



THE
BILLIONAIRE
MAFIA

Stolen
BY THE
MAFIA

AVA GRAY

STOLEN BY THE MAFIA

THE BILLIONAIRE MAFIA

BOOK TWO

AVA GRAY

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BLURB

He was my father's prisoner, our handsome, irresistible enemy... Now I'm his unwilling captive.

I should have stayed away from Rafferty O'Shea. But I felt compassion for the monster trapped in a cage in my father's dungeons. I shouldn't have trusted Rafferty. He was always planning on using me to get away.

By the time I realize his cruel plans, it's too late. He's not the valiant, strong fighter I thought he was... he's the bastard my father warned me about, with good reason.

One mistake is all it takes for him to own me for *nine months*.

Nine months of carrying his child and the consequences of my sins.

Nine months of paying for my betrayal because I could not resist temptation.

And no hope of ever hearing him say he loves me back...

***Stolen by the Mafia* is the second full-length novel in The Billionaire Mafia dark romance series. Borrow for free with KU and binge this spicy novel today!**

SOFIA

I look down at the cooing infant in my arms and can't help but smile even though I'm on the verge of crying. My new nephew Griffin O'Shea smiles up at me like the happy baby he is and I wish my family could act more like him.

My older sister Aurora, better known as Rory, recently married Liam O'Shea and their baby is only a month old. We were hoping Griffin could help mend old rifts, but that hasn't quite happened yet. My family, the Marino's, and his family, the O'Shea's, have been rivals for hundreds of years, going all the way back to Prohibition.

At this point, I'm not even sure what the feud is about. I know Rory and I are on the same page and all we want to do is bury the hatchet. But nothing is ever that easy. There's so much history and hate which makes me wonder if it will ever be possible for our families to let go and move on.

I hope so. New blood and marriages and forgiveness will be the answer, I tell myself. Even so, I have my doubts. Our father, for example, is so set in his ways and his hatred for the O'Shea's that it's disconcerting. Our families declared war on each other so long ago and the rivalry hasn't eased up.

However, ever since Nolan O'Shea was gunned down and Liam took over the family business in his father's place, things have begun to change. He eliminated their old school enforcers and hired private security. He and his siblings have also been shutting down the various underground businesses, trying to focus on their legal, multi-billion dollar enterprises instead. You'd

think less competition in that area would make my father happy, but he's never been more on a rampage than he is now, and I know it's because Rory defied him and fell in love with the enemy.

The enemy who loves her with a fierce loyalty and protectiveness like I've never seen before in my life. Liam would die for Rory and when they're together, I can see the stars in his eyes, and the way he dotes on her and Griffin is heartwarming. If only I could be so lucky to find a man who would love me the way Liam loves my sister.

The enemy...what a joke.

My father hasn't spoken to Rory since she married Liam and gave birth to Griffin. And that makes me incredibly sad because this little miracle made from love in my arms should bring our families closer, not separate them further.

With a soft sigh, I see Griffin has fallen asleep and Rory motions for me to hand him over.

"Be right back," she whispers and heads down to the nursery to lay him down for his nap.

I sit back and look around the house where she and my new brother-in-law live. It's located on the O'Shea compound around a half an hour outside of Chicago and it has everything they need. It's also next door to Conor, Liam's twin brother, and the main house where their mother Maeve and younger sister Finley live. Then a little further back is where their younger brother Rafferty lives in his own place.

Their home is everything I'd like to have one day. Not too big, but very cozy and welcoming, and I immediately notice all the little, personal touches my sister has added—the candles, pillows and a few framed pictures.

Rory reappears a few minutes later. "He'll be out for a while. Do you want some tea?"

I nod, stand up and follow her into the kitchen. It's modern and bright, and I walk over to a stool and sit down at the granite-topped island.

"So give me the full scoop," Rory says, moving over to the stove and lighting

the flame beneath the tea kettle. “And don’t hold back.”

“Oh, geez, where do I even begin?” I let out a sigh and watch my sister bustle over to the cupboard, pull out a couple of mugs and find tea bags. She looks amazing for just having given birth not too long ago. I’m sure she’ll have her old shape back in no time, but Liam keeps saying how much he loves her new curves. “I suppose I can start with Dad going on an absolute rampage when he found out about you getting married.”

“Does he know about Dante?” she asks.

I nod. Dante Rivera, the man my father wanted Rory to marry, stormed over here in a jealous, angry rage, waving his gun around. During his tirade and threats, he shot at Liam and grazed his upper arm. Conor immediately fired back and killed Dante before he could hurt any of the other O’Shea family who had all been at the dinner. I can’t imagine how scary that must’ve been, but thank God Conor protected my sister and unborn nephew, along with his family.

“The whole story got back to him and I honestly don’t think he was too surprised that Dante went off the deep-end. He’s promoted another enforcer named Tony. It’s just a never ending cycle,” I say wearily.

In my opinion, Tony Maggiano is worse than Dante ever was, but that’s because Dante left me alone. He was far too obsessed with Rory to pay me any attention. But Tony, on the other hand, is a completely different story. I can’t help but notice the way he looks at me and it gives me the creeps. It’s not sexual in any way like Dante had been toward Rory. Tony’s stare is cold and predatory. Calculating. The way a serial killer looks at his victim. Behind his dark eyes, there’s a brutality capable of untold horrors. And I have the very disconcerting feeling that he’d like to hurt me.

“I was hoping things would get better. Dad is going to have to accept the fact that Liam is my husband and I love him.”

I’ve noticed that Rory has stopped referring to him as papà. Matteo Marino, I fear, has lost his oldest daughter due to his stubbornness and refusal to move on past old hurts and beliefs.

And it’s an utter shame.

“He forbade me to see you,” I tell her softly. “Called you a bad influence.”

Rory’s brown eyes widen. “What?” With a sad nod, I watch as my feisty sister crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. “Why is he doing this? How can he be so cold? Doesn’t he want to meet his grandson?”

Not wanting to hurt her feelings or fuel her fire, I hesitate before telling her the rest. But then I spill it because she deserves to know. “He said he’s cut you from his life and that you don’t exist to him any longer.”

With a look of disbelief that quickly morphs into sadness, Rory leans back against the counter as the tea kettle whistles. “Well, then I guess that’s it.” She turns, picks up the kettle and pours the hot water into our mugs.

“I’m so sorry, Rory. I didn’t want to tell you, but you have to know how he’s behaving and the horrible things he’s saying.”

Rory sits down next to me on a stool and slides my tea over. “It’s certainly not your fault. If he wants to be petty and continue this asinine rivalry, even at the cost of losing his relationship with me and his grandson, then so be it. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

Her words make me sad, but she’s right. What can we possibly do? Feeling helpless, I can’t stop the tears that start falling from my eyes. “It’s getting harder and harder to sneak away,” I tell her, turning the mug around and watching the steam rise. “He’s increased security and they’re everywhere.”

“This is all my fault. I’ve caused so much chaos since falling in love with Liam. But I don’t regret it. He’s the love of my life.”

“I know and I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m sorry to put you through so much sneaking around, though.” Rory takes a sip of tea then sighs. “I hate to say it, but maybe we shouldn’t see each other for a little bit. At least until Father cools off.”

“I don’t know if that will ever happen. I’ve never seen him so angry all the time. And this guard he promoted...” My voice trails off.

“What?” Rory presses, studying me closely.

“He’s so threatening and cold. And when he looks at me...” A little shiver

runs down my spine. “I don’t know. It gives me the creeps.”

“He scares you?”

“Yeah.” I admit. “Looking into his emotionless eyes is like looking into a bottomless well. Just dark and deep and scary.”

“Stay away from him, okay? I never trusted any of those enforcers, especially after seeing what they were capable of and their utter lack of empathy.”

I know she’s referring to the time she walked in on Dante beating up a man to the point of death. Rory had begged him to stop, but he didn’t.

We drink our tea in silence for a moment, both of us wishing for a solution to the chaos that exists between our family and the O’Shea family. It’s sad because I’ve met several of Liam’s siblings and they’re kind and funny. The exact kind of people I’d choose to be friends with.

“For now, it’s probably best if you don’t visit for a little while,” Rory says again. “I’m sorry, Sofe. I hate putting you in the middle like this.”

I let out a groan. “I’m going to miss you and Griffin so much,” I lament.

“I know because we’re going to miss you, too. But that doesn’t mean we can’t talk on the phone every single day and text, too.”

“Do you honestly believe things will ever get better?”

Rory thinks over my question for a minute before answering. “Right now, tensions are just extra high, but I really do believe with all of my heart that one day they will get better.”

Maybe after Dad dies. Though neither of us says it, the mutual thought seems to be hanging in the air between us.

“This sucks,” I say.

“I know, sis, but we will still talk all the time, okay?”

I nod. “Every day.”

“Every day,” she assures me.

We exchange smiles and then hugs. Rory is my best friend and not coming over here to spend time with her is going to be difficult. But I hope she's right and if we give it some time then things will start to cool off and, best case scenario, they will eventually heal.

The way things are going right now, though, that's a big "if."

With a heart that's growing increasingly heavier, we finish our tea and then I go upstairs to whisper a goodbye to Griffin. He's still sound asleep and looks like a little, chubby cherub. I lightly curve my hand over his dark, fuzzy head and smile. "See you soon, handsome." Then I blow him a kiss and I wave goodbye.

Rory walks me outside where a car waits to drive me back to our family brownstone in the city. To be honest, I'm getting tired of living in Chicago and dealing with all the noise and traffic. The more time I spend out here, the more I'm falling in love with the quiet countryside.

After more hugs and promises to talk every day, I climb into the back seat of the SUV and wave goodbye to her as it rolls away, taking me back home.

Back to a place that I don't want to be any longer.

But if I leave, where would I go? And what would I do? My father may have cared for us, sending us to posh boarding schools and made sure that we all received an excellent education, but I've begun to wonder about that. All the subjects we studied have proven useless in our everyday lives. Who wants to hire me when I have a background in subjects like Latin, Art, Greek Mythology and Ancient Civilizations?

Utterly useless. The more I think about it, the more I wonder if he planned that. I wasn't encouraged to study chemistry or politics or law. In fact, those subjects and any others that actually could lead to a real career were discouraged. Unnecessary, my father used to say. And since he paid for my tuition and boarding, he always had the final word on the matter.

It never bothered me too much, though. I always enjoyed school and had a few close friends. Much like Rory, though, I was always a good girl and obeyed the rules. I never snuck out or broke curfew and I certainly never had a boyfriend. I was kissed once, though, and I didn't find it very exciting. Just

wet and sloppy. Eww.

Now, I'm 23-years-old and finally starting to question things. Before, I just blindly believed and accepted everything I was told. But I don't want to be that naive, young girl anymore.

Pushing my long, wavy chestnut hair back off my shoulders, I look out the window at the passing countryside and wonder what my future holds. Rory was so brave to stand up for herself and the man she loves. I wonder if it came to that, would I be able to do the same?

I have no idea.

Not that I have a love interest or even a possibility of one. Ever since returning from abroad, I've been a hermit in the family brownstone. I haven't really gone out much unless I was sneaking off to visit Rory. And, as much as I love my sister and new nephew, that's hardly exciting.

God, my life is dreadfully dull. I need some action, some adventure. Dare I say, some spice? An attractive man who will sweep me off my feet and teach me what it's like to love and be loved.

Whelp, I'm not going to hold my breath. If anything, I'll just hope not to get caught by my father when I'm sneaking texts and phone calls to Rory.

Sighing, I press my forehead to the glass and have a feeling that it's going to be a very long and boring summer.

RAFFERTY

Lifting my hand to catch the bartender's attention, I motion for another pint of Guinness. I prefer whiskey, but I have all night to drink and don't need to find myself shit-faced in less than twenty minutes. Still though, my plan tonight is to get stinking drunk because I have no idea what else to do. Ever since my father, Nolan O'Shea, was gunned down by the Marino family, I've felt lost. Spinning out of control and without answers.

My dad and I weren't overly close, but that doesn't mean I want to see him six-feet under, dead because of a rivals' bullet. He was our family's leader and patriarch. Growing up, I always thought he was larger than life, so strong and undefeatable. I never thought anyone would be able to take my father down, but I was wrong.

Those Marino scum stole the life from him far too early.

As a result, I've been helping my older brother, Liam, get the business side of things under control. We all have—me, Conor and Finley. There are four of us and my mom, Maeve, but she doesn't care about any of the companies our family owns. If it were up to here, she'd probably sell them all off and not worry about it. She'd much rather dote over her new grandson and read her romance novels.

But it's more than just running a bunch of businesses; it's about keeping my father's legacy alive. We've been discovering a good portion of that legacy extends deep into the criminal underworld. Drugs, prostitution, gambling. A lot of unsavory crap. Liam is shutting all that illegal shit down fast and I

don't blame him.

Because of that, though, people are getting pissed off. The hush money to the cops has dried up and the group of enforcers my dad used to keep on the payroll were all let go. As a result, we're starting to see a lot of anger which is most certainly going to lead to backlash. I'm not sure what that's going to be exactly, but it's inevitable because people were getting paid a lot of money to either keep their mouths shut and look the other way, or they served as protection and now they're out of a job.

The bartender sets a fresh, frothy glass of beer in front of me and I take a long drink. I have to give Liam credit, he's cleared house and making progress. Again, it's left a lot of people unhappy, but times have changed.

The one thing that hasn't altered, though, is my growing obsession with vengeance. We still don't know who pulled the trigger and killed our father. I'm assuming a Marino enforcer, but we're no closer to a definitive answer than we were when it happened almost one year ago.

Hell, how can it be going on a year already? So much has happened in the past twelve months, it's enough to make my head spin. Liam married Rory and their new baby definitely tops the list. The moment those two got together, all hell broke loose. The rivalry deepened on some levels, but it also healed on others. I can't sit here and say I don't like my sister-in-law because I do. I think she's a gem and probably the best thing that ever happened to Liam. My brother needed a woman like Rory to help reel him in when he got too close to walking that fine line between light and dark. She tamps the darkness inside of him down and I've never seen him so happy. And, of course, Griffin is the most perfect baby and I love my nephew.

Still though. It's crazy how those two wound up together. They had a one-night stand, not knowing each other's names or true identities. Things may have turned out very differently if they had. Personally, I could never willingly go with a Marino. Rory is lovely, but she's the exception to the rule. As far as I'm concerned, the rest of the Marino family can go straight to hell.

Starting with Matteo Marino.

My thoughts turn back to revenge and I'm wondering how I can exact it on him and his brood. I'm conflicted because of Rory, but her father, for all

intents and purposes, has disowned her. He wants nothing to do with her and, according to Liam, Matteo has wiped his hands away from her oldest daughter.

Lifting my glass, I take another drink and notice two guys pushing in beside me. The bar is getting crowded and they jostle against my elbow. “Hey, buddy,” one of them says, very friendly. “How’re you doing? Sorry to squeeze in here, but the place is packed.” He motions to the bartender.

“No problem,” I murmur.

“What’re you drinking?” the other asks.

“Guinness.”

“I usually prefer a good whiskey. Do you like Jameson?”

“I’m Irish. What do you think?”

They laugh and the next thing I know, he has the bartender pour three glasses of Jameson and then slides one over to me.

“I’m Tommy and this here the funny-looking fellow is Joey.”

“Funny-looking?” Joey echoes, his tone playful.

I reach for the glass. “Thanks. I’m Rafferty.”

Tommy and Joey lift their glasses. “To new friends,” Tommy says and they clink their glasses against mine.

The whiskey tastes good, burning a trail down my throat, and I briefly close my eyes and savor it. Tommy and Joey don’t seem to understand the meaning of the word “savor” though and they pound their whiskey back like a shot. They engage me in meaningless conversation to pass the time and Tommy keeps the whiskey flowing. Before I know it, I’m laughing and sharing jokes, and my thoughts of revenge have moved to the back of my mind.

Maybe this is exactly what I needed. A night out on the town with some new friends. Things have been so heavy lately and it feels good to loosen up and let go. Over an hour later, it hits me when I nearly fall off my stool that I’ve drunk way too much. I’m not sure how much Jameson they’ve poured or how

many bottles we've demolished, but the room is spinning and I'm feeling damn good. Better than I have in a very long time.

My inhibitions are low, so when Joey says I look vaguely familiar and asks what my last name is, I don't hesitate and say, "O'Shea."

I should've kept my mouth shut but, by this point, I'm three sheets to the wind. In fact, I don't remember the last time I've been this drunk.

"Ah, okay, that explains it. I used to have a cousin that worked for your father," Joey continues.

I nod, not really caring or connecting any threat yet to these two fun-loving drunks. At this point, I just want to forget all of the bullshit going on around me and enjoy this night out on the town.

Eventually, the whiskey and jokes dry up. My new friends look just as wasted as I am and we stumble outside in search of taxis. That's when everything changes. Their easygoing smiles morph into glares and suddenly Joey is behind me, pulling my arms into a vise-like hold while Tommy begins punching the holy hell out of me like I'm some kind of punching bag.

