their comrades, they stand to attention, whipping their guns out of their holsters and up, aiming into the dark night.

Antonio motions for me to move forward. We'll attack the men from behind.

I manage to grab one around the neck, and I tighten my hold on him. Unfortunately, that alerts the other one to Antonio. The two begin to fight. I squeeze the neck of the man until he stops struggling and passes out. I drop his body to the ground.

Antonio is fighting hand-to-hand with the other guard, but I stop it by shooting the man in the head. He falls right into Antonio, who catches him and lowers him to the ground.

We run for the front door when someone shouts behind us.

"Stop!"

We turn around and see the two original guards running in our direction. Antonio's men obviously didn't manage to kill

them, which means Antonio is down two men.

The guards raise their guns and fire at us, but we duck out of the way, hiding behind the porch railing.

“Shit,” I mutter. I raise my gun over the edge of the porch and fire. I miss.

Antonio does the same but has to duck back down as the men shoot at us some more, inching their way closer to us.

With all the commotion we’re making, Patrick will surely be alerted to what’s going on, which will give him a chance to escape. And I can’t have that.

With a burst of energy, I stand and fire at the men. I manage to hit one in the head. The other one hits me. Pain flares up my shoulder as the bullet rips through it. I stumble back, clutching my wound as blood begins to seep past it.

“Killian,” Antonio says. He stands up and shoots the last remaining guard before running over to me. “You got shot. Here.” He rips off part of his shirt and helps bind my wound. “That should stop the bleeding long enough.”

“Good thing it was just my shoulder,” I say, trying for humor, even though I feel a little weak.

“You still good to kill Patrick?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Antonio busts the doorknob on Patrick’s front door, and we let ourselves inside. It’s a clean, simple looking house. I guess Patrick doesn’t want a huge display in his home—no, he saves those displays for hurting people.

We make our way upstairs to his bedroom, but no one is there.

“Let’s search,” I whisper, keeping my gun raised, even though my shoulder is killing me. I walk slowly down the hall, keeping my eyes and ears peeled for any sound.

That’s when I hear it—a creak downstairs.

I turn around and hurry back down the steps and into the kitchen, where I see Patrick attempting to leave out the back

door.

“Not so fast,” I growl, aiming my gun at him.

He turns around, his hands raised. “You’re not going to kill me, Killian.”

“No?”

“You didn’t have the balls to before. Why now?”

“Because you killed all the guests at my mother’s funeral. I’m not going to let you survive this time.”

“I think you’re bluffing,” he says.

“I’m really not.”

I pull my trigger.

He lets out a little grunt as the bullet hits his head before he falls face first onto the ground. I shoot him in the back for good measure.

Antonio finds me in the kitchen. “It’s done?”

“It’s done. Now, I have a wife to return to, who’s worried about me. I promised her a dream wedding, and I’m going to deliver on that promise.”

Antonio claps me on the arm. “Welcome to the big leagues, Killian. With my help, you’ll have no problem taking over now that Patrick is dead. These men will be looking for someone to turn to.”

“Thank you.”

“No, thank you. You saved my sister from ruin. You saved me when I was in hiding. You’re a good man, Killian.”

I take the praise as I leave the house, heading back home to Mia. The place where I belong.

CHAPTER 20

Mia

I keep pacing the house, waiting for Killian to return home. What am I going to do without him if he dies? Will Patrick come for me? Will he kill me? And what will Antonio do? He'd have to go to war.

None of those outcomes sound good.

I never told Killian I love him, and I vow that if he returns home, I'll tell him.

When I hear Killian's car in the driveway, my hope spikes. I run outside. He's getting out of the car. Alive.

I gasp, running over to him. Killian grunts when I throw my arms around him.

"Careful," he says. "Got shot in the shoulder."

I let him go. "Are you ok?"

"I'm ok. Antonio stitched me up so I could get home to you sooner. Patrick is dead. I'll finally be able to take over. I'll always make sure you're safe, Mia. I promise."

I kiss him, and Killian responds in kind.