Cursing, I try to twist away, but my world tilts and, to be honest, I can barely stand up at this point from all the alcohol I drank. My knees sag and Joey is basically holding me up while Tommy keeps hitting me. After what seems like forever, Joey lets go and I drop to my knees, palms slapping against the pavement. The cement is hard, but I try to steady myself and look up when a large, black SUV rolls right up to the curb. The passenger side door opens and a very big guy with a mean-looking scowl steps out, focusing his attention on me.

Fucking hell. This night sure took a turn.

"This him?" the newcomer asks.

"That's the asshole," Tommy confirms. "Rafferty O'Shea."

"Good job, boys." The giant of a man pulls a wad of cash from his pocket and peels off some hundred dollar bills, handing them each several.

"We roughed him up a bit for you, Tony," Joey brags.

“I can see that,” the man named Tony says. “Toss him in the back.”

Tommy and Joey each grab an arm, haul me up off the ground and shove me face-first into the back of the idling SUV. I can’t even find the strength to fight and all I want to do is curl up on the backseat and go to sleep. Or puke. The moment the car takes off, I pass out.

The next time I open my eyes, I have no idea how much time has passed or where the hell I am. A rattling noise draws my attention downward and I realize iron cuffs circle my wrists and are connected to a chain that is attached to the stone wall. Not good.

I’m lying on the floor and attempt to pull myself up into a sitting position. My head feels like it’s about to split in two and I press my palm against my skull and utter a low curse. My gaze moves over to the bars and there’s no doubt about it—I’m locked up in a cell. Looks like my newfound friends who plied me with liquor all night had a nefarious agenda.

Shit.

Where the hell am I? I wonder. Not knowing whether it’s day or night because there are no windows or light, I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to ignore the massive hangover that’s making my head pound like a drumline.

I vaguely remember one of my new pals calling the big man who took me Tony, but I have no idea who he is and I didn’t recognize him. As I’m racking my brain, trying to figure the current situation out, I hear footsteps above and then a door opens. A bare light bulb flickers on above and I blink against the brightness. Looking up, I see a man step into view. Someone I instantly recognize.

Matteo Marino, the ruling don of the Marino family.

Fuck. Those bastards sold me to my worst enemy.

And right by his side is that mountain of a man, Tony, who is clearly his guard. Guess since Dante Rivera was shot down by my brother, Marino needed a replacement.

“Hello, Rafferty,” Matteo says evenly and my pulse begins to thunder in my ears.

“What the hell, Matteo? You’ve resorted to kidnapping now?”

“Looks like it,” Matteo says as Tony unlocks the cell door. “I’m not very happy about my eldest daughter running off and marrying your brother.”

“How is that my problem?”

“That’s a good question and you’re about to find out the answer.” He steps into the cell, hands tightening into fists.

My gut curdles and I fight the urge to throw up. Don’t do it, Raff. Not in front of the enemy. My poor stomach is a wreck from drinking so much whiskey and now it’s empty and queasy. I drop my head back against the stone wall and sigh.

“You look a little hungover, Mr. O’Shea.” He practically spits my last name out and I force my head back up.

“Just a little,” I mumble.

“Well, I suggest you sit up and pay close attention because I’m going to use you as an example of what happens to my enemies.”

“What’re you talking about?” Maybe I should be kissing his ass right now instead of being difficult, but I feel awful and I’m not in the mood for games. This is the man who killed your father, I remind myself. He doesn’t deserve your respect.

Matteo stalks closer, grabs a handful of my thick hair and yanks my head sideways. “You’re going to pay for your brother’s sins,” he growls in my ear then slams my head back against the wall before releasing it.

Ow, fuck. Stars fill my vision, and I reach around and rub the spot that just hit the hard stone.

“I’m going to use you to send a clear message to my wayward daughter that I don’t approve of her recent decisions or appreciate how she rebelled against my wishes.”

Instead of responding and digging my grave deeper, I glare up at him. Matteo is furious and the last thing I want to do is incur his wrath when I’m not exactly in peak form. My gaze slides over to Tony who’s watching the entire

exchange closely. He cracks his knuckles and leans forward as though he's waiting for Matteo's order to strike. He reminds me of a pitbull on a leash.

A leash that Matteo holds. For the moment, anyway.

Releasing a small sigh, I choose to remain silent and I'm not sure if that just makes Matteo more angry. It feels like I'm in a losing situation so I clench my fists and keep my jaw clamped shut. No point in riling up the beast.

"This is Tony," Matteo says and nods to his hulk of a guard. "I'm going to leave you two alone so you can get acquainted better."

There's no mistaking the awful gleam of retribution in Matteo's eyes or the bloodthirsty one in Tony's. Yeah, I'm pretty much fucked, I think, and watch as Matteo turns on his heel and stalks out.

Looking up at the man who's about to kick my ass, I give him a crooked grin and say, "Hi. I'm a little hungover, so I'd appreciate it if you could take it easy—"

His boot connects with the side of my face and my head snaps sideways. Christ. A million silver stars flash in front of me. It's clear that he's not going to take it easy on me.

Right now, I'm at the mercy of the Marino family, a prisoner of the Italian mob, and there's nothing I can do about it. Liam and Rory were hoping their love could help diminish the fires of this blasted feud, but it seems to me that they just created a bigger inferno than ever before. One flaming with betrayal and vengeance.

And now I get to be punished for their love.

SOFIA

Over the next week, Rory and I keep our promise and talk and text every single day, but it's just not the same. I miss seeing my sister and holding my nephew. I know it's a smart decision to lay low for a while and not rankle our father, though.

Staying at home all day in the big brownstone, surrounded by my father's enforcers, is getting old fast. He doesn't want me to go anywhere or do anything, and I'm beginning to feel like a prisoner. The days drag by and I try to occupy myself with books, but keep re-reading the same page until I finally toss it aside. Then I start binging a new show that's streaming, but I quickly lose interest. My brothers aren't around and my mother is lost in her own, little world.

It's basically me and my shadow and a big, empty house most of the time. Other than my father's enforcers, of course, but I don't talk to any of them.

When I finally leave the sanctuary of my bedroom, I start to notice some strange things happening. Like how the guards immediately stop talking when I appear. They never seemed to care before and it's kind of weird that they don't chat like usual as I'm passing by. It's almost like they're hiding something and the moment I appear, they clam up and shut down.

One morning, I wake up extra early because I had trouble falling asleep. For whatever reason, sleep eluded me all night. My bedroom is located right by the back staircase which conveniently takes me directly down to the kitchen. My mom said it was used by the servants years ago. Of course, we don't have

any household help now, just a bunch of guards hanging around which I don't really care for. It makes me uncomfortable and that's why I spend all of my time locked up in my room.

Planning to put the kettle on and make some tea, I'm halfway down the back staircase when I hear someone step into the corridor below, and I pause. It's ridiculously early and I assumed everyone would still be asleep. The stairs curve ahead of me and I know whoever it is can't see me. So I tiptoe down and peer around the corner just in time to see an enforcer open the basement door. He's carrying a tray with what looks like a glass of water and a couple slices of bread. The door creaks as he closes it behind him and I hear a resounding click.

Why would he lock it? And why in the world is he taking food down there?

Our basement is not somewhere anyone goes. It's the oldest part of the brownstone and ever since we were little, it's been off-limits. Of course, that never stopped us from sneaking down there and playing in the tunnels when we were growing up. There are miles of tunnels beneath the property that were built during Prohibition and lead right down to the waterfront. They're like a maze and were used to smuggle liquor. Boats would dock, unload the illegal alcohol and the crates of hooch and beer would be brought straight into the tunnels and hidden down there until distributed to the local mafia kingpins like Al Capone.

There's even an old cell down there with rusty cuffs chained to the wall and we used to pretend to lock each other up inside it.

I used to know the dark, damp, musty tunnels like the back of my hand, but now I'm not so sure I could find my way around down there. They've always been extremely creepy and it would be far too easy to get lost in them. They're also old and crumbling, decayed and unkempt. The danger of a collapse has always been a definite possibility and a risk. One of the reasons my parents always yelled at us when we snuck down there to play and explore.

Now, no one goes down there. Or, at least, they haven't since we were kids.

But now an enforcer is going down into the basement, where there's a cell and tunnels, and I can't help but wonder why.

I've always been curious and I'm itching to know what's happening down in our spooky basement.

After the coast is clear, I continue down the steps on silent feet and enter the kitchen. After making my tea, I sit at the island and glance over at the clock. It's still barely 7 AM and it isn't long before I hear the basement door open, close and then the same enforcer appears, stepping into the kitchen, and immediately freezing when he sees me.

When he doesn't say anything, I tilt my head and check out the now empty tray he's carrying. The bread and water are gone. I don't want to alert him to the fact that I saw him go down there earlier, so I play dumb.

"Good morning," I say politely.

"Morning," he responds warily. "You're up awfully early."

"I couldn't sleep." Something about his behavior strikes me as off. Guilty maybe? Definitely uncomfortable and being secretive. I watch as he sets the tray down on the counter and quickly turns to leave. Hmm. Very interesting. He practically bolts and I'm wondering if that's because he didn't want me to ask any questions. Because right now, I'm entertaining quite a few.

After finishing my cup of tea, I walk through the swinging door that leads up the back staircase. But instead of going back up to my room, I pause in front of the basement door and press my ear to it. For a long moment, I listen, but there's nothing but silence.

My hand drops to the handle and I twist it. Locked. That's normal, so I don't think much of it. The key is kept in the kitchen drawer nearest to the swinging door and I poke my head back in, reach over and slide the drawer open. There's no key.

Narrowing my eyes, I close the drawer and move back into the stairwell. Where in the world is the key and why would anyone move it? It's sat in that same drawer for years and no one ever touched it.

Curiouser and curiouser. I feel like Alice on the verge of going down the rabbit hole.

Suddenly, I get the overwhelming urge to find out what exactly is going on down in that basement. On a mission, I head back upstairs to get dressed and then I'm going on a search. I am determined to find that key and the first place I'm going to look is in my father's office.

I just need to beat him there before he wakes up. Because once he goes into his office and shuts the door, he's usually in there all day.

After I slip into a t-shirt and leggings, I jog down the main staircase and over to my father's study which is located on the second floor and overlooks the front part of the neighborhood. The house is still quiet and no one else is up yet. I don't plan on running into anyone this early because they all seem to maintain the same schedule. My dad gets up a little before 8 AM, showers and comes down to make coffee; my mom sleeps in until 9 AM every day; Gio rolls out of bed and goes for a run not long after Dad gets up; and, of course, Luca isn't here. But, if he were here, my night owl brother wouldn't normally show his face until noon.

Glancing over my shoulder, I check the hallway one last time before slipping inside my father's office. It's large and masculine with a dark wood desk, a wall of bookshelves filled with all sorts of reading material and a large Aubusson rug with several leather chairs along its edge. There's also a sidebar with a crystal decanter filled with some kind of alcohol and various bottles on a tray. Paintings of Old World Italy decorate the beige walls.

I glide over to the desk and pull open the top drawer. Bingo. The key to the basement door sits right there in a small tray and I scoop it up, palming it, and shut the drawer. Well, that was easy. Too easy? I can't help but wonder.

Not giving it much thought, I sneak back through the hallways like a wraith and make my way through the kitchen and to the basement door. Once again, I press my ear to the wood and listen for several minutes. When I hear a low groan, I slap a hand over my mouth, stifling my surprised gasp. Someone is down there.

Images of ghosts and long-gone gangsters from the 1930s fill my head, but that's ridiculous. Isn't it? My life has been so incredibly boring lately and I feel an adventure calling me.

I have to be brave, go down and check it out. Placing the key in the keyhole, I

turn it and push the door open. There's a slight creak and I immediately tense at the sound which may as well just have announced my presence. A staircase goes straight down into darkness and I hesitate. I need a light, so I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. Clicking the flashlight on, I pull in a deep breath and listen. Another soft groan reaches my ears and it almost sounds like someone is in pain.

That's no ghost. At least, I hope it isn't.

My heart speeds up as I step inside and pull the door shut behind me. Then I lock it from the inside just in case. Luckily, this key will lock and unlock the door from either side. Swallowing down my nerves, I start down the steps, trying to ignore the way the light beam bounces around in front of me because my hand is shaking.

Get a grip, Sofe. There are no such things as ghosts. Or so I try to tell myself.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, I swing my light up to reveal the old cell. The iron, barred door is closed and a dark figure huddles on the floor inside. My heart nearly stops and, this time, the surprised gasp leaves my mouth before I can smother it with my hand. A head lifts and I find myself looking into a pair of the bluest eyes I've ever seen. Stringy, long bangs hang in those startling blue eyes and a beard covers the man's lower face.

Frozen in fear, I realize my mouth is hanging open when he says in a dry voice, "You might want to close your mouth before you start catching flies."

I snap my jaw shut and take a step closer. "Who are you?"

He drops his shaggy head back against the stone wall and eyes me. "What do you care?"

Even though his dark hair hangs in his face, I immediately notice his bruised cheekbone and split lip. Then I hear the rattle of chains and realize his wrists are manacled, and he's chained to the wall.

Since I'm certain that he can't hurt me because he's doubly-secured, I walk right up to the cell and wrap my fingers around the bars. I keep my flashlight on, but I make sure to keep it away from his eyes which aren't used to the brightness. "What happened to you? Are you okay?"

“I’m fucking peachy. How’re you?”

Surprised by his sarcasm, I tilt my head and study him. “How long have you been locked up down here?”

“One week,” he drawls. “I don’t suppose you’d like to unlock these and help me get out of here?” He lifts his manacled wrists.

“You never answered me. Who are you?”

“No, of course, you don’t,” he continues, ignoring my question. “Because you’re a Marino and you enjoy seeing me suffer like this.”

I bristle. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Well, then let me get you up to date.” His light blue eyes narrow. “Your family is a bunch of monsters. Especially your father. He’s a murderer.” I frown, on the verge of commenting, when he grumbles in a very low voice, under his breath, “I don’t know how he married a Marino.”

“Who?” I ask. A sinking sensation fills my stomach and, suddenly, I already know the answer before he responds.

“My brother.”

Oh, God. This man is an O’Shea. He has to be. “What’s your name?” I ask, gaze locked with his scowling one.

“Rafferty O’Shea,” he says proudly.

Once again, my mouth drops open. Shit, shit, shit. This is Liam’s younger brother. Rory’s brother-in-law. Griffin’s uncle. Why is he down here in chains? What the hell is going on?

He’s scrutinizing me closely and I squirm under that intense blue gaze of his, quickly growing uncomfortable. This whole situation has me on edge and confused.

“You’re Liam’s brother,” I finally whisper.

“Ding, ding, ding,” he responds, voice dripping with derision. “Will someone please get this young lady a prize?”

“What’re you doing down here?” I repeat, ignoring his caustic tone.

“Why don’t you ask your father that question.”

Right at that moment, I hear the door unlock and open at the top of the stairs. Then, the bare bulb above flips on. Shit. Not wanting to be discovered, I dart down the tunnel entrance closest to me. Making sure I’m completely out of sight, I click my flashlight off and press against the cool wall, blending into the shadows. From my position, I can see Rafferty and anyone else who is near the cell.

A moment later, there’s a thump of feet coming down the steps and I hear my father say, “How’re you settling in, Mr. O’Shea?”

Rafferty ignores him and his gaze flickers over in my direction. For a brief moment, I’m scared he’s going to rat me out, but he doesn’t. Instead, he turns his attention back to my father and Tony Maggiano who hovers by his side.

“Not quite as comfortable as what I’m used to,” Rafferty responds, lips curling up in a sardonic grin. “Maybe we could undo the cuffs?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What’s the point of this?” Rafferty presses. “How long do you plan to keep me down here?”

“Maybe I wasn’t clear before, but you’re going to rot down here.”

“I’m not the one who married your daughter.”

“Yes, that’s true. You’re just the drunken fool who was easier to catch. But don’t worry. I’ll get my hands on Liam at some point and he’s going to suffer the same fate. When I’m done, your entire family will be wiped out. There won’t be one O’Shea left in this town.”

“There are better ways to end the rivalry between our families.”

“Fuck the rivalry. I’m going to crush your family into oblivion, O’Shea.”

My father’s threatening words stun me. I’ve always suspected he could be violent and had a temper, but I’d never really witnessed it because he kept that side well-hidden from me and my siblings. But now that I’m seeing this

ruthless side of him up close and personal, my stomach sours. I never wanted to believe the rumors or witness his dark side.

And now I have a front row seat.

My father unlocks the cell and swings the iron door open. “Go ahead, Tony. Have some fun with this O’Shea filth. And don’t go easy on him.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Tony practically growls.

Then my father turns on his heel and walks back up the steps. Meanwhile, Tony enters the cell, grabs Rafferty by his shirt and drags him up. The chains clank and Rafferty can’t even defend himself as Tony begins to pummel him with his meaty fists.

I cringe with every blow and squeeze my eyes shut when Rafferty finally drops to the ground. After a few well-placed kicks, Tony spits on him and walks out of the cell. He re-locks it and leaves.

All I hear is the drip of water in the tunnels behind me and Rafferty’s heavy, pained breathing. The whole thing makes me sick to my stomach, and I start questioning who my father really is.