"I love you," I whisper against his lips. "I should have told you sooner. I love you so much, Killian. I just want to start our lives together."

"Me, too." He cups my face. "And I love you. God, I love you."

He kisses me again.

It doesn't take us long to walk back into the house, get to our bedroom, and take our clothes off.

Even though Killian's shoulder is hurting, he doesn't let it get in the way.

I push him down on the bed and get on top of him.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he says.

"Your shoulder is hurt. And besides, I can't be insecure forever. I want to be confident with you. I'm not afraid any longer."

I'm already wet for him as I place my legs on either side of his waist. We lock eyes. Then, without being scared, I lower myself on to his erection. I gasp as he groans. In this new position, he's able to sink deeper than before.

I rest my hands on his chest to steady myself as I rock my hips around, getting used to this new sensation.

Killian stares up at me with so much love in his eyes; I could almost cry. Together, we move as one. He holds my hips as I grind them down.

I hope Killian can sense the love from me. He has helped me so much. He has shown me what it's like to believe in myself. He has shown me there's more to life than petty drama.

My pace increases as my breath comes out faster. Killian brings my hips down, helping me to rock harder against him.

"Killian," I gasp, my inner walls clenching down around his length.

"Mia." His murmur is so sexy, it makes my toes curl.

When I sink back down, his erection brushes that sweet spot within me, and I come.

"Killian!" I cry out, throwing my head back in wild abandon. No more time to feel insecure. I only want to feel beautiful with my husband.

He follows, his seed filling me up. The growl that escapes him is so primal, it almost makes me come again. He pulls me

down to him and kisses me with so much passion, I lose my breath.

We stay like that—me on top of him—for a while, content just to hold one another.

“I promised I’d return to you, didn’t I?” he says.

“You did.”

“And now we can have the wedding of your dreams.”

I smile up at him, feeling more content than I ever have. “You’re the best husband.”

“You’re the best wife.”

We lay in each other’s arms the rest of the night.

MY DREAM WEDDING goes off without a hitch. We say our *I do’s*. We have a great party, delicious cake, and a wonderful first dance.

But most importantly, it’s because I’m with Killian.

The rest of my family is there, including Cecilia. I never got the chance to make complete amends with her before. I have no excuse now.

I approach her as she gets a glass of wine. “Can we talk?”

“Of course.”

We walk out into the hallway, away from the party.

“What’s up?” Cecilia asks.

I pull her into a hug.

“What’s this for?” she asks, hugging me back.

“It’s something I should have done long before today. You were never to blame.” I pull back. “All those men who said mean things to me and blamed me for your actions ... Well, I was just doing the same thing. Blaming you for something you didn’t deserve. You found love. I should have respected that.”

“I never blamed you for blaming me,” she says. “I understood it. You were angry. My actions had consequences for you.”

“I’m ready to put that all behind me.”

“Really?”

“Really. I just want to be happy with my family. No more drama.”

Cecilia laughs as we link arms and head back into the party. “Ok, no more drama. But say that to the twins. When they become adults, I imagine we’ll be in for a world of hurt.”

“We’ll just deal with that when the time comes. But we’ll all be a family, and that’s what’s important.”

Cecilia squeezes my arm before heading off to find Theo.

Killian approaches me. “Everything ok?”

I meet his eyes. “Everything is ok.”

And for the first time in a long time, I truly mean it.

The End

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Secrets about his intentions, with me and my family, are
exposed.

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SNEAK PEEK

Chapter One:

OLIVIA

The first time I laid eyes on James Kelly, I was enthralled. A mixture of ruggedness and pure masculine energy, I knew I wouldn't be able to resist him. His silken hair that fell around his ears and the tattoos covering his arms made me weak.

I'm the good girl of the Irish mob. That's how I was raised.

But something told me that the minute James walked into my life, I wouldn't be good for much longer.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I'm living my normal life, or as normal as one can be when one's family is the Irish mob of Boston, completely unaware that my life is about to change.