When I’m sure the coast is clear, I step out of my hiding place and wander closer to the man in the cell. They’re treating him like a criminal. Or some kind of rabid animal. I feel awful, but what can I do?

He’s lying on his side and when he sees me, he rolls onto his back and begins coughing. There’s blood at the corner of his mouth and I see that Tony re-split his lip. Tears burn my eyes. I don’t care who this man is—he doesn’t deserve this.

At that moment, I have no idea what to do, but the way he’s lying on the cold, stone floor, bleeding and chained up, tugs at my heartstrings.

“Still have any doubts over your father being a cold-hearted murderer?” he rasps, swiping at the blood trickling into his dark beard. With a loud, pained grunt, he pulls himself up then drops back against the wall.

Confusion fills me and I don’t have any words. All I know is that I need to get the hell out of here. Turning, I hurry toward the staircase and race up it on

silent feet. Then I unlock the door, peer out and see the coast is clear.

After shutting and locking the door, I sneak back down to my father's office and replace the key before he figures out it's gone. Clearly, they used Tony's copy to get downstairs and I'm lucky I didn't get caught. If they'd tried to use the one in his desk drawer, I would've been busted.

I race up to my room, shut the door and release a shaky sigh.

I am not okay with whatever is going on. The question swirling through my head is how do I stop it without incurring my father's wrath like Rory did?

How can I help the stranger in the basement?

And, the even better question is should I? Or will he try to slit my throat the moment I unlock his manacles?

RAFFERTY

That first week spent in this dank, dark, dreary cell feels like an eternity. There's nothing to do except listen to the incessant drip, drip, drip of water from the ceiling and tunnels beyond. The only other thing I do is count the rats that scurry by and listen to the footsteps above as people walk back and forth.

I can't help but wonder if any of those lighter steps belong to Marino's daughter?

I still can't believe she had the nerve to sneak down here and talk to me. I know what I must look like and I'm surprised my gruff, mountain man appearance didn't scare her off. My dark beard is growing in more every day and crusted with blood, and my hair, which I always keep a little longer on top, is in dire need of a trim. I must look like a yeti to her refined eyes.

At first, I wasn't sure who she was, but after racking my brain, I remember Rory mentioning a younger sister named Sofia. The young woman with the amazing hazel eyes and long, wavy chestnut hair must be her. The resemblance is there, but there's a big difference, too. While Rory is more curvy with a heart-shaped face, Sofia reminds me of a doll. Her features are small and dainty—a pert, button nose, small hands and the tiniest waist I've ever seen. And so graceful. She moved across the room as though she floated. And, she possesses an air of fragility and looks like she might break if touched.

When I first opened my eyes and saw her, I swear I thought I'd died and she

was an angel standing there.

I'm not sure I'd know what to do with such an ethereal, elegant, delicate creature. Not that it matters. Now that she's satisfied with her curiosity and saw the monster locked up in the basement, I sincerely doubt that I will ever see her again.

Yet, a part of me hopes I'm wrong. Maybe she'll sneak back down here again.

That's silly, though. Why would she?

Unfortunately for me, Matteo's right-hand man Tony Maggiano keeps coming down here and he thoroughly enjoys beating my ass. Being chained to the damn wall doesn't let me defend myself very well and I'm not exactly the fighter of my family. That would be Conor who fights on the underground circuit. He boxes and also knows mixed martial arts.

Me, though? Not so much. And chained to this damn wall doesn't even allow me to throw a punch. So I have to take his beatings as best as I can and try to twist out of the way when he's targeting my kidney. Because that hurts like hell. He's also split my lip more times than I can count now and the swelling isn't going down. In fact, it just keeps getting worse.

I'm surprised Sofia didn't run screaming from here after she saw me.

Stop thinking about her, I tell myself. It's counterproductive. Right now, I need to figure out how the hell I'm going to escape because the situation isn't getting any better. In fact, I think it's growing more dire with each passing day. Matteo Marino told me I'm going to rot down here and I'm beginning to think that he wasn't bluffing.

Wondering if my family knows what's going on, I sit up a little straighter, gaze searching the cell and area around me for something I can use to aid my escape. Liam and the others will know I'm missing by now, but do they have any idea Marino is the one who kidnapped me?

If they don't, I am on my own.

It's a scary thought because I've always relied on my older brothers to handle things. Liam and Conor are confident, level-headed and have take-charge

attitudes. So many times, I've let them make the important decisions and not bothered expressing my opinion. But ever since our dad died, they've included me and our little sister Finley in everything, and I realize that I appreciate it. I want to be heard and more involved.

It occurs to me that I might not get out of this hellhole unless I figure it out for myself. I have a feeling my brothers aren't going to charge in and find me. No one is going to help me escape from here except me.

My gaze sweeps the floor and I spot a small rock laying over in the dark corner. Scooting sideways, I stretch my arm, pulling the chain taut, and reaching as far as I can. My fingertips brush the rock, but I'm still too far away to grab it. With a groan, I pull harder, until it feels like my shoulder is going to pop from its socket and, after struggling another few minutes, I manage to maneuver the rock closer and finally pull it over to me.

It's not a big rock by any means, but I test its weight in my hand then bang it against the chain link. Not much seems to happen so I try hitting one of the cuffs circling my wrist. Again, I don't see any real results, but if I keep working on it, I'm hoping I can break free.

After a few hours, I've made some dents and I'm about to slam the rock down again when the door opens and Tony appears. Great. Hiding the rock behind my body, I watch him unlock the cell and step inside.

"What're you doing?" he asks, dark eyes full of suspicion. "I heard pounding."

"Nothing," I lie.

Tony grabs my shirt, yanks me up off the ground and slams a fist into my face. The back of my head hits the rock wall and my knees buckle.

Fuck, that hurt.

Stars appear at the edges of my vision and I raise my hands to deflect Tony the Titan's massive boots that begin kicking me. The man is a damn colossus. Like Goliath and I feel like David. Except unlike David in the story, I'm not winning. I'm getting my ass kicked. Again. But it's hard to block his blows with the chains pulling at my wrists, holding me back, and so I curl up into a ball, trying in vain to protect myself.

After what feels like forever, but is probably only five minutes, Tony leaves and all I can do is lay here. Fuck me. Every part of my body aches and the asshole split my lip again. Everything hurts like a bitch and I roll onto my back and groan.

I'm not sure how much more of this I can take.

Very slowly, I move my arms and make sure nothing is broken. My ribs are killing me and I'm pretty sure they're bruised. Lightly pressing my fingers to my ribcage, I grit my teeth, and make sure they're all intact. Doesn't feel like any broke, so I guess that's a good thing. The one bright side in this shitty situation.

The moment I start feeling a little better, Tony appears again. And from that point forward, the beatings happen like clockwork. By the time a guard brings me dinner—a measly couple pieces of bread and glass of water again—I can't even pick it up. I'm in a world of pain and my eyes slide shut.

The constant beatings are keeping me subdued and an absolute mess, so I can't focus on escaping any longer. I'm sure that's their plan. All I can think about is the pain and trying to manage it. And, of course, my hate for Matteo Marino fills my head and grows exponentially.

There's no way I can escape when I can't even sit up. It's impossible.

I'm not sure how much time passes after my final beating of the day, but it must be night and Tony the Titan has finally gone to bed and given me a temporary reprieve. At least until morning when I have a feeling the whole terrible routine is going to start all over again. Every time I try to move, lightning bolts of pain shoot through my body. I'm on my side, cheek pressed to the cold concrete, and every breath I draw into my lungs hurts.

As I'm praying for sleep so I can escape the pain, I hear my cell door open, but I can't even open my eyes. Assuming Tony is back for another round of kick-my-ass, I cringe, waiting for the first blow. But it never comes. Instead, a cool cloth presses against my face and I flinch as someone begins to gently wipe it over my cheek.

When I finally manage to pry my eyes open, I see an angel. Lit up from the glow of her nearby phone, Sofia carefully cleans the dried, crusty blood from

my face.

“Why’re you doing this?” I rasp, not even recognizing my own voice. I can’t remember the last time I drank anything and my throat feels scratchy and dry.

The smell of chicken hits my nose and I notice a tray of steaming food nearby. My empty stomach growls and I roll onto my back, chains rattling. At least my ribs aren’t rattling, too.

“Take these,” she whispers.

She offers what looks like a few pills and I hesitate.

“What’re they?” I ask warily.

“Painkillers.”

I’ve never felt this awful in my entire life and I try to reach for the pills, but my arm drops short, not able to do what my brain wants. To take the damn pills she’s offering. Every move I make is an effort and my eyes roll back in my head.

“Open up,” she says softly.

My eyes flutter open and she’s holding the pills in front of me. Carefully, I open my mouth, trying not to stretch my split lip too far. She places the pills into my mouth and I feel the brush of her soft fingers. Then she lifts a bottle of water to my lips and pours some in my mouth to help wash them down my throat.

My gaze latches onto her pretty hazel eyes, so full of concern. Why is she doing this? The question haunts me as she lifts a small bag of ice and very carefully holds it against my mouth.

“This will help the swelling go down,” she tells me.

I have no words and I appreciate her help. Though a part of me is suspicious. Maybe Sofia is more like Rory than her bloodthirsty father.

It finally occurs to me that she’s in the cell with me and I reach up and snake my fingers around her wrist, startling her.

“How did you get in here?” I ask.

“I took the key from my father’s desk. And the one for your cell was hanging right over on the hook on the wall.”

“Why?” I manage to ask.

She pulls her wrist away and moves back slightly. Obviously she doesn’t trust me and I don’t blame her. I must look like some kind of wild, feral animal.

Instead of answering, she sets the ice bag aside and lifts the water bottle again. “You need to drink more. You’re dehydrated.”

Sofia tilts the bottle and I sip greedily, starting to feel a little better. At least more like a human being again.

“Slowly,” she murmurs.

I choke slightly because I’m still lying down and I wipe away the water that drips down my face. God, I feel like a child. It’s pathetic.

“Easy,” she says. Then she puts the ice against my lips again. “You should get stitches, but if you keep this on, it should help.”

A part of me contemplates overpowering her and escaping, but I’m too damn weak.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I remind her, my voice sounding less hoarse after drinking. “Why’re you doing this?”

“Because this isn’t right. My father has gone off the deep end since Rory ran off with Liam. He’s so angry and he has no right to be taking it out on you.”

Hmm. That’s a nice thought and all, but I still don’t trust her. I can’t believe a thing out of any Marino’s mouth. For all I know, she has her own agenda and it isn’t empathy guiding her actions. It’s something secret and selfish.

The smell of the food fills my nose and I glance over at the steaming tray.

“Are you hungry?” she asks.

“Starving,” I admit.

“Can you sit up a little? I can help you.”

Eyeing her, still not sure why the hell she's doing this, I struggle to move into a sitting position. She grabs my elbow and helps me lean back against the wall.

"Good," she murmurs encouragingly. "That's better." Then she reaches for the tray, pulls it closer and cuts up some chicken. After spearing a piece, she lifts the fork to my lips and I open my mouth and pull it off with my teeth. My eyes never leave her and I follow each movement she makes.

I'm fascinated by the gentle way she's feeding me and even though I try to harden my heart toward her, the kindness she's showing me is slipping in through the cracks, softening my attitude toward her. I'm grateful for her ministrations, but I'm also not stupid. The moment I feel better, stronger, I won't hesitate to overpower her and leave this prison I'm stuck in.

I just have to figure out how to get these damn cuffs off.

My gaze moves to her hair, wondering if there's a hairpin somewhere in that mass of chestnut waves. Damn, her hair is thick and gorgeous. The urge to run my fingers through it hits me out of the blue and I quickly shove the annoying thought away.

I shouldn't be having sexual thoughts about my captor's daughter. What the fuck is wrong with me? Focus, Raff, I scold myself. Find something to use to pick these damn cuffs. They've been on for over a week now and chafing my skin raw.

Sofia must have noticed because next thing I know she picks up a tube of antibiotic ointment off the tray and says, "Let me see your wrists."

I finish chewing a mouthful of potatoes and swallow, then I lift my right arm, offering her the red, irritated wrist. Very carefully, Sofia applies the medicated lotion to each wrist and I watch closely, unable to look away.

"Are you a nurse or something?" I ask.

A surprised look crosses her lovely face. "No. But lately, I've been giving it some thought."

"About becoming one?"

She nods. “I like helping people, I guess. And I don’t want to be stuck under my father’s care in this house forever. Even though my studies haven’t prepared me for a career, I’d like to have one.”

There’s no doubt in my mind that she’d make an excellent nurse. Her bedside manner is impeccable and downright soothing. I should be hating her right now just because of her last name, but I find myself enjoying her company and hanging on every word that comes out of her small, heart-shaped mouth.

I try to tell myself it’s only because I haven’t had any decent company down here and it’s merely loneliness.

The painkillers begin kicking in and it’s a blessed relief. The food and Sofia’s care have helped and I’m feeling much better than before, but I’m exhausted. After spending almost 45 minutes with me, Sofia stands up.

“I should go.”

We both look up, listening to the sudden sound of footsteps above and I glance over and see the fear in her green-brown eyes. She clearly doesn’t want to get caught down here with me. And certainly not after helping me.

I watch her grab the tray, covering it with a large cloth napkin and stand up.

“Wait!” I exclaim. I don’t know what I even want to say to her; I just don’t want her to leave.

Sofia pauses and waits expectantly.

“Thank you, Sofia.”

Her eyes widen when I say her name, but then she nods. “You’re welcome, Rafferty.”

Then she walks out of the cell, re-locks it, hangs the key back up on the hook and starts up the staircase.

And just like that, my angel disappears, taking all of the light with her and, once again, I’m left alone in the gloom.

SOFIA

After leaving the basement and returning to my room, my thoughts are consumed by Rafferty O'Shea. I don't trust him and I was terrified to go in the cell with him. But he was too weak to hurt me or attempt to escape. However, after cleaning him up, giving him painkillers and feeding him, I have no doubt that he's going to grow stronger again.

Unless, of course, they keep beating the holy hell out of him.

I squeeze my eyes shut, picturing all of the bruises and cuts. He can't even defend himself chained to the wall like he is. It's an unfair fight and it makes me sick. A part of me wants to call Rory right now and tell her what's happening, but I hesitate. She would tell Liam and he'd come charging over here to rescue his brother. And, in the process, that could cause a full-scale war. I don't want to jeopardize anyone, especially my mom and siblings. I need to be smart about how I handle the situation so no one else gets hurt.

For now, I can help Rafferty by bringing him food and more painkillers. Tony doesn't seem to go down in the basement past 10 PM, so I should be safe after that. The temptation to help Rafferty escape lingers at the back of my mind.

But, God, if my father ever found out I'm helping Rafferty much less if I let him escape, I'd be dead in his eyes. Just like Rory.

My chest tightens. I don't want that, but I don't agree with what he's doing, either.

But who is Rafferty and why would I risk the relationship I have with my family to help him? A total stranger? A man who would most likely hurt someone I love without a second thought.

A man who is my enemy.

No, it's far too risky. Even just sneaking down there with leftovers and painkillers is asking for trouble. The chance of being caught is high if I'm not careful.

Why are you doing this, Sofia? I ask myself. But, deep down, I know the reason. The truth is, I feel bad for him. He looks absolutely pathetic and helpless. Like a wounded lion. Despite the risk, I know I'll go back down there again.

I just hope my empathy won't prove to be my downfall, and that my wounded lion won't turn on me. Because the moment he feels better, it's a very likely assumption that he would try to overpower me and escape.

Even though I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, it's wise for now to take it one day at a time.

So, for the next week, I sneak down every single night and bring Rafferty leftovers from our dinner and medicine. Each time, he's bleeding or sporting some new bruise and it makes my heart ache and my conscious duel.

On the one hand, I should let him go. Just unlock him and point him toward the tunnels. They'll dump him right out on the riverfront. Well, as long as he doesn't get lost or they haven't caved in somewhere over the years.

On the other hand, I'm growing used to his company and the selfish part of me doesn't want him to leave. As silly as it may sound, I feel less lonely and he's actually enjoyable to be around. He has a dry, sarcastic side that makes me smile and, for whatever crazy reason, I get the feeling that he's starting to enjoy my company, too.

Later that night, as he devours an entire plate of food, I study him closely. He's been a prisoner down here for two weeks and he's wild-looking and unkempt. But beneath the long, greasy hair and beard, there's no mistaking Rafferty O'Shea is an attractive man.

“How old are you?” I ask, squinting at him in the dim light. It’s so hard to tell and my curiosity is overwhelming me. I’m not sure why I have the sudden desire to know everything about him, but I think it has to do with the fact that I’m so lonely. Not visiting Rory has taken its toll.

His piercing, light blue eyes lift and meet mine. “Twenty-six. You?”

God, those eyes of his are striking. I swallow hard, trying to ignore their magnetic pull. “Twenty-three.”

“You’re a baby,” he murmurs, instantly writing me off, and takes a long drink of the juice I brought him.

“You’re only three years older than me,” I insist.

“I’m a lifetime older than you, little girl.”

I straighten up and cross my arms. Every time I come down to visit him, I make sure I don’t sit too closely. Always remaining just out of his reach. I’d be a fool to trust him. Especially since I’m developing a soft spot for this prisoner. My family’s mortal enemy.

It all seems so ridiculous and the more I think about it, the more I believe it’s time to bury the hatchet and let the old feud go. But how do I convince my father and Giovanni, my older brother who’s being groomed to take over after our dad steps down?

I know I need to tread carefully, but I’m curious how Rafferty feels about the situation. “Can I ask you something?” I ask quietly.

“You can ask anything you want. Doesn’t mean I’m going to answer you, princess.”

“Princess?” I echo. “I am not a—”

“Sure you are. I can tell by looking at you that you lead a cushy life and get whatever you want. Didn’t you say you went away to school, but never studied anything of importance? And that you sit around the house all day and do nothing?”

Anger and disbelief infuse me, and I frown, sitting up straighter. Normally, I’m the more quiet one, but when someone irritates me, I will not hesitate to

put them in their place. My fuse is generally slow to light, but once it's lit, watch out. I will explode quickly. "Excuse me, but you don't even know me. How dare you judge me?"

"Oh, I know you're type," he assures me arrogantly. "Daddy's Little Girl."

The spark of anger becomes a roaring flame, and I cross my arms over my chest. "I suggest you be more polite or you can enjoy your bread and water again."

It's a mean threat, but he's making me mad. For a moment, he gets quiet and must realize he crossed the line. And that I could so easily never come back down here again.

"Sorry," he grumbles. "I shouldn't have said that."

The way he backpedals so quickly tells me he doesn't want to lose the small privileges of extra food and medicine. I won't delude myself into believing he also enjoys my company. I'm not stupid and I know he's using me as much as I'm using him.

And it's a dangerous situation to be in.

"I should go," I say and stand up. It's getting late and I don't feel like spending any more time with him when he thinks I'm a brat. And it's clear as day that the camaraderie we had earlier is long gone. As I reach for the tray, he picks it up first and hands it over to me.

"Sofia?"

I take the empty tray and meet his incredible ice-blue eyes. Against my will, my pulse kicks up a notch.

"Yes?" Why does my voice sound so husky? So...needy?

"I hope you'll come down again tomorrow." When I don't respond, he continues, "Because I really do enjoy your company."

My company or the food? I want to ask. But, I don't. Instead, I turn and walk out of the cell, locking it up behind me and putting the key back on the hook. Rafferty O'Shea is a mystery and I'm not sure I want to figure him out because I may be very disappointed with what I find.

After replacing the tray in the kitchen and sneaking back up to my room, I get ready for bed, slip into my nightgown and crawl under the covers. All this sneaking around is exhausting and I fall asleep the moment my head hits the pillow.

And that's when the dream happens.

I'm in the cell with Rafferty, but he isn't sporting the long hair and beard. Instead, his thick dark locks are trimmed up, but his bangs still fall slightly in his crystal blue eyes. Just enough to make my heart thunder. Only a light stubble covers his angular jaw and he's also no longer cuffed.

I notice this the moment he reaches a big hand up and cups my face.

"You're so beautiful, Sofia," he murmurs, lightly caressing my cheek.

I don't have much experience with men and I tend to keep my distance, but I lean into his touch, welcoming it. All of my inhibitions seem to fall away for some inexplicable reason. My gaze moves up to his lips which aren't too thin or too full. They are, in fact, perfect and look utterly kissable.

I wonder what he tastes like and how his lips would feel moving against mine.

So I throw caution to the wind and embrace my curiosity. Pushing up on my tip-toes, I blink slowly and meet his light blue eyes. Eyes that make me think of frozen icicles warmed by blue flame.

Ice and fire don't normally go together, but for whatever reason, I believe that Rafferty and I would complement each other. Very, very well.

"Kiss me," I murmur, sliding a hand around his neck and drawing him closer. He doesn't hesitate, lowers his mouth to mine and captures it in a soul-stirring kiss that leaves me wobbling on my feet.

Rafferty's mouth devours mine, his tongue tracing the seam of my lips then forcing its way inside my mouth. With a soft whimper, I welcome the intrusion, leaning back in his arms, and returning the kiss.

"I've been wanting to do that since the moment we met," he tells me.

"Really?"

He nods. "I could kiss you forever, Sofia. Until you're dying for more and inviting me to touch you."

"I want your hands on me," I tell him without reservation and more bold than I've ever been before.

"Tell me where, princess. Where do you want my hands?"

A jolt of heat spreads through me and arrows straight down to my core. I can feel the wetness pooling in my panties and wonder what it would feel like if he touched me there. In the very place I'm aching.

"Anywhere...everywhere..." I answer breathlessly.

His large hand slides from my face, down along my throat and continues down further. When it curves over my breast, he lightly squeezes and asks, "How about here?"

"Yes," I murmur, arching into his palm.

A moment later, his hand is on the move again and when it trails past my stomach and cups my mound, I gasp.

"Here?" he asks huskily.

A soft moan escapes my throat and my hips begin to move of their own accord. Searching for the pleasure only he can give me.

"You can have whatever you want, princess," he tells me. Then he's kissing me again and sliding his hand down the front of my leggings and into my wet panties. Wet is an understatement. They're soaked.

I'm dying to feel his touch and the intimate step I'm about to take with this man is getting me worked up. No one has ever made me so excited before or willing to throw caution to the wind. I'm ready to rip my clothes off and let Rafferty O'Shea take me against the stone wall.

And to hell with the rivalry.

My eyes pop open and I release a soft, shaky breath. Holy hell, I was just about to have sex with Rafferty. In my dream, of course, but still.

What is wrong with me? And where did that come from?

My hand languidly slides down my body and I realize my panties are freaking soaked. Biting my lip, there's no denying it: Rafferty O'Shea fascinates me and excites me in ways no one else has ever before.

And that scares me.

He also needs my help. I can't leave him in that basement to rot away and keep getting pummeled by Tony. But how can I help him escape without my father's wrath coming down on me?

I'm going to have to think extremely carefully about it. But, in the meantime, I'm looking forward to seeing him again tomorrow. Very forward to it.

When morning comes, I'm heading down the back staircase, intent on making tea, when I pause. Below me, I hear my father talking...to Tony. Cocking my head, I move closer, press against the wall and eavesdrop on their conversation.

"I think it's too soon," Tony says.

"Liam is threatening to burn the entire house down in order to find Rafferty," my father tells him and my heart picks up, thundering in my chest.

Liam suspects the truth—that my dad is behind the kidnapping of his brother.

"So you want me to kill him now?"

My head snaps up. Oh, God. No!

"It's best to eliminate him sooner rather than later. Not quite yet, though. I want to question him further. And, in the meantime, you and the other guards can still have a little more fun with him."

"Beating the shit out of Rafferty O'Shea is my new favorite thing to do."

They laugh and then I hear them walk into the kitchen.

This is the worst possible situation and it becomes crystal clear to me that I need to help Rafferty escape. And soon. Because if my father follows through on his threat, then Rafferty's days down in that basement are coming to a close fast.

And I refuse to let that happen.

RAFFERTY

Even though I should hate her, I'm yearning to see her again. Something about Sofia intrigues me and I can't quite figure out why she's sneaking down here every night and helping me.

What's in it for her? Why does she care?

I'm a disgusting mess and probably smell to high heaven. There's a small hole that drops down into pitch blackness to God only knows where and serves as my toilet. A small, dripping sink is in my reach and I splash water on my face and body every day, wiping the grime away with an old rag laying on its edge. At least I can swish my mouth out because Sofia snuck me a small bottle of mouthwash which I keep hidden beneath the rag.

I think Sofia must have a very empathetic soul and just feel bad for me. Of course, not bad enough or she'd help me break out of here. Doesn't matter, though, because I still plan on using her empathy against her. I will make her feel so bad that she helps me escape. I just hope it's sooner rather than later because I am damn sick of this cell and being chained to the wall.

At this point, I'm willing to do anything. And that includes being nice to my enemy. It's hard to call Sofia my enemy, though. She's such a bright light and so damn beautiful that she sometimes makes me forget what I'm saying right in the middle of my sentence. She also makes me forget that I should hate her.

I've never met anyone so lovely, so innocent. It's like she's completely unaware of our family's infamous rivalry and that we're supposed to despise

each other. Not be sneaking me meds and food. She also isn't supposed to be cleaning my wounds and chatting with me into the wee hours of the night.

It's clear that Sofia Marino is extremely lonely.

And I'm going to use that fact to help me get the hell out of here.

Refusing to feel guilty about using her naivete against her, I steel myself for her visit. I'm going to be charming, flatter her a little and see what information I can extract from her. I've noticed the tunnels beside my cell and I wonder if she knows where they lead. If I can get these damn cuffs off and open the cell door, I could try to escape that way. It's pitch black, though, and they could lead to a deadend. I have no idea.

When Sofia arrives, it's way earlier than I'm expecting. But I'm ready and sit up straighter, a grin lifting my mouth. "Hey, princess. This is a nice surprise. What brings you down here so early?"

Sofia shifts nervously and is about to open her mouth when the sound of footsteps above fills the air.

"Hide," I tell her as the door at the top of the staircase opens with a loud creak. The light flicks on as Sofia darts into the dark tunnels and I wait. Matteo appears, Tony by his side, and I narrow my eyes, refusing to show any fear. I won't let them intimidate me.

That's what I tell myself, but the moment Matteo opens his mouth, my blood runs cold.

"You've outgrown your stay here, I'm afraid," Matteo tells me.

"Does that mean you're letting me go?" I ask, playing dumb. I know it doesn't and it occurs to me that I'm in big fucking trouble.

He chuckles and my skin crawls. "No. But I do have a few questions for you." Matteo approaches the cell and I meet his gaze, steady and unflinching. I may not be a prize fighter like Conor, but I close my hands into fists and get ready to defend myself. If they think I'm going down without a fight, they're crazy.

I watch Tony unlock the barred door and they both enter.

“Is it true that your brother Liam eliminated all of your family’s enforcers?”

Pressing my lips together, I shrug a shoulder. I’m not offering this bastard any inside information on my family.

“And he plans to pull out of all illegal activities?”

Again, I don’t respond.

Matteo releases a deep, annoyed, extremely impatient breath then slants a look at Tony. “Make him talk.”

Shit. Here we go. I steel myself for the beating I’m about to get.

But as Tony approaches me, Matteo suddenly lifts a hand. “Wait!” Rolling up his sleeves, Matteo walks up to me instead, his dark eyes glittering dangerously. “Tony, hand me that broom over there.”

With wary eyes, I watch Tony walk out of the cell and grab the broom. Then he returns and passes it to Matteo.

“Do you have any idea how many things I could do with this to hurt you? To violate you?” he asks evilly. “To defile you?”

My heart stops and every horrible thought possible flashes through my mind. Fucking hell. We both know the possibilities are endless and I shift on the concrete floor, ready to jump up if he comes one step closer.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I don’t want a broomstick anywhere it doesn’t belong.

“Lucky for you, I’m not very creative and the last thing I want to see is your bare ass.”

I let out the breath I’m holding, but his words don’t reassure me.

“I do believe in a good, old-fashioned beating, though.”

The moment he lifts the broomstick, I pop up and try to grab it out of his hands, my chains clanging. We wrestle it back and forth between us, and I quickly realize I’m stronger. I would totally be able to wrench it out of his hands if Tony didn’t step in. The moment he punches me in the gut, I let out a pained oomph and bend over, clutching my stomach. I swear to God, his fists feel like twin slabs of concrete and it takes me a moment to catch my breath.

I'm about to stand back up when the broom handle slams down against my back over and over with cruel, vicious hits. With a sharp cry, I drop, knees hitting the cement. I don't want any of the repeated blows to strike my head, so I turn to the side, trying to avoid that from happening.

Matteo curses up a storm as he beats the ever-living crap out of me and, at some point, I give up trying to fight back. Breathing hard, Matteo finally steps away and my gaze moves to the broken handle. It's the only reason he stopped and I'm glad it broke or the beating would've continued.

Throwing the two broken pieces of wood, Matteo slicks his hair back and unrolls his sleeves, re-buttoning them at the cuff.

"You have no idea how good that felt, O'Shea."

Mentally cursing him, I stay down and hope to hell he leaves. All sorts of potential ideas for retribution flit through my mind and I promise myself one thing—Matteo Marino's demise won't be swift and I will do anything and everything in my power to make him suffer. Emotionally and physically.

The cell door clangs shut and I let my fists slowly uncurl. Damn, it feels like I just got tossed out the back of a speeding truck and then bounced along the concrete road for about a mile. Every little movement causes a rippling of pain through my body and I try not to let them see how much I hurt. That I'm on the verge of passing out.

"Don't worry, O'Shea, your time in this cell is coming to a swift end," Matteo tells me. Then he and Tony turn and head back upstairs. The light goes out, plunging me back into darkness, and the door slams shut and the lock clicks.

A groan rips from my throat and I fall forward, letting the pain consume me. When I hear a soft sound, I look up and see Sofia's shadowy form, standing outside my cell. Damn, I forgot she was still down here, hiding.

There's a horrified look on her face and, honestly, all it does is piss me off. "If you're going to stand there and gawk, just get the hell out," I snarl, turning my head, refusing to look at her. I don't want her to realize how badly I'm hurting right now and if she sees my eyes, she'd know. Immediately.

"Rafferty, I'm so sorry," she murmurs quietly.

I'm planning to ignore her, but I can't. My head snaps up and I glare at her. "You're just as much to blame as your father."

I can't miss her sharp intake of breath.

"I think you get a kick out of this—watching me suffer and playing the Good Samaritan. Well, I don't want your food or your sympathy. Go! Leave!"

Gritting my teeth against the waves of pain wracking my body, I know I'm fucking up my escape plan by pushing her away, but I'm sick of it. She isn't going to help me escape, so she can go straight to hell right along with her father and their entire goddamn family.

"I'll help you escape," she whispers, fingers twined through the bars.

Her words catch me by surprise. "Really?" I force out, hoping I heard her correctly, but not quite believing her. I'm having trouble focusing on anything but the pain.

"I'm sorry I didn't do it sooner. But I was scared."

"If you're serious," I say, dragging myself up carefully, and grimacing, "we need to devise a plan. Right now."

When she nods, I try not to show my excitement.

"First thing you need to do is get the key for these cuffs," I tell her, lifting my hands.

"I know where it is," she states, a resolute tone in her voice that gives me hope.

"Then we need to do it tonight. My time is running out fast. According to your father," I add for good measure.

"I didn't believe he'd do it, but now..." Her voice trails off.

"Now you saw firsthand what a monster he is and the rage fueling him," I finish for her. "You heard him, Sofia. He's going to kill me, and if you fail to help me get out of here then you're an accomplice to my murder."

Let's see how she feels about that.

Sofia shakes her head. “No. I will show you how to escape.” Her gaze drops to my handcuffs. “I’ll return after I get the key. I’m not sure how long it’s going to take me, though.”

I give her a sharp nod. “Well, I’ll be here. Waiting on pins and needles.”

My voice is dry, heavy with sarcasm, but she doesn’t seem to notice. I think she’s too upset that I said she’d be an accomplice to murder.

“I’ll be back as soon as possible,” she promises. Then she jogs up the stairs on silent feet and I hope to God this isn’t the last time I see Sofia Marino. Because I have a plan that’s coming together in my head, fast and furious.

And it starts with using her to aid my escape...and my revenge.

I just need to hang in there a little bit longer. But, in the meantime, I’ve come to the conclusion that Sofia sneaking down here these past couple of weeks was nothing short of a miracle.

Ignoring the little bit of guilt rising inside of me for what I’m about to do, I let out a sigh and go over the details in my head. As soon as she gets these blasted cuffs off my wrists, I’ll find out if the tunnels can lead me out of here. I’m willing to bet they were used to transport booze back during Prohibition and they’ll lead us straight down to the waterfront. I’ll tell her that I need her to guide me through the dark maze because, my luck, I’d get lost in there.

Then, after we get out, I’m going to kidnap Sofia Marino and turn the tables on Matteo. He’s going to pay and I’m going to use his daughter to exact my vengeance.

SOFIA

Once the coast is clear, I sneak into my father's office and steal the key to the handcuffs. He went upstairs, presumably to see my mother, Anna. They rarely spend any time together lately and when they do, it tends to end in an argument. Especially after he found out she'd been visiting Rory and baby Griffin.

I don't know when exactly it happened, but it's like my father has turned into a different man. The darkness of his enterprises have finally caught up to him and infiltrated his soul. He's becoming a stranger to—to his entire family—and that makes me sad.

It's still fairly early, barely 9 PM, so I know I need to move fast. Just in case he decides to come back down here to his office and work more because it's been known to happen. Swiping the key from his top drawer, I hurry out, then I quickly grab a few things in a small bag for Rafferty to take with him—some painkillers, a couple bottles of water and several granola bars. It's not much, but it should help him on his journey home.

I also take a wickedly-sharp knife from a kitchen drawer. I'm taking a big risk on a man I don't trust. I may be somewhat naive at times, but I'm not stupid. If he turns on me and forces me to defend myself, I will.

Once I reach the basement door, I pause, listening closely to see if anyone is around. After a few minutes, I only hear low creaks as the house settles. The coast is clear and I unlock the door.