Before James enters my life, before he's even a thought on my mind, I'm playing the good girl by reading in my room decorated in pastel pinks and whites, the epitome of innocence—as I was raised to be. I'm not one to push boundaries. Much.

A knock on my window makes me glance over. The face of my best friend, Lucy Kennedy, all blonde hair and blue eyes, shines through. I sigh as I place my book down and go to open the window.

Lucy, unlike me, loves pushing boundaries. She stumbles as she steps into my room, rightening herself after I catch her arms.

"Lucy, you're not supposed to be here," I comment, letting her go.

"Well, where else am I supposed to be?" She sits down on my bed, bouncing slightly.

“Not *here*. Won’t your parents wonder where you are?” Lucy is a mafia daughter just like me, with her father working for mine. My father, Patrick Donovan, is the head of the Irish mob in these parts of the city. Mafia fathers tend to be overprotective. I know. My father hardly lets me leave my room. I know for a fact that Lucy’s father is just as protective, but Lucy always finds a way to sneak over to my house without a care in the world about getting caught.

“Of course,” she says way too cheerfully for the situation. I’m already an anxious mess, worried we’ll both get in trouble. Our parents have no issue with Lucy and me being best friends. My parents just don’t like how wild Lucy can sometimes be, and her parents don’t like losing track of her, when they notice she’s missing, which is hardly ever. They tend to not notice their daughter too much. They like their daughter seen and not heard and all of that. “But I’ll be back before they even notice I’m gone.”

“Keep your voice down,” I hiss. “I don’t want my parents to come in and find you. Or worse, Owen.”

Lucy perks up. “You mean Owen might find me here? That wouldn’t bother me at all.”

I stare at her. Lucy has been in love with my older brother Owen for years now. I mean, I can’t understand why. Owen is annoying and just as overprotective as our father. He’ll take after our dad once Dad is ready to retire, which I hope is no time soon. Dad dotes on me, whereas Owen ... not so much. Mostly, I’m just a thorn in his side when he’s not obsessing about my safety. But for whatever reason, Lucy has a massive crush on him. Owen never even glances her way.

Lucy pouts. “Oh, Olivia, don’t worry so much. You’re always such a worrywart. Learn to relax every once and a while.”

I give her a rueful smile while pushing some strands of my brown hair behind my shoulder. “It would be easier for me to relax if you weren’t always sneaking into my room.”

“You got to live a little, right?”

“Lucy, you’re a bad influence.”

She waves a hand. “Tell that to my dad. He’s always harping about how good girls are never supposed to go out and have fun. Well, I say we should have some fun. Maybe we could go down to—”

“No,” I cut her off. “We’re not going *there*.”

Lucy manages to pout even more. “But it sounds like an adventure.”

“Going to a fighting ring is not an adventure.”

“But Owen likes to go there often.”

I just laugh. “Lucy, why in the world would I want to see my brother fight in the rings?” There’s a well-known underground fighting ring that my father partly owns. Lucy’s right. Owen does like to go there often. But I also know I’m not supposed to know about it. I only found out when I overheard my brother and dad talking about it. I mentioned it to Lucy, and now, all she wants to do is go, mostly to see my brother fight, shirtless. Or at least, that’s how she imagines him, as she’s told me repeatedly.

She opens her mouth, then snaps it shut. “True. But I would still like to go, and I’d like you there. You could cheer your brother on.”

“No. He’d only find us and take us home, getting us both in trouble.”

Lucy stands up, her blonde curls bouncing. “Well, I’m going.”

“How do you know Owen will even be there tonight? Dad sent him off on business.”

“One can only hope he’ll be there.”

“Wait,” I say, stopping her before she can leave through my window again. My house doesn’t have any guards surrounding it since my father believes he can handle any intruders himself, making it even more ironic that Lucy sneaks in undetected. Lucy glances back at me, her eyes open wide. “I don’t want you to get hurt, so I’m not going to let you go by

yourself. But,” I hold up a finger, “we’re getting my parents’ permission.”