I reach for the door handle, wrap my hand around it and freeze up. Can I

really go through with this? Can I trust Rafferty not to hurt me once I let him out of his prison?

Not really, but what am I supposed to do? Stand back and pretend everything is going to be okay? Because at this point, I know my father is going to kill him. Or, more like than likely, have Tony kill him.

It's now or never.

I turn my phone's flashlight on and open the door. Clutching the cell phone in one hand and the knife and bag in my other, I head back down into the gloomy basement, for the last time, determined to set Rafferty O'Shea free. I can't live with his death on my conscience, knowing I could've helped him, but didn't. Truthfully, I feel awful for waiting this long. But it's been ingrained in my head that he's dangerous and his family will hurt me the first opportunity they get.

He's so much bigger than me and I'm scared he's going to turn on me.

Helping a wounded lion has its risks. I just hope he doesn't bite.

Swallowing down my nerves, I reach the bottom of the stairs and walk over to the cell. As usual, he's sitting up with his back against the wall, waiting for me.

"You came back," he says, sounding relieved.

"I told you I'd help and that's exactly what I'm going to do." I set the bag down, white-knuckling the knife, and nod to it. "I brought you a few things."

"And a knife, I see." His tone is dry, yet wary.

"The knife isn't for you. It's to ensure my protection."

Pulling in a deep, steadying breath, I grab the key off the wall hook and open the door. Stepping inside, I hesitate, my gaze meeting his over the glow of my cell's flashlight. Something flashes in the depths of his light blue eyes and he watches closely, waiting as I lift the key to the handcuffs.

But before I unlock them, I say, "I'm going to unlock your cuffs and you can sneak out of here through the tunnels. If you try to hurt me in any way, I won't hesitate to stab you." I show him the knife again, making sure he can

see how sharp it is.

“Well, I hope it won’t come to that,” he says, eyeing my weapon.

“That’s completely up to you.”

Rafferty nods then slowly stands up. God, he’s so much taller than I ever realized and I look up, feeling like a pixie compared to this giant. He extends his hands, offering his wrists, and I take a tentative step closer. Trying not to let him see how badly I’m shaking, I keep my hands as steady as possible and unlock the first cuff. It drops and my heart is galloping inside my chest faster than a racehorse at the Kentucky Derby.

Before releasing the other one, I meet his gaze over the flashlight. It’s intense, also hopeful, and I hand him the light. “Hold this,” I say and he takes it. I need to get a better grip on the knife in my left hand while I open the other cuff.

Just in case.

My logical side is telling me I’m insane for doing this; while my foolish heart is cheering me on. Sticking the key into the lock, I twist it and the handcuff falls off his wrists and clatters against the concrete floor.

Shit. I did it.

He’s free.

Looking up, I meet Rafferty’s gaze and, before I can blink, his mouth is on mine. The kiss is hot, his lips so very soft, and I feel my body melt against his of its own accord. My mouth opens and, for a moment, I think he’s going to pull away because he freezes. But then he slides his tongue inside, angling my head back, and deepens the kiss.

He tastes like peppermints and, in the back of my mind, I pat myself on the back for sneaking him mouthwash. I forget about the knife in my hand and it drops, landing beside the discarded handcuffs.

My pulse is racing and I’ve never been kissed like this before. The chemistry between us is electric and all-consuming. When I lift my hands and begin to wrap them around his neck, he abruptly breaks the kiss and pulls away.

We're both breathing hard, a little at a loss for what just happened. Confusion briefly flashes through his ice blue eyes, but he quickly hides it and gives me a smirk.

"Thank you, Sofia," he says, voice husky, and hands my phone back.

I don't trust myself to speak, so I merely nod and take it.

Then he's moving fast, stalking out of the cell, scooping up the bag and opening it. He quickly pops a few of the painkillers and washes them down with some of the water. Afterward, he looks over at me and says, "I'm going to need your help maneuvering through the tunnels."

He's right. The tunnels are a maze and pitch black. He's going to need the light from my phone and me to guide him through to the end. I should give him a flashlight and say good luck. But, I can't. I'm in all the way now, so it's time to help him escape once and for all.

"Okay," I acknowledge. Suddenly remembering the knife, I bend over and scoop it up. I can't help but notice the way his mouth flattens.

"You really think you're going to need that?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. That's completely up to you."

"Let's go," Rafferty says and motions for me to lead the way.

Giving him the side eye, I hold my flashlight up in my left hand and the knife up in my right, and then quickly sidle past him. The tunnels are still as dank, dark and creepy as they were when we used to run through them as children. I haven't been through them in forever and I look for the permanent markers I used to use to help guide me through.

A large gouge in the rock that resembles a heart reminds me to turn left. A pair of matching boulders in the middle of the path still sit there and I circle around them and continue straight, glancing over my shoulder to see Rafferty right on my heels.

I pause where the tunnel splits, looking for the old marker we carved into the wall as children. I spot our initials—mine, Gio's, Rory's and Luca's—and can't help but smile. We'd spend endless hours down here playing and it all

comes back to me as though it were yesterday.

“Which way?” Rafferty asks, scratching his head.

“This way,” I tell him and move down the right hand tunnel.

“When’s the last time you’ve been down here?”

“Probably twenty years ago.”

“How do you remember where to go?” he asks.

“Because I’m smart like that,” I say teasingly and his mouth edges up.

“Well, I hope you know where you’re going.” Well, for the most part, anyway.

“I do,” I assure him. As we continue through the winding maze, my mind inevitably returns to the steamy kiss he gave me. I think the incredibly intense chemistry that exploded the moment our lips met caught us both by surprise.

Lately, I’ve had a few dreams and fantasies about kissing Rafferty—and doing a few other naughty things with him—so I had a feeling it would be good. But I didn’t have any idea it would be out-of-this-world fantastic. My knees are still shaky and my body feels like a bowl of quivering jelly.

Even so, I know nothing can happen between us. Tensions between our two families are too high and about to blow. Anything between us would just add to the fire—just like Rory and Liam.

Plus, there’s a huge difference between us and them. They love each other, got married and have a child. Rafferty doesn’t love me and there’s no promise of anything with him, much less his heart and tomorrow. And that’s what I need from a partner.

No, it’s best to help him escape and never see him again.

Or, so I try to convince myself.

Of course, I’m curious about what else could potentially happen between us, but those are dead-end thoughts. We do not have a future together. This marks the end of our story.

Despite how very much I enjoyed that kiss.

Oh, Lord, I think. Just forget about it, Sofe.

Consumed in my thoughts, I suddenly stop and look around. Did I miss a turn? Shit. I think I might have.

“What’s wrong? Are we going in the wrong direction?”

He sounds nervous and I lift my light and look around more closely. I’d been thinking too much about kissing Rafferty again when I should’ve been paying more attention to the tunnel.

I make a low humming noise and turn around. “Back this way,” I say and start back the way we just came from.

“Are you lost?”

“Need I remind you, it’s been twenty years since I’ve explored these tunnels. Cut me some slack and have a little faith.”

He grumbles something under his breath, but I’m too busy trying to figure out where I messed up to question it. Then I spot the deep puddle at the base of the wall. Ahh, right. I missed a turn and I guide Rafferty back onto the correct pathway to the river. Several of these turns lead to deadends so I’m doing pretty well right now because we haven’t hit any of those yet.

We walk for what feels like miles, but I sincerely doubt it. Eventually, we see the small door that will lead outside. “There,” I say, pointing to it. The door hasn’t been opened in forever and I’m not sure if it will open now. I try the small, rusty handle, but it doesn’t budge.

“Let me,” Rafferty offers, stepping up beside me.

I move over and watch him struggle for a minute. “Dammit,” he curses. Then his eyes drop to the knife in my hand.

“Can I use that?” he asks.

I didn’t bring him all the way here to be stuck. Or stabbed. And though this may be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done, I slowly lift my hand and offer the weapon.

“Thanks.” He gingerly takes it from my grip and turns back to focus on the door. After a few minutes of wedging the tip between the wall and warped wooden door, he manages to pry out some dirt and grim. Even a couple of small rocks.

“Okay, stand back,” he warns me.

I immediately do as he says and watch as he moves beside me then launches himself against the door. It rattles in its frame. After a few more hits, the door flies open and the crisp outside air hits my nose, clearing out the musty smell of the tunnels.

We step outside and I see we’re standing right on the edge of the river, near the docks, where at least one-hundred or so boats are secured in the harbor, bobbing up and down beneath the moonlight. In the old days, Rafferty could’ve stolen a boat for his getaway. Today, he just needs to catch an Uber.

Not quite as romantic, I think.

“There’s no way I would’ve gotten out of here without you,” Rafferty murmurs. He turns to face me and my heart speeds up. “Thank you, Sofia.”

Thank me with another kiss, I think.

As though he can hear me, Rafferty moves up to me, cups my face and lowers his head to capture my mouth with his.

My toes curl and all the blood in my body heats up. Wet warmth pools between my legs and I cover his hands with mine, relishing the slide of our tongues, falling under the spell he’s casting.

Once again, I melt against him, my breasts crushing against his chest and he groans, devouring my mouth in a kiss to end all other kisses.

And that’s the exact moment I hear my father yell my name.

RAFFERTY

Well, this isn't exactly how I planned for things to go down, but I take a perverse satisfaction and pleasure in knowing that Matteo Marino just witnessed my tongue down his daughter's throat. I finish the scorching kiss by licking her lips and grinding my pelvis against her.

Enjoy that, Marino, I think evilly. My taunt yields an angry roar from the man and he, Tony and several other enforcers stalk over, guns clutched in their hands.

"Get the fuck away from my daughter," he snarls, dark eyes blazing with fury.

Instead of pulling away, I spin Sofia around, using her as a shield, and lift the knife to her throat. "Sorry, princess," I murmur. She gasps, dropping her phone, and when she begins to struggle I reluctantly press the tip of the knife into her skin. I don't want to hurt her, but I need her to be scared and docile.

I need her to believe that I would slit her throat without thinking twice. Same goes for her bastard father.

They need to understand that I'm serious and a dangerous threat so I can escape without getting a bullet in my head.

"Let her go," Matteo demands, but he doesn't sound quite as sure of himself.

"Fuck you," I hiss, tightening my hold on Sofia.

"Rafferty," she whispers, clutching at my arm. I hear the betrayal in her

voice, the pleading, but I can't let myself care. It's time to show them what a cruel-hearted bastard I can be. That I can be just as evil as Matteo.

"Get the fuck out of my way, Marino. Throw your guns over there and step aside, or I will slit her throat from ear to ear." I dig the sharp tip in just a bit more and blood appears, sliding down the side of her neck. I immediately pull it back, not wanting to hurt her, only wanting to convince them that I'm serious. That I'd actually do it.

I wouldn't, though.

But it has to look real or I'm going to wind up back in that basement in chains. And they will torture me until I die a slow, painful death.

Apparently, Matteo believes me because he reluctantly tosses his gun and motions for the others to follow suit. They all do and I smirk.

Sofia's nails are digging into my forearms and I can feel the fear flowing through her. Good. I need her to be scared and take my threat seriously. Sorry, princess. Now for the worst part. She's never going to forgive me after this.

"Say goodbye to your daughter," I growl.

"Don't hurt her! Let her go!" Matteo demands.

But I shake my head. "No. She's coming with me."

"What?" Sofia sputters.

"Sofia is the key to my revenge," I tell Matteo darkly.

"If you so much as raise a hand against her—"

"I'm going to do better than that," I promise him. "I'm going to defile your youngest daughter and after I've had my fill of her sweet, little body, then I'll dump her back on your doorstep." Sofia tenses in my arms, but I continue. "The vile things I have planned would make you sick. I'm going to humiliate her and use her until she's nothing but a broken ragdoll."

Matteo swallows hard, biting back whatever comment is on the tip of his tongue. "You wouldn't dare," he finally manages to utter. But there's no

force behind his words.

I let my hand slide down over her breast and I squeeze it. Sofia yelps and I grin, pulling her flush against my body, walking backwards, away from the men. “Oh, but I would. And I’m going to enjoy making her scream.”

“You’re a dead man,” he growls.

“Not if I can help it.”

Matteo’s face is a blotchy reddish-purple and I toss him a jaunty salute. I’ve managed to get under his skin and I laugh. For once, I’m the one in charge and Matteo looks unsure. Mission nearly accomplished. Earlier, I spotted a man on his boat when we first came out and it occurs to me that I have a better chance of escaping by hijacking that boat rather than making our way up to the street and trying to find a taxi or make a run for it.

So, let’s play pirate, I think, dragging Sofia toward the dock. I’ve lowered the knife and luckily, she’s cooperating. I’m not sure how long that’s going to last, though, so we need to get on that boat fast.

“There’s nowhere to hide, O’Shea! We will hunt you down and you’re going to pay!” Matteo calls out, glaring at me.

But I ignore him and, as we pass by one of the guns they tossed, I bend over, pulling Sofia down with me. Throwing the knife aside, I pick up the gun and ignore the panic in Sofia’s voice when she says, “Please, let me go.”

“Not a chance in hell,” I say, scooping her up and tossing her over my shoulder. She weighs practically nothing and I easily step onto the boat, point the gun at the owner and order him to untie the ropes and hand over the key.

Without much of a choice, he follows my directions.

“Now get off,” I order him, and he jumps off so fast you’d think he had a fire lit under his ass.

Good. That’s one less thing to worry about. My gaze moves over to where Matteo stands at the end of the dock, watching us like a hawk. As long as he doesn’t move, I won’t have to fire this gun at him.

I lower Sofia back down to her feet and nod to the rope on the floor of the

boat. “Hand me the rope and put your hands together.”

Slowly, she does as I say and when our eyes meet, I’ve never seen so much hurt and distrust. Can’t worry about that, though. Yeah, I’m double-crossing her, being a disloyal, back-stabbing, treacherous asshole, but I have to save my own hide.

And, damn if she isn’t the sweetest revenge.

It all worked out so perfectly and I mentally congratulate myself. I’m going to bring Matteo to his knees and he will rue the day he had those men kidnap me.

Threaten to defile me? Ha! I loved throwing that word right back in his face in regards to his little girl. Bastard deserved it after that little stunt with the broomstick.

After securing Sofia’s hands, I push her down into the seat beside the captain’s chair. “Stay put. If you give me any grief or try to escape, you’ll regret it,” I warn her.

“I can’t believe I trusted you.”

“Me neither. That was a big mistake, princess.” I start the boat up and begin maneuvering it away from the dock.

“You’re such an asshole!”

Ignoring her, I guide the boat out of the harbor and hit the throttle. Waves explode behind us and we leave the dock and Matteo and his guards in the dust. Now it’s just the open water of Lake Michigan which may as well be the ocean. It’s huge and the wind is picking up, making the water out here a little rough.

My plan is to ride a little further away then ditch the boat and head over to my apartment. My brothers and I each have a small place in the city for when we need privacy and to get away from the compound. Basically, a place to hook up.

It’s been a couple of months since I’ve visited my apartment and I’ve been staying out in the country at my small house on my family’s property. We all

have our own house on the gated compound, but there's always the chance of someone popping in unexpectedly. Hence, the need for a more separate place away from the family.

I certainly couldn't go home with a tied-up Sofia. Everyone would know within five minutes. And, for now, she's my little secret. My hostage, my captive, my plaything. The tables have turned and every instinct in me is telling me to punish her just like Matteo did to me. Not only that—but also for gunning my father down.

Seaspray hits my face and for a brief moment I close my eyes and relish the cool night air on my skin. I've been locked up in that blasted basement for weeks and now I'm free. The first thing I'm going to do is shower and shave off this itchy beard. I've been eating well, thanks to Sofia, so I'm really not overly hungry. At least, not for food.

My gaze slides over to her and I think about the kiss we shared before her father appeared. It was far more heated than I intended and the incredible chemistry between us is undeniable and explosive in a most unexpected way.

No doubt about it. She's my revenge.

I have to be careful, though, because she could also be my undoing if I let her. There's clearly something between us and I have to resist the pull she has over me. But I can't help wanting more.

And I'm going to have more.

My threat to defile her wasn't merely bullshit. I want Sofia Marino beneath me, writhing, screaming my name. She woke up my dormant dick and the need to bury myself deep inside her is becoming an obsession. All those long, lonely days and nights, I couldn't stop thinking about her. It was almost more torturous some days than the beatings Tony inflicted upon me.

And now here we are. I can enjoy that sweet body of hers and also use her as retribution. My gaze slides over to where she sits in the co-pilot's chair, staring at me. The look in her beautiful hazel eyes is sharp with betrayal, but what the hell did she think I would do? Hand her back to her father?

No fucking way.

When I notice her pressing her lower lips together, it hits me that she might be about to cry. Aww, hell. I don't want to see her cry. I have a weakness when it comes to sobbing women and how am I going to enjoy fucking her when she's beneath me crying her damn eyes out?

That's going to kill the mood.

Already, my hardening dick deflates.

Fuck. I need to man up and not worry about her tears. Just take what I want, what I've been fantasizing about, and not let my conscience get involved.

I wonder if she's a virgin?

The thought flits through my mind. Is that going to stop me from taking her? No. In fact, I hope she hasn't been with another man because knowing I'm the one who's enjoyed her sweet, little body, the man who stole her virginity, is a huge slap across her father's smug face.

And I'm going to enjoy rubbing his nose into that truth. Revel in the fact that I'm the only one who's been balls-deep in his youngest daughter. It's going to crush him.

I can't fucking wait.

As much as I'd like to rip her clothes off and pound into her, I don't want to traumatize or hurt her, though. Especially if it's her first time. I promised to defile and humiliate her, but when it comes down to it, I want her to experience pleasure with me, too.

I want Sofia wet and slick with desire for me. I want her tight pussy clenching around my cock, milking it dry. That means I'm going to have to put some work into it.

Hmm. This might be the best plan I've ever come up with.

But when I meet her chilly gaze, there's no desire in those hazel depths. Yeah, I'm definitely going to have to put in some work. A lot of work, actually.

"Are you surprised by this?" I ask her.

The wind is whipping her long, chestnut hair around her face and she glares at me.

“You’re not who I thought you were,” she informs me.

Her words don’t come off as haughty or snotty. More like sad.

Dammit. If she were being a brat, I could be an asshole without a second thought. But that look on her face is killing me. Making the guilt creep up inside me until I’m almost second-guessing this plan.

No. I squash it down. For all I know, she’s a consummate actress and she could be putting on a show. Tricking me into letting her go with crocodile tears.

Forget it, Sofia Marino, I think. I’m going to get my revenge and you’re now a part of that plan whether you like it or not. And I refuse to feel one more ounce of guilt over it.

I have to do what I have to do.

SOFIA

Fighting back tears, I look away from Rafferty and stare straight ahead at the dark night in front of us. He turned on me and showed me his true colors, and now I feel like a fool. What was I thinking? Why did I actually believe I could trust him? He's an O'Shea and he hates my family. I should've known better.

Maybe my father is right.

I hate thinking that, but Rafferty has proven what a cold-hearted bastard he can be. Fear trickles through me when I think about his threat.

Threat or promise?

I've never had sex before and the idea of him forcing himself on me brings a fresh onslaught of tears to my eyes. What kind of monster would do that? He claims he wants revenge, though, so why wouldn't he? It's clear that I am merely a pawn in his game of revenge and I let myself get tricked.

Blinded by my empathy, I made the foolish mistake of believing he was a decent human being. So much for that. He's shown me his true colors and that he's a complete, unfeeling asshole.

The boat Rafferty stole bounces over the waves and the lake is rough tonight. Gripping onto my seat so I don't fall off it, I dare a glance over at him, squinting against the wind and mist of water hitting my face. His strong profile is set, determined, and he's focused on the dark watery path ahead of us. Every so often, he glances toward the shoreline, maybe trying to figure

out where to stop and what comes next.

I have no idea what his plan is. Is he going to drag me out to the O'Shea family compound, kicking and screaming? I hope so. Then I can call for Rory and she'll run over to save me.

That would be too easy, though, and it's not what happens. After about 15 minutes, Rafferty pulls the boat up to a deserted section of the shoreline. "C'mon," he says, standing up.

I'm in no hurry to follow him, but I want to get off this dreaded boat. It's making me nauseous. I've never had a very strong stomach when it comes to anything that jolts or bounces me around overly much. Roller Coasters, for example, have me heaving in no time. Apparently, so do stolen boat rides across Lake Michigan in the dead of night.

Reluctantly, I follow Rafferty to the edge and when he reaches over to help me climb out, I yank my tied wrists away and hiss, "Don't touch me." Annoyed, I manage to climb down all by myself, albeit a little shakily, and send him a piercing glare.

I don't like mixed messages and that's exactly what he's sending me. He just kidnapped me and I'm flipping tied up right now, so I don't need him pretending to be a gentleman. It makes me angry and I bristle, bringing my bound wrists up and pressing my arms against my body for some extra heat. The chill in the air leaves me shivering.

"This way," he tells me, grabs my arm, and pulls me along. I try to shake his grip off, but he only tightens it and I make a frustrated, very annoyed sound in the back of my throat.

"Stop growling at me, princess," he says.

"Stop calling me that," I snap.

Rafferty shakes his head. "Behave yourself or I'll toss you back over my shoulder again."

"Don't you dare."

"Then stop being a brat."

“I am not a brat,” I argue. Maybe I should be more scared, but I’m more angry than anything. Rafferty gets under my skin like no one I’ve ever met before and he riles me up with his comments. “Where are we going?”

“My apartment,” he states, guiding me down a dark back alley, his hand still wrapped around my upper arm.

“Apartment?” I echo. Oh, no. This isn’t good. I was hoping, expecting, us to return to his home at the O’Shea compound. But if we’re stuck here in the city together, completely alone, how am I going to get help?

My feet abruptly stop walking and Rafferty is forced to stop.

“What’s the problem? Keep moving.”

“I want to go home.”

“Yeah, so did I,” he grumbles darkly.

“I helped you,” I remind him. “How could you turn on me?”

Not far away, I see a man walking toward his parked car and I’m debating whether or not to scream for help when Rafferty’s fingers squeeze my arm hard and his ice blue eyes narrow. “Move your ass or I’m going to spank it.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me, princess,” he growls.

I look down and see him flex his long fingers on the hand that isn’t holding me securely. No, thank you. I don’t want his hands on me, much less on my rear end.

Not anymore, anyway. Not after he betrayed me and became someone I no longer recognize. The thought sends an aching pang through me and I quickly shut it down. Whatever fragile trust I was naive enough to have in this stranger is broken. He’s no longer the man I was foolishly falling for, and this stranger can’t be trusted.

The beaten man in the cell, pitiful and starving, is gone. And, in his place, is a completely different person. He’s a vengeful hunter and I’m his captive.

Clearly, the man is also a consummate actor because I fell for his lies and

deception—hook, line and sinker. It's your own damn fault, Sofe. This is what happens when you believe in the fairytale and the happily-ever-after.

You get screwed. And, in my case, it may be literally.

Maybe I should be more scared. But I'm not. Not yet, at least. I'm having mixed emotions because a part of me still believes that Rafferty won't follow through on his threat.

"We're here," he murmurs and leads me up the brick pathway to a back door. He quickly punches in a code on the keypad while keeping his other hand securely wrapped around my upper arm, and there's a soft beep after it unlocks.

Pushing the door open, he pulls me in and locks the dead bolt. After releasing a sigh, his attention drops to my bound wrists.

"Can you untie me? The rope is cutting off my circulation," I inform him, my voice taut.

"No," he states firmly and flips on a lamp.

"So what's your plan? To keep me tied up forever?"

"Maybe," he says and shrugs. "Let me remind you, Miss Marino—I'm the captor and you're my prisoner. When and if I decide to untie you, will be strictly based on your behavior."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rafferty grabs my chin, tilts it up and his bright blue eyes lock with mine. "Be a good girl, Sofia," he says in a husky voice that makes my stomach flip. Then he grabs my bound wrists and pulls me down a long hall, past a couple of dark rooms, a bathroom and finally into what must be his bedroom.

Although not unpleasant, the place smells like it's been closed up a little too long. Rafferty sits me down in a chair in the corner and opens a window. I get the feeling that he hasn't spent much time here lately. Probably because he's been living at his family compound.

When he kneels down in front of me, eyeing me closely again, my heart rate spikes. Even though I want to despise him, I can't shut down the stupid

attraction that's running through my body and creating sparks and heat. Something is building between us and I'm doing my best to ignore it, but it's damn hard.

It's like trying to ignore the sun on a bright summer day.

He begins to unravel the rope and starts untying me. Hope soars through me until I realize he's merely separating my wrists and retying each one to the arms of the chair.

"I'm going to take a shower," he tells me. "Stay put or I will follow through on my earlier threat."

"Which one?" I can't help but ask. I have no idea where this feistiness is coming from and why I'm pushing him. Maybe to see what exactly I can get away with.

And what I can't.

"The one that involves my palm on your bare ass," he informs me. My eyes narrow and he chuckles as he stands up. "You're a breath of fresh air, Sofia."

Glaring at his receding form as he walks into the attached bathroom, I try not to notice the way his shirt pulls across his muscled back or the way his sides taper down into slim hips and what appears to be a very firm ass. Stop it, Sofe, I scold myself. Look away.

For a moment, I'm scared he's going to leave the bathroom door wide open and I'm not sure what scares me more—that I'll see him naked or that I won't be able to look away from his body. He shuts the door about three quarters of the way, leaving it open just enough that I can catch a glimpse of him undressing in the mirror's reflection.

Swallowing hard, I know I should look away. I really, really, really should. But, I can't. It's not like I can see any details. He's too far away and is moving around. I do get a glimpse of his bare back and ass before he walks out of view and the sound of the shower turns on.

He hasn't had a real shower in weeks, so I know he must be enjoying it right now. Standing beneath the cleansing water, washing the crud and grime down the drain. Soaping up his hard body, washing his hair, maybe shaving...

My stomach contracts and it makes me so mad at myself. I want to hate him and tell him to go to hell. Instead, I find myself crossing my legs and squeezing my thighs together, tamping down the ridiculous fantasies filling my head.

“Jesus,” I hiss and start tugging on my ropes. “What the hell is wrong with me?”

No matter how intense the attraction and chemistry, I need to escape. I don’t trust Rafferty and now is my chance. But after ten straight minutes of twisting and pulling at the ropes, I’ve accomplished nothing except make my wrists red and raw.

“Shit,” I swear, slumping down in the chair. Defeat washes over me, but hopefully I’ll have another chance to break out of here. Eventually, he’s going to loosen these ropes, hopefully even untie me. And then I’m out of here.

Screw Rafferty O’Shea and this infernal nuisance in my belly that does a jig whenever he’s near.

When the bathroom door opens all the way up again and steam pours out, my head snaps up and I stifle a gasp. Oh, no. He’s clean-shaven, long hair slicked back, and bare-chested. A pair of thin pajama bottoms hang loosely around his slim hips. And I mean very loosely. He’s clearly lost weight over the last couple of weeks and I swallow hard, trying not to notice the large bulge there. But it’s front and center, and I can’t seem to look away.

There’s no doubt in my mind that Rafferty is quite well-endowed. The thought makes me squeeze my thighs together even more.

“Something interest you, princess?” he asks. His low voice is gruff, seductive even, and I stare down at my lap, vainly pulling at my restraints.

“No,” I lie, finding the courage to look back up and meet his gaze. Now that he’s cleaned up, I can see his features better. His sharp cheekbones and square jaw make him insanely attractive. His skin is flawless and his eyes look more blue than ever before under the thick slash of his dark brows. Like an icy glacier, so deep and mysterious.

Damn him.

Just when I think he can't get under my skin any further, he saunters over and I get a whiff of him. He smells so clean and soapy. Like fresh cotton and sunshine with just a hint of spice. My belly contracts when I realize he's standing directly in front of me now and I'm at eye level with his crotch.

Oh, my God.

I quickly look up, but I'm not sure if staring into his gorgeous blue eyes is any better. And don't even get me started on his flat, ridged abs and firm chest. The man was made for sin and I start wondering what he tastes like. Now that his skin is clean and smells like a summer day. Just one little taste...

Stop it.

"Are you scared of me, Sofia?" he asks.

My eyes latch onto his. "No," I answer truthfully. "Maybe I should be, but I don't think you'd purposely hurt me. At least...I hope not."

Honesty pours from me. I think Rafferty appreciates it much more than he would if I try to play games instead.

He nods then sinks down in front of me, laying his hands on my thighs. Slowly, he trails his fingers up and down, and goosebumps break out over my skin. "Do you feel that?" he asks softly. When I don't answer, he skims his fingers up the crease where my thighs are pressed together tightly. And stops right before touching my center. "Are you a virgin, Sofia?"

Again, I don't answer him, but a tremble runs through me. He arches a brow, waiting for my answer, and when I finally find my voice, I say, "That's none of your business."

"Oh, but it is, though," he says silkily and cups my center. "Because you and I are about to be intimately involved."

A shiver runs through me and my eyes slide shut. And I hate myself for allowing him this power over me.

But no matter how much I scream at myself to kick out and tell him to go to hell, I can't find my voice to say the words.

Instead, I unlock my thighs, opening them in invitation.

RAFFERTY

The moment her legs part, I reward her with a soft stroke, up and down, carefully gauging her reactions. She pulls in a sharp breath, head tilting back and then sighs softly. I've never seen a woman look more beautiful and my dick goes hard as steel in an instant.

Settling down more comfortably between her thighs, I continue touching her through the leggings, wishing I could rip them off, but knowing I need to take things slowly.

"Tell me, Sofia," I order her, breathing harder. She's turning me on like no one ever has before and I'm dying to strip her clothes off. Patience, Raff. All in good time. "Has anyone ever touched you like this before?" I press my index finger against her clit, pushing hard on the little bundle of nerves and she gasps.

"No," she whispers.

Good. The word echoes through my head and a wave of possession washes over me. I don't want any other man touching her like this except me. I've never cared before how many lovers a woman had before me. But, for whatever reason, I do with Sofia. I want to be her first, the one to show her what it feels like to be fucked good. I want her shaking and screaming my name and no one else's when she comes.

I'm going to use her and then return her to her father as soiled goods. Maybe even put a baby in her belly.

I don't tell her that, though, because I want her to want this as much as I do.

Pulling my hand away from Sofia, I reach down and adjust my aching dick. Her eyes snap open and she lifts her head. Those gorgeous hazel eyes of hers are slightly dazed and fuck me if she doesn't actually look disappointed that I stopped touching her.

"What's wrong, princess?" I ask, mouth edging up in a smirk. "You need more?"

Clarity fills her gaze and she says, "I've never done this before, Rafferty. Please, don't hurt me."

Something in my vengeful heart tightens and I swallow back the emotion her innocent request causes. "The first time always hurts a little, Sofia. But it'll pass. First, though, I'm going to make sure you're ready."

Lifting her shirt, I start kissing her flat stomach. My fingers hook in the elastic of her leggings and panties and I slowly slide them both down. Over her thighs, around her knees and off, leaving her exposed.

She's breathing hard and tries to close her legs, but I shove a shoulder against her knee, stopping it, keeping it open. Beside my head, her hands curl into fists, squeezing tight as she watches every move I make.

"I'm going to taste you now, Sofia. Lick your pussy and fuck you with my tongue and fingers."

"Raff—" An incoherent sound slips from her throat.

She can't even get my whole name out as I slide a finger up and down her glistening slit. "You're dripping for me, princess." A strange satisfaction fills me and I slide my finger into her body, moving it in and out, then adding a second one. Scissoring them, stretching her. Damn, she's tight. Reaching down, I put my dick in a chokehold. I'm going to fucking explode. Not yet.

This isn't going to be easy and taking my time when all I want to do is plunge deep inside her is going to nearly kill me. But I want her to enjoy what I'm about to do. My goal for her isn't fear, it's pleasure.

Pulling my fingers out, I lift them to my salivating mouth and taste her juices.

Sofia's eyes widen as I lick my fingers clean. "So sweet," I murmur wickedly. Then I reach behind her, cupping her ass, and I drag her closer. Pushing her legs further apart, I take a moment to appreciate her soaking wet pussy before lowering my face and lapping up her seam.

"Oh...my...God..." Sofia moans, hips twisting.

But I hold her in place and don't let up. Tossing her legs over my shoulders, I keep her steady while I lick and suck. The moment my lips wrap around her clit and I suck, grazing the sensitive bud with my teeth, she arches and her hips grind against my face.

"Raff...please..." A cry tears from her throat, but I don't let up. No, just the opposite. I slip my fingers inside her again, thrusting them in and out of her soaked passage while alternately sucking and teasing her clit with my tongue. She's so close. On the verge of coming on my fingers, and I'm so damn hard, it hurts.

"I...can't. Raff, God..."

"Get there, Sofia," I whisper and blow on her clit, my fingers thrusting hard. After one long pull on her clit, suctioning it like a Hoover, Sofia cries out. I can feel her inner muscles contracting tightly around my fingers and I curl them, finding the spot that makes her scream, and stroke it.

Removing my fingers, sitting back on my heels, I slide her legs off my shoulders and set them back down on the floor, watching as she comes down. Her thighs are shaking and she's panting hard. My gaze drops to her wrists still tied to the chair and I'm going to have to rearrange things because I need to get her ass in my bed. Immediately.

I reach for the ropes and untie them from the chair's arms. Then I scoop her up and carry her over to my big bed. I can feel the tremors running through her and when her hazel eyes meet mine, she looks a little stunned. While I have the chance, I remove her shirt and bra. She barely blinks until I secure her wrists to the bed posts.

"Please, don't tie me up," she pleads.

But I'm not willing to take the chance that she might try to escape after I fall asleep. In fact, I'm expecting it. I don't trust her and she certainly doesn't

trust me. But that doesn't mean we can't continue to give each other pleasure now and throughout the night.

After giving Sofia her first orgasm, I know I want to see her come again. Immediately. Because it was a goddamn beautiful sight. She's barely recovered from the first one when I shove my pajama bottoms off and join her on the bed. The mattress lowers under my weight and I automatically reach over and open the nightstand drawer. The moment my fingers wrap around the condom, I pause.