Lucy deflates. “No. Your father won’t allow you to leave.”

“He will if he thinks we’re going out shopping. Whenever my dad hears me mention anything girly, he blanks out and lets me do it. So let’s go downstairs and tell him that’s what we’re doing. But first, you need to come in through the front door to make it look less suspicious.”

“But he’ll send a guard with us.”

I smirk. “You’re not the only one who’s good at out-maneuvering a guard.” I may be a good girl who never gets into trouble, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have my own tricks up my sleeve. There have been times I’ve wanted to do something by myself, and I’ve managed to trick one of our guards into letting me go off and do my thing. I’m always back by an appropriate time to never raise suspicion, and they’ve never tattled on me. “Let’s just hope my dad sends Garret with us.” Garret is the easiest of my dad’s guards to manipulate. He’s young, and I’m pretty positive that he’s infatuated with me. I might not have many life experiences, but I’ve read enough romance novels to understand how to flirt.

Lucy smiles wide. “So, we’re really gonna do this?”

I sigh. “If it means less of a chance of you getting hurt, then yes, I’m going to go with you. That’s what best friends are for. Doing something stupid even though they know better just to protect their friend.”

Lucy runs over and hugs me, her light lemony scent wafting over me. “Thank you, thank you. Olivia, you really are the best friend I could have hoped for.”

“All right.” I pat her back. “Just go to the front door and knock like a normal person. I’ll talk to my parents.”

Lucy bounces over to the window and scales out. Taking in a deep breath, I steady my nerves and find my parents in the living room, where my dad is nursing a glass of something alcoholic and my mom is reading a book. That’s something

I've always marveled at—that they can be together and yet exist in quiet and not be bothered by it. Their love shines through even when they're not looking at each other.

“Olivia,” Dad says in his deep voice. Mom glances up from her book.

Patrick and Siobhan Donovan, the power couple of the Irish mob. Many people have spoken about my parents and how they make a great team. I can only hope to find someone like that someday, though more than likely, my dad will arrange a good match for me.

My dad sits tall with his robust frame, dark hair, and eyes that make him seem more sinister than he really is. Deep down, he's a bit of a softie. And my mom—the radiant redhead who would rather face her fears of spiders, catch one, and let it outside than kill it. How she hasn't been beaten down in the mafia world, I have no clue. Maybe it helps that she always has a wine glass in her hands. But it's thanks to both of them I've been saved from the horrors of the world we live in. It's also thanks to them I'm not allowed to leave the house often, all in the name of protecting me.

“Dad. Mom.” I give them each a nod.

When I don't say more, Dad asks, “Is there something you need?”

“Um, yes. Lucy wanted to come over, and we're thinking about going out to do some clothes shopping.”

Mom glances at the clock on the wall. “At this hour? I'm sure most stores will be closing soon.”

Crap. I'm starting to sweat. I'm not exactly good at this deception thing, but I need to protect Lucy from doing something stupid. “Um ... better to avoid the large crowds.”

Dad shrugs. “That seems true.” My dad really has no idea how clothing stores work. Anything remotely girly is just a mystery to him, even if he pretends otherwise. “You really want to do this, sweetheart?”

And that's the kicker right there. Even though my dad prefers me to stay home, if I ask sweetly enough, he'll never

say no to me. “Yes, Daddy, I do.” I call him “Daddy” for extra effect. He’s powerless to resist it—I know it reminds him of when I was a little girl. He’d prefer to keep me that way forever.

Mom eyes me with suspicion. She knows I only call Dad “Daddy” when I really want something, but she won’t go against Patrick Donovan. Once he says something’s done, that’s it.

And he does. He nods, taking a sip from his glass. “Just take Garret with you.” He pulls out his phone. “I’ll have him come over right away.”

“Thank you.” I hug him, and he smiles sheepishly.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.” He kisses the top of my head. “Now, have a fun time.”

As if on cue, Lucy knocks on the door. “That’s Lucy. I’ll wait with her out front for Garret.”