It's so wrong on every level, but I want to feel Sofia clench around my cock with nothing between us. And there's also the perverse thought floating around in my head to return her to her father pregnant with my baby. I almost blow my wad at the thought.

It's solely for revenge, I tell myself with a small frown. Not because I'd enjoy seeing Sofia huge with my child and as his or her mother.

Dropping the foil packet, I close the drawer and move between her legs, settling myself down on my elbows. Then I lean in and kiss her like she's never been kissed before. And like I've never kissed another woman before. I put my everything into it. My tongue plunges between her lips and she meets it with her own, sliding and exploring. She's so sweet, like sugar, and I can't seem to get enough.

The head of my thick cock presses at her wet entrance and it's decision time. Do I fuck her bare? Do I send her back to Matteo, swollen with my child?

Fuck, yeah, I do.

"Are you ready, my Sofia?" I rasp, my control on the verge of snapping.

"Yes, please," she whispers, lifting her hips, offering herself to me.

I can't hold out a second longer. Sliding inside her slick channel, I groan, not ready for the intense feeling of her pulsing around me in welcome.

Fuck you, Matteo, I think, and begin to pound into his daughter, stealing her virginity and cursing him to hell.

SOFIA

I know I should be scared, even humiliated at the things Rafferty is doing to me. But I'm not. Quite the opposite, in fact. He may think he's stolen my virginity, but the truth is, I'm giving it to him willingly.

Hell, I'm 23-years-old and I'm past ready. The funny thing is, I wasn't ready until a certain blue-eyed devil strolled into my world and turned it completely upside down. No one has ever made me feel the way Rafferty O'Shea does—utterly wanton—and the wicked things he's doing to my body don't feel bad.

They feel incredibly good.

Maybe I should be putting up a fight or making this more difficult. Maybe my mind shouldn't be caving in so easily to my body's desires. But I can't help it.

What is wrong with me? I wonder. His wicked words are turning me on and I'm attracted to a man who's using me.

It's no longer a question. It's a fact.

I'm hot, aching and needy, and I want this man on a primitive level. Maybe I should be offended because he tricked me and used me but, secretly, I want more. I want it all.

I'll never admit it to him, though.

Biting down on my lip, my traitorous body waits in excited anticipation. He closes a drawer, settles down between my thighs, and I feel his hard cock

press against my entrance. God, I've never been so wet in my life.

"Are you ready, my Sofia?" he grits out, struggling to even say the words.

"Yes, please," I whisper, lifting my hips, offering myself to him. To my family's sworn, lifelong enemy.

And I don't even care. I'm too lost in sensation and overcome with the red-hot haze of lust and desire. It's fogging my brain. Making me do things I never would normally when I have my wits about me.

But Rafferty is different. He makes me want to let go of my inhibitions and embrace my sexuality like I haven't done ever before.

Rafferty pushes forward and I gasp as he stretches me like I've never been stretched before. For a moment, I panic. He's too big and it stings.

"Shh," he whispers when I tense beneath him. "I've got you."

"Raff—" My voice cuts off as he slides all the way inside me with a groan. His hand reaches between our bodies, finds my clit and he swirls his fingers around it. Massaging, pressing, and when he finds the right combination, I start whimpering, my hips lifting to meet his.

Holy hell. My inner muscles start pulsing around his cock, trying to draw him deeper, and my body naturally takes over. Back arching, pelvis grinding and my fingers digging into my palms because I can't touch him, I give myself over to him completely.

I'm overwhelmed by sensation. It's all hot and slippery and oh-so hazy, and the burning turns to an all-consuming pleasure that has my legs wrapping around his waist.

Then he starts moving, plunging in and out of me, faster and harder than I expect, and all I can do is hold on for dear life as his magical fingers launch me into another orgasmic bliss of epic proportion. I cry out, clenching tightly, and strain against the ropes around my wrists.

"Oh, God," I moan, waves of pleasure rolling through my body. Above me, Rafferty's icy gaze locks onto mine and he picks up his pace, pounding into me now.

I want to touch him. His chest is hot against my breasts, our skin slick and sticky with sweat, but he's careful not to crush me and positions us in such a way where he keeps most of his body weight off me.

But I can still feel so much of him. The hard muscles flexing as he thrusts deep, his hips slapping against mine, his hair-roughened legs rubbing against my silky ones. All of these new sensations leave me spinning and I watch the expression on his face as his release hits him. He grits his teeth as his entire body shudders above me and when he explodes inside me, it belatedly occurs to me that he didn't use protection.

I was so swept away in the moment that I didn't even think about it. Until now as his hot seed fills me. Shit.

"Get off me," I hiss, trying to twist away, tugging at the ropes. He's betrayed me once again. "You didn't use anything."

From the look in his eyes, I can tell that he knows this...and he doesn't care.

Bastard. He wants me to get pregnant. The thought hits me hard and I squeeze my eyes shut as he withdraws, flopping down on his back beside me. He's panting hard and I can't even look at him.

He told my father he'd return me defiled. Spoiled goods for any other man. And he kept his word. At first I didn't really care. I wanted to have sex with him. But now I realize I fell right into his honey trap far too easily.

Without looking at me, he slides out of bed and my heart stutters. He's leaving me? He just took my virginity and he has nothing to say? My mouth drops open and I'm trying not to let his callous actions hurt when he returns with a warm washcloth. Then he lowers himself back down on the edge of the bed and starts to clean between my sticky legs.

Oh. God.

The intimacy of the act has me reeling and I don't know how to feel. I suppose it's thoughtful of him, but the gesture is making me less mad at him when I should be spitting barbed words.

"Relax," he whispers, wiping me clean. Then he goes back into the bathroom, tosses the washcloth and returns, sliding back into bed, lying on his side,

eyeing me intently.

“Can you please untie me?” I ask, feeling more vulnerable than I ever have in my life.

Instead, Rafferty grabs the sheet and covers me.

“Is that better?”

“No,” I grumble. “My arms hurt and I don’t like feeling stretched out.” The moment the words leave my mouth, I regret them. Beside me, Rafferty grins wickedly.

“Are you sure about that?”

If my hands were free, I’d punch him. “Oh, my God, you know what I mean.”

But then he grows serious and he brushes a lock of hair off my face. “You should take a shower. It might help with the soreness.”

My glance automatically flicks down to his cock. Even though it’s not nearly as big as it was, it’s still ridiculously large and now I want to punch myself because one glance at his cock and I’m growing wet again.

He immediately notices where I’m looking and he starts getting hard. Pulling my gaze away, I nod. “Yes, I’d like to take a shower.”

“Alone or do you want company?”

“Alone, please.” I am not ready to shower with Rafferty O’Shea.

He chuckles and stretches out across me, first untying one wrist and then the other. “You’ll be a good girl, right?” he asks, lips brushing my ear. Then he presses a kiss against the spot on my neck where he drew blood with the knife earlier.

I pull in a sharp breath and swallow hard. A shiver runs through me and I force a nod.

“Good because, otherwise, I will follow through with that spanking.”

Even though his eyes glow with amusement, I get the feeling he isn’t joking.

After he unties me, I rub my wrists, happy to be free, then sit up and pull the sheet tighter around my body. Slipping off the edge of the bed, I start walking to the bathroom.

“Sofia?”

At the sound of his deep voice, I look back over my shoulder. He’s lounging there, arms behind his head and completely naked, not even bothering to cover himself. And he looks very satisfied. Like the cat who just ate the canary.

“What?”

“If you aren’t out of there in exactly ten minutes, I’m coming in to join you,” My eyes widen at his threat. “Fair warning, princess. You better get a move on.”

With a squeal, I hurry into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. There’s only a small window and I move over to it and look out. Even though we’re on the ground floor, the window is sealed shut. Still, I try to push it open. Nope. It won’t budge.

Cursing under my breath, I turn the shower on, knot my hair on top of my head and drop the sheet. Since there’s no other way out of this bathroom, I decide to take advantage of the warm water and soap. After lathering up quickly, I carefully wash myself.

Yeah, I’m already sore. But in the most delicious way imaginable. I’m not sure how I feel about the way Rafferty handled everything tonight. A part of me is furious, while the other part of me is unbelievably sated. It’s like my head and body are at complete odds with each other.

No matter how angry I am with what Rafferty has done, I can’t deny the feelings he’s stirring up inside me. A bond developed between us during his imprisonment which makes the situation so much more complicated and complex. And now that we’ve had sex, my emotions are all over the map. And so very raw.

Lost in my thoughts, I jump when there’s a sharp rap of knuckles on the door.

“One minute warning, Sofia,” Rafferty tells me, his voice all business.

Oh, holy hell. I hit the water off and reach out to grab a towel. “Almost done,” I tell him.

“Take all the time you want,” he drawls. “Just know I’m coming in...in exactly forty-three seconds.”

“Rafferty!” I squeak. Wrapped up in the fluffy towel, I yank the door open to find him nonchalantly leaning against the frame, a smirk on his too-handsome face. “I need some pajamas.”

He hesitates and I’m scared he’s on the verge of telling me to sleep naked. Something I’ve never done before. And I certainly don’t want to start tonight with him beside me. But then he relents and motions for me to follow him back into the bedroom. He rustles through a drawer and then hands me a t-shirt.

“Thanks,” I murmur. Turning away from him, I pull it over my head and lower the towel as the shirt drops. It’s far too big, but it’s soft and it smells clean. When I turn back to face him, Rafferty’s gaze slowly wanders down my body and then back up again.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he murmurs.

“Hardly,” I respond, brushing the compliment aside. “Rory is the beautiful one. I’m just a cute, less hot version.”

“That’s not true,” he insists, moving closer. The vehemence in his voice takes me by surprise. “You’re perfect in every single way. Not just the way you look, either. The way you respond to me is sexy as hell. I’ve never been with anyone so free, so damn responsive.”

Desire flares in his icy blue eyes and I pull in a long, slow breath. Then he tamps it down and holds his hand out. I give him the wet towel and he takes it into the bathroom to hang up. When he returns, I stifle a yawn. It’s been a very long day and night.

When Rafferty holds out his hand and says, “Come to bed, sweet Sofia,” I hesitate. “I promise I won’t touch you again...tonight.”

I’m too tired to argue, so I place my hand in his and he guides me over to the bed. I notice that he changed the sheets and my blood is no longer there.

Thank God. That was nice of him to do while I was in the shower. The man is such a flurry of contradictions and I wonder who the real Rafferty O'Shea is.

Honestly, I have no idea. I've seen too many sides.

Once I'm in bed, he reaches for the rope. "No!" I exclaim when I see it. "Please, don't tie me to the bed, Rafferty. I won't run. I promise!"

"Sorry, sweet Sofia, but I don't trust you. But I won't tie you to the bed."

I watch, brow furrowed, as he ties one end of the rope around his wrist.

"Now give me yours," he says, tone surprisingly soft. "If you attempt to leave, I'll know. I'm a very light sleeper."

With a huff of annoyance, I reluctantly offer my wrist. He ties the rope around it, but not too tightly. Just enough that if I try to escape, he'll know right away.

"Come here," he murmurs, offering the crook of his arm.

Without a word, I slide up against his warm side and lay my head on his shoulder. Thankfully, I notice he put his pajama bottoms back on, so I settle more easily against his side. Lost in his touch and his scent, I close my eyes.

As I drift off to sleep, it occurs to me that I've never felt so safe and secure before.

And that I have become Rafferty O'Shea's willing prisoner far too easily.

RAFFERTY

Sweet Sofia falls asleep almost immediately. She's pressed against my side and her soft floral scent teases my nose. For a long time, I watch her breath. I don't ever let women spend more than a few hours here with me after I sleep with them; and, I certainly don't cuddle.

Ever.

Yet, something about holding Sofia close feels right. She fits into the curve of my arm perfectly and her soft cheek has moved over and now lays on my chest beside our bound hands. Something inside my chest tightens and I know I've behaved like an absolute bastard.

But I don't regret a damn thing. Not kidnapping Sofia or stealing her virginity. Hell, it's not like she put up a fight. My princess was completely willing and offered herself to me on a silver platter.

And now that I've had a taste, I don't know how I'm going to let her go. She tastes too pure, too good, and I have the sinking feeling that I'm going to get addicted if I indulge too much. Like a drug. Hell, it's only been a half hour since I was balls deep in her and my cock is already going through withdrawal. It's a good thing I put my pajama bottoms back on because lying naked next to Sofia is too big of a temptation. There's no doubt in my mind I would've taken her again, and I promised myself I wouldn't. She's going to be sore and I don't want to hurt her.

Why do you care? a little voice asks. You should be fucking her all night. Until she's raw and you're satiated.

I do care, though. My intention was never to harm her. Well, that's sort of a lie. I planned on using her in order to exact revenge on her father, but now...

If it involves hurting her more than I already have, I don't think I can do it. It's like kicking a puppy. No matter what show I've put on, when it comes down to it, I'm not that kind of a monster.

I'm nothing like Matteo Marino.

But, at the same time, I purposely fucked her without a condom. So my desire for revenge must be stronger than my feelings of protection. They have to be because my whole intent is to exact revenge on her father. And, if sleeping with her wasn't enough, I may have put a baby in her belly.

The sick, twisted part of me hopes that I did. For retribution only, though, I tell myself. It's not like I plan on having a relationship with her or, God forbid, marrying her. That would completely defeat my plan to humiliate her father.

I don't love Sofia. I've never loved any woman other than my mother and little sister, Finley. I've seen the way women manipulate to get what they want. Even with my own parents, I saw how my mother ignored all of the shady shit my father did so she could be comfortable and live a life of leisure.

Does anyone truly love anyone else more than themselves? I wonder.

An image of my older brother pops into my head. The way Liam looks at Rory is a little disconcerting. It's like she's the very air he needs to breathe and without her, he'd be lost. I don't ever want a woman to be able to have that much control over me.

When you love someone else that much, you're willing to do anything for them. And that means the beginning of the end. I don't buy into happy endings of the fairytale variety. It's all bullshit and stardust. In the real world, people use each other to get something they want.

Sofia, for example. I'm using her to exact my revenge. I'm enjoying her body in the process, too. But it all boils down to my own wants and needs. Sure, I like giving her pleasure and I think she earned it after risking everything to help me escape.

But I have to keep my head on straight. Keep my eyes on the prize. My plan needs to remain steady—enjoy her for as long as I want, until I’ve had my fill of her sweetness, and then drop her off on her father’s doorstep.

Remaining cool and calculated is imperative. Letting emotions get involved absolutely cannot happen. That’s when shit gets murky and plans go awry. And feelings get involved. That’s where Liam fucked up. But I know better and have no intention of falling for a Marino like he did.

I’m quite capable of keeping my head in the game. Business is business. I have no intention of letting things get personal. No matter how much those pretty hazel eyes of hers try to suck me in and entice me.

When I finally drift off to sleep, it’s deeper than I anticipate. Our hands are bound together, laying on my chest, and I don’t think either of us moves for the rest of the night. We’re both exhausted not only from the escape, but also from our exertions in bed.

And chair.

Giving Sofia orgasms might be my new favorite thing, I decide.

Hours later, after waking up first, I notice that she’s moved over, pulling the rope taut. I untie my wrist from hers, pull the sheet aside and slide my hand between her silky thighs. She wakes up with a soft moan and I move down her body, finishing what my fingers started with my mouth and tongue. Going down on a woman never appealed to me as much as it does with Sofia. Knowing I’m the only one to touch her like this is a heady feeling.

I’m her first in every way and a part of me wonders if I’d like to be her last, too.

But, no, that’s a dangerous thought. That would mean we’d wind up together and I’m not Liam. Marriage isn’t something I’m ready for and, to be honest, I’m not even sure I want to get married at all. I’m only 26-years-old and I have my whole life ahead of me.

Well, as long as Matteo Marino doesn’t kill me after what I’ve done to his daughter.

“Raff!” Sofia cries, arching up off the mattress as the orgasm hits her. Her

breathy gasps fill the room and I lick and suck a little longer than necessary.

As much as I'd like to sink my hard cock deep inside her, I grab it instead and finish myself off. Sofia watches as I pump my rigid length and her curious gaze makes me explode. Turning at the last second, I shoot my wad over the edge of the bed, watching as the thick ropes of my release hit the hardwood floor. I feel Sofia's fingers trail down my back and I slowly flip back over to meet her gaze, panting.

"I've never woken up like that before," she murmurs, a small smile curving her mouth.

"I'll wake you up like that every morning," I promise. "How do you feel?"

"A little sore," she acknowledges. Her gaze dips. "You're, ah, rather large."

My mouth edges up. "Yet you handled me just fine. I had no doubts, princess."

"It'll be easier now, right? I mean, if we..." Her voice trails off and she clears her throat.

"Do it again?" I finish for her, and she nods shyly. Damn, she's the cutest thing. Fucking adorable and my dick twitches. "I promised to give you some time to recover."

"But later?" she presses.

"What're you saying, sweet Sofia? That you want my cock inside you again?"

She swallows hard and a blush pinkens her cheeks. "Maybe."

"Maybe? Or yes?"

"Yes," she whispers.