“You do that.” He doesn’t even question that Lucy’s already here before I have the chance to call her to come over. My dad is very observant when it comes to his business, but when it comes to me, he’s oblivious. As long as I stay his sweet girl, he never questions me.

I hear my mom murmur to him as I walk away, “You can never say no to her.”

I don’t hear Dad’s response as I open the door for Lucy. I give her a quick nod that we’re all set, and she squeals and hugs me.

“Shh.” I step onto the front porch and shut the door behind me. “We’re just going shopping, remember? Don’t get too excited.”

Lucy zips her lips. “You’re right.”

“Now, we just wait for Garret to arrive, and he’ll take us.”

Garret arrives in less than ten minutes. He springs out of his car, all gangly and long limbs. “Ready at your command, Miss Donovan.” He bows low to me.

Lucy shoots me a look and giggles, but I just roll my eyes.

“Thanks, Garret,” I say dryly. “We’re heading to the mall.”

He gives me a salute. “Right away.”

Lucy and I chat in the backseat as Garret takes us to the nearest shopping mall. I think about what to say to him to convince him to take us to the underground fighting rings. I still can’t believe I’m doing this, but it’s for Lucy.

Once Garret parks in the mall parking lot, neither Lucy nor I leave the car. Garret glances back at us. “Everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine,” Lucy squeaks.

I shush her again and elbow her gently. She just laughs some more, high on the thought of doing something dangerous. “Garret.” I lean closer to him. I can tell right away he appreciates it. His eyes linger on my lips before darting up to meet my eyes. I try not to grimace. “Garret. Lucy and I were actually thinking of doing something else tonight.”

“Oh?”

I let my fingers trail over his shoulder. “Would you mind taking us to see my brother fight tonight?” God, I’m hoping Owen is on tonight. Otherwise, this will blow up in our faces.

Garret pauses. “You’ve never asked to see Owen fight before.”

“Well, I’m asking now.” I drop my voice, hoping it sounds husky enough.

Garret notices. “You know, I’ve always wanted to see your brother fight.”

Hope sparks in my chest. “So, you’ll take us, then?”

“Is your dad all right with this?”

“Since Owen will be there, he’ll be fine with that.” Lie. “Owen can help keep us safe in case anything happens.”

Garret nods slowly. “Good point. Ok, then. Let’s go.”

I settle next to Lucy, who gives me a thumbs up and mouths, “Good job.”

I just shake my head and push aside the worry coursing through me.

It only takes a short drive to reach the fighting rings. They’re located in a nondescript building that I would never have guessed housed an underground fighting ring. I also love that Garret is too naïve even to question how I know about this.

When we get out of the car, I’m immediately aware of how out of place we look. Outside the building, a line is forming with a bouncer in front of the doors. It looks like a typical line outside a club, but inside, it’s not so innocent. Everyone in line is dressed in varieties of black leather. Lucy is in a preppy dress with a high collar, and I’m in a floral pink and white summer dress. It’s smothering hot in the Boston summers, but you wouldn’t guess that by how much leather the people in line are wearing.

We get some stares as we pass by the line, approaching the bouncer. Some smirks, some looks of confusion, some people laughing at us.

“Maybe this isn’t a good idea,” I whisper to Lucy.

“Nonsense. I want to see Owen fight, and that’s what I’m going to do.” She grips my arm and pulls me toward the bouncer.

The bouncer eyes us. “Line starts back there.” He points down to where the line wraps around the side of the building.

“Actually,” Garret says, leaning in closer to the bouncer, who wrinkles up his nose and jerks his head back, “this is Olivia Donovan. She’s here to see her brother, Owen, fight.”

The bouncer looks at me more closely, more interest in his eyes. “Fine,” he says after a beat, opening the rope. “Go in.”

Lucy lifts her hand for a high five, which I slowly return as we step inside a world much different from the one I’m used to.

Instantly, I notice the loud sounds of music, shouting, and grunting. It's a symphony of noise, making me sweat harder.

We turn a corner and enter the main room, where a large ring is in the middle, with two men already fighting inside. I don't recognize either of them.

A sea of people surround the stage, making it tough to walk through. Lucy points toward a booth near the back of the room, where we settle in and watch the show.

Garret watches enrapt as Lucy and I huddle together. "This is all so ... violent," I say, scrunching up my nose as one of the guys punches the other one in the nose, making blood spurt out.

"I know," Lucy breathes. "Isn't it exciting?"

"I guess," I mutter, slouching down in my seat. I can't risk getting spotted and the word getting back to my dad. The fact he owns the place means a lot of people here might know who I am. Then again, my dad would never imagine me here in a million years, so ...

Once the men on the stage are done, another pair of guys take their place.

I recognize one of them this time. My brother.

Owen Donovan, next in line to everything our father owns, stands with his chest puffed out, his eyes set in a glare as he stares down the man opposite him, a bulky, bald guy. Owen is shirtless, which I'm sure elates Lucy. Since he's my brother, his bare chest is kind of gross, but glancing at Lucy, it's like she's looking at God right before her. With his dark hair and muscular body, I see even more women around the room checking him out.

I roll my eyes and settle in to watch the fight.

Even though my brother is leaner than his bulky counterpart, he beats the guy in a matter of seconds with just a couple of punches in the first round. As they start the second round, Lucy leans over to me and says, "Owen is amazing, isn't he?"

“Sure.”

Lucy doesn't even hear me as she keeps her eyes on my brother. Owen quickly wins the second and then third rounds. A round of applause sounds off, with Lucy standing up and shouting.

I grab her arm. “Sit back down,” I hiss.

Fortunately, it's so loud in the room that Owen doesn't even notice. He walks off stage and into a back room.

“I should go thank him.” Lucy starts to get out of the booth.

“No.” I grab her arm again and make her sit back down next to me. “You'll get us caught.”

Garret glances over. “Caught? I thought your dad gave you permission to be here.”

I pause, and Lucy and I exchange a glance. The next fighters walk on stage. “Oh, look,” I say, pointing. “Let's watch this.”

Garret shrugs and turns back to the ring. I let go of a deep breath, and Lucy winks at me.

I cross my arms as I watch the next fight.

It only takes a second for my entire body to light on fire when my eyes focus on one of the fighters. A man with dark hair that brushes his ears and tattoos covering his entire chest and arms, standing with purpose. He's the most handsome man I've ever seen in my life.

My body responds to him even though we've never spoken, even though he's not even looking at me. I've never seen him before, but something deep inside me is calling me to him.

The ref announces the fighters' names, and I pay attention. When the ref says *his* name, I sit up straighter.

James Kelly.

I know that name even though I've never met him.

The Kelly family is the other mob family in the area, owning the other half of Boston. I know the Kelly's have worked closely with my father in the past, but I've never seen James around. I heard he took over as leader after his father passed away a few years ago, which means I'm looking at a mob boss.

Once the ref tells them to begin, James attacks with a ferocity that makes me both scared and aroused, a combination I've never felt before.

He takes down his opponent just as fast as my brother did his. In a few short rounds, James has won, and it's announced that he'll fight again later that night.

I don't stand up as Lucy did for Owen. Instead, I just gently clap and watch James stand tall as he's announced as the winner. And in one beat, his eyes flick to mine, and I feel like I'm lost forever.

He keeps his gaze steady on me. A few other people in the crowd notice and glance back toward me. I sit down deeper in my seat. This is the opposite of staying low.

James doesn't wait for the ref to finish announcing his win. He stalks out of the ring and begins walking through the crowd.

Walking right toward me.

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I was meant to protect her... instead I consumed her.

Sofia Di Luca is spoiled and innocent.

A mafia princess I was chosen to keep safe.

I wasn't supposed to desire her.

To press my mouth against her soft, plump lips.

To show her pleasure she's never known before.

Her body was off limits.

Until evil men threatened to take her away.

So I made a choice.

I claimed her instead...

Even if it means my death.

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