Fuck me. "Tonight," I tell her and press a kiss to her lips. I can't say anything else because any dirty talk is going to have me flipping her over, spreading her legs and thrusting deeply into her sweet, siren pussy from behind. The damn thing is calling to me, but I force myself to get up.

"Tonight," I say again, my voice firm. "I'm going to show you things...so

many wicked, wonderful things...”

A shiver runs through her and she sits up, removing the loose length of rope from around her wrists. I may even use that rope again, I think. For recreational purposes.

After we each use the bathroom, we end up sitting at the island in my kitchen. I’m drinking coffee and Sofia has her tea. And we start talking like old friends. It’s bizarre. I never let women stay the entire night and join me for breakfast after a rendezvous. And I certainly never start chatting with a passing lover like we’ve known each other forever.

But it’s so easy with Sofia. Plus, we have that connection since Liam and Rory are married. Despite our family’s terrible history, we’re linked now through my brother and her sister’s marriage and child.

“Griffin is the best baby in the whole world,” she gushes.

“He’s already such a character. When he gets older, he’s going to be a force to be reckoned with,” I tell her. “All that wild Irish blood in him.”

“And don’t forget his fiery Italian blood,” Sofia reminds me.

For a long moment we look at each other.

“Like you,” I say softly.

“No. Rory is more fiery than me,” she immediately says.

“Is that what you think?” I burst out laughing. “You’re more fierce than you realize, princess.”

“Well, you seem to bring it out of me,” she replies, tone dry and laced with unconcealed amusement. “Normally, I’m much more quiet and easygoing.”

Leaning closer, I trail my fingers up her arm and her skin prickles in response. “I like your sass.” My voice is low, huskier than I intend, but she brings it out of me.

I notice the pulse beating in the hollow of her throat and I press my fingers to her wrist, feeling it speeding away like a runaway horse.

“Do I make you nervous, Sofia?” I ask, circling my thumb over her pulse

point.

“In the beginning, you did.” Her green eyes speckled with brown and gold search mine. “But now...” Her voice trails off and I lean in even closer, breathing in her soft floral scent.

“Now what?”

“Nervous isn’t the right word.”

“What is?”

“Excited,” she says, voice barely a whisper.

Her answer has my nostrils flaring and my dick standing at attention. Too soon. Down boy. Unclenching my jaw, I draw back before her intoxicating words and scent have me throwing her on top of the island and fucking her again.

As much as my head is telling me to keep my distance, another part of me is enjoying our time together. I want to get to know her more. It’s ironic that we’re so similar despite being sworn enemies.

Liam and Rory said it’s all bullshit—the feud and archaic rivalry that’s been around since Prohibition. And now I’m starting to wonder if they’re correct.

Her father killed your father, a little voice reminds me.

There’s no proof of that, though.

My attention drops back down to her wrists and I can’t help but notice they’re still a little red and chafed from me tying her up. They don’t look nearly as bad as mine from the handcuffs that held me for two weeks, but still. I don’t like it and I feel like a bastard. Getting up, I go in search of antibiotic cream.

“Be right back,” I tell her. There’s a tube under the sink in the guest bathroom and I return in a couple of minutes. “Let me see your wrists.”

“They don’t hurt,” she tells me.

“Don’t care. Gimme them.”

With a soft sigh, Sofia offers her dainty wrists and I carefully rub the cream over the red marks.

“Better?” I ask and she nods.

“Your turn,” she says and takes the tube.

I’m about to argue but, instead, I let her cover them in the soothing salve. And the craziest thought hits me—maybe together we can help heal the rift between our families.

Is that even possible? Liam and Rory tried but, so far, it hasn’t been enough. In fact, it just seemed to make everything worse.

I tell myself that I still have every intention of using Sofia then dumping her back home. At least, I did. But now that I’m watching the tender way she’s taking care of me—yet again—that cold lump in my chest beats a little harder.

Dammit. She’s getting beneath my defenses, finding the cracks in my armor, and that’s dangerous for me. Maybe I should forget my vengeance and take her back home. Not dump her on the front steps and humiliate her, but walk her up and kiss her goodbye.

Forever.

But the selfish part of me isn’t ready to let her go yet. And, I have a pretty good feeling that the more time we spend together, the harder it’s going to be for me to send her away.

SOFIA

Later in the afternoon, I surreptitiously study Rafferty through my lashes. We've spent the entire day together and it's a little disconcerting how similar we are. I never intended to become his captive, but now that I am, I find myself liking it far too much.

Probably because I don't feel like a prisoner. I feel like I'm spending time with my new boyfriend. And that's a very dangerous thought to be entertaining. Because Rafferty O'Shea isn't my significant other and he never will be.

I'm so damn confused. The moment I tell myself to keep my distance and be a bitch, he turns sweet. Like when he put the ointment on my wrists. They were barely chafed and it was completely unnecessary, but he insisted.

Rafferty can be moody and sarcastic at times, but I'm finding out he's also a lot of fun. His dry sense of humor makes me laugh and he's being considerate of my wants and needs.

And then there's the way my body responds to him. One heated look from his light blue eyes and tingles race through my body and zap my uterus. He has me wanting things that can never happen.

I need to keep my head on straight and not succumb to his seductions. That's what my logical side is saying.

But my lady parts are telling me to give in and not worry about it. My time here with him is limited, so maybe I should just enjoy it.

So, that's what I decide to do.

After lunch, I ask Rafferty what he'd like to do. Since we can't leave the apartment and he isn't giving in and seducing me quite yet, I wait for his answer, but he's quiet. "Do you have any books or—"

"Let's play a game," he suggests.

"What kind of game?" I ask. "Like Monopoly or chess?"

"How about Two Truths & A Lie?"

My brow scrunches up. "What's that?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. I'll tell you three things about myself and you guess which one is a lie."

"Okay."

We sit on the couch and Rafferty tells me he'll go first. I've never played this game before, so I'm not sure what to expect.

"Okay," he says, settling back against the cushions. "One, my full name is Rafferty Joseph O'Shea. Two, when I was 5-years-old, my older brothers tossed me off the roof. And, three, my beverage of choice is a pint of Guinness."

"Tossed you off the roof?" I exclaim. Then I chuckle. "You know, that actually explains a lot."

His mouth edges up. "So you're saying truth for that one?"

"I am."

"Correct. Liam and Conor—they're twins—found a basket and I was little enough to fit in it. They constructed a parachute, tied it to the basket and put me inside. Then they threw it off the roof. Luckily, I only fell one story and landed in the bushes."

I burst out laughing at his deadpan delivery. "I'm sorry," I apologize and cover my hands over my face. "It's not funny."

"Yeah, it kinda is."

“Yeah, it is!” I agree and we both laugh heartily. “It’s only funny because you didn’t get hurt.”

“Didn’t get hurt?” he echoes. “Hell, I broke my damn arm!”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious. It was the first day of summer vacation, too. I spent the rest of it watching them go swimming and climb trees while I had to sit there with a cast and be miserable.”

“Oh, poor baby.” I tilt my head and consider his other two statements. “Well, I’m not quite sure about the others. Joseph is a good middle name, but being Irish, I imagine you like your Guinness. I’ll say your middle name is something else.”

“That’s your final answer?”

“Yes,” I tell him, leaning forward, curious if I’m right.

He makes a sound like an annoying game show buzzer. “Wrong.”

“What?”

“Joseph is my middle name, but whiskey is my drink of choice.”

“Oh! That was a trick question.”

“One point for me, princess.”

I narrow my eyes and cross my arms. “Okay, my turn.” I think over what I can say to trick him and then grin. “One, I love cats. Two, my middle name is Bella. And, three, my favorite food is melanzane alla parmigiana.”

“You seem like an animal lover.” He studies me intently and I try not to squirm. “Bella is perfect since you’re beyond beautiful.”

My cheeks flush at the compliment.

“And that third one is awfully specific.” Again, he looks at me closely, as though he can see directly into my soul. Then to my absolute amazement, he announces, “Lie, truth, truth.”

My mouth drops. “How in the world would you know that?”

He gives me a wide grin. “Because cats are a whole different breed. Did you have a bad experience with one?”

Damn, he’s good. Nodding, I say, “When I was ten. I tried to pick up a stray and it scratched the hell out of me.” I turn my arms over to show him the light scars that you can still see.

“I noticed those,” he murmurs and lightly strokes his fingers along the thin, white tissue.

Surprised, I pull my arm away from his touch before I begin to overheat. “Your turn,” I murmur, trying to ignore the way my pulse speeds up at his touch.

“First tell me more about your favorite food. Say it again?”

“Melanzane alla parmigiana. It’s basically eggplant Parmesan, but in the traditional recipe, the layers of fried eggplant are alternated with a tomato basil sauce and Parmesan isn’t used at all. Pecorino is and it’s so delicious.”

My enthusiasm makes him smile again and it’s dazzling. I don’t think I’ve ever seen teeth so white and straight.

“That sounds good.”

“It’s divine.”

“Do you cook?” he asks.

“My mother is an amazing cook and she’s taught me a few of her secrets. But I’m not nearly as talented as she is.”

“Maybe you can cook one night. If you want,” he hurriedly adds.

“I’d like that.” Our gazes lock. The connection between us is insane and indescribable. I’ve never experienced anything like it in my life. All I know is that I want to be in Rafferty’s arms again tonight.

He nods, clearing his throat. “Right then. My turn.”

I seem to have distracted him and I like that. A lot.

Something in his light blue eyes darkens. “One, I’m never letting you go. Two, I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

He pauses, letting that sink in, and my face flames and my stomach somersaults.

“And, three, I can’t stop thinking about how amazing it feels to be inside you.”

The low, guttural tone in his voice makes my heart skip a beat. Or two.

“Which is the lie?” I ask, voice barely a whisper.

“I guess I’ll have to let you go one day,” he says, though he doesn’t sound very happy about it. “Can’t very well keep you a prisoner forever.”

Scooting closer, I lay a hand along his stubbled jaw. “Forever. That’s an awfully long time.” When his hand lifts to cover mine, I lean in and our lips are barely a breath away. His clean scent infuses me and I want to kiss him more than anything.

So, I do.

Rafferty groans into my mouth and quickly takes control. His hand slides through my hair, tilting my head and his tongue slides past my lips. God, the man knows how to kiss. Giving in to him, I grasp his shirt and kiss him back with a passion I never knew I possessed.

But I only possess it with Rafferty. No one else gets me going like this. There’s just something about him that casts a spell over me and makes me utterly wanton.

Between kisses, I murmur, “Take me to bed, Raff.”

His voice comes out gruff when he says, “We weren’t done playing.”

“Oh, I’m done with games.” I reach down and boldly cup the front of his sweatpants. “I think you are, too.”

With a growl, he flips me around and I find myself hanging over the back of the couch. I suck in a sharp breath when he nudges my legs apart. I’m still only in his t-shirt and his big hands slide it up out of the way.

“Raff,” I gasp over my shoulder.

“Shh, turn back around so I can worship you, princess.”

Every sense in my body is heightened and tingling as I lay my arms on the edge of the sofa and wait to see what he’s going to do next. Riiiiip. Well, there go my panties. And I only had one pair.

Before I can think too hard about that, Rafferty spreads my legs, lifts my ass and his mouth latches hold of me from behind.

“Ohmygod,” I cry, gripping onto the couch as his tongue plunges inside me. That wicked tongue of his is relentless and he reaches around and begins strumming my clit with his fingers. Playing my body like some kind of instrument until my hips are rocking back against his face.

I can’t hold out from the impending orgasm and it’s barrelling down on me hard and fast. With a screech, my nails dig into the fabric of the couch and I arch back, offering Rafferty everything. His fingers take over and he’s thrusting them inside my wet core, extending my release, and I buck back with a scream.

Then I collapse forward, completely drained and pleasure rolls through my center, then radiates out through my limbs. I feel like a ragdoll, unable to move as he finishes me off and then presses a kiss on my ass cheek.

His lips trail kisses up my spine and when he presses against me, nuzzling my ear, I feel his hard length jutting against my back.

“My good girl,” he murmurs between kisses. “So, so sweet.”

I can barely lift my head and even though I just had the most amazing orgasm, I want more. Turning around, caught between his large, muscled body and the couch, I start tugging his sweatpants down.

“Fill me up, Raff. Please...” My fingers wrap around his steel length, squeezing, and he groans long and hard.

“So greedy,” he rasps, thrusting his hips forward. “But I’m all yours.”

“All mine,” I say, sliding my hand up and down his cock.

“And you’re all mine,” he grits out and flips me onto my back.

He moves so fast and I yelp in surprise. Then he’s settling himself down between my thighs and his hand wraps around his cock, lining us up. I feel his thick crown start pushing inside, demanding entrance, and I nearly swoon. The desire pumping through my veins is molten and Rafferty stretches me with his girth. It’s pain and pleasure all at the same time, but it feels so damn good.

“Okay?” he asks, pausing.

I’m not capable of words at this point, so I merely nod. Rafferty bends my knees, pulling them tightly to his sides then covers my mouth with his as he thrusts home. I scream into his mouth, my nails digging into his biceps, and then sink into the cushions as his hips begin pumping.

Unable to think clearly, all I can do is feel. Every stroke, every glide of our bodies. It’s heaven and I look up at him, more vulnerable than I’ve ever been in my life. His light blue eyes are bright, blazing with the bluest fire, and his features are strained as he starts moving faster, harder, filling me up like never before.

When his hand reaches between our bodies to find my swollen clit, I bite down on his shoulder and shatter into a million and one pieces. My inner muscles ripple and tighten, squeezing around his cock, and Rafferty shouts a curse when his release hits and he comes so hard his eyes roll back.

“Christ,” he grunts, panting hard, trying to catch his breath. His cock is lodged deep inside me, still twitching and pulsing with his release.

The intensity of our coupling rocks my world to its core and something deep within me shifts. Dropping my head back, also struggling to catch my breath, I realize that I’m developing feelings for Rafferty O’Shea.

And that terrifies me.

Because now I finally understand what Rory found with Liam. The chemistry and attraction is far stronger than I ever thought possible, but it’s there and it’s only growing more potent with every moment we spend together.

Falling in love with Rafferty O’Shea wasn’t in my plans. But I have the

uneasy feeling in my gut and heart that there's no turning back now.

No escape from my feral desire for this man.

And certainly no escape for my foolish heart.

RAFFERTY

There aren't any words to describe what just happened. All I know is I've never come so hard in my life. Finally catching my breath, I pull out of Sofia and, for a dazed moment, I meet her equally startled eyes.

I think we just blew each other's minds. I've certainly never experienced anything like what just happened. For whatever reason, when I'm deep inside Sofia, I not only lose all control, but also I feel things on a level I've never been able to reach without her. Hell, I've never come close with anyone else.

There's something that happens between us. As corny as it sounds, it's almost...magical.

And for someone who doesn't believe in that kind of hocus pocus, that's saying a lot.

I tenderly brush a lock of her dark hair back from her face then push up. "Be right back," I whisper and go retrieve a wet, warm washcloth. Caring for a woman after sex is something I've never done before. Taking a woman bare is also new. Sofia is the only woman I've ever not used protection with.

Somehow this pixie-like creature has turned my entire world upside down in such a short amount of time. Suddenly, I'm beginning to understand what happened between my brother and Rory. The lust and passion is overwhelming and makes you do things that you normally wouldn't do.

They're in love, though, I remind myself. I'm not. I'd say I'm more in a state of infatuation, consumed by lust.

Or, at least, that's what I try to tell myself.

Back in the living room, I drop down beside the couch and very gently clean Sofia. Afterward, I press a kiss to her lips and wonder what the hell I'm going to do when she's gone.

The thought makes my chest tighten and a lump lodges in my throat.

Sofia pushes my t-shirt she's wearing back down. "Rafferty..."

"Hmm?"

"I have two requests."

"Okay," I say slowly, wondering where she's going with this.

"Well, I don't really have any clothes besides the ones I wore here. And, uh, you sort of just ruined my only pair of panties."

"We can order you some new things," I tell her. "Whatever you'd like."

"Thanks," she murmurs and starts chewing on her lower lip.

"What else, my sweet Sofia?"

"I'd like to call Rory and let her know I'm okay."

"No," I immediately answer and she frowns. "I mean, I think it's better if no one knows where we are for the time being."

"But she's going to be worried that something happened to me. I'll just tell her I'm safe. Just a quick text. Please."

Dammit. No matter how much I want to deny her, I can't. "A very quick text," I finally relent.

"Thank you!" Sofia pops up, places a quick kiss on my lips and slides off the couch. My gaze dips, watching the way her hips sway as she walks over to grab her phone.

"And do not say you're with me. Or, where you are," I add.

"I won't," she promises.

With a sigh, I realize this slip of a woman could have me wrapped around her little finger in no time. Even though I know I should keep my distance emotionally, I'm crumbling and succumbing to my feelings and to her. She makes me feel and think things that I never have before and that leaves me a little out of sorts. But in the best possible way.

I'm so fucked.

Sofia sits back down beside me and, after sending a text off to Rory, she lifts her hazel eyes to meet mine and gives me the most dazzling smile I think I've ever seen.

"Thank you, Raff."

I've noticed she only uses my nickname when we're having sex or when she's very happy. I love hearing it and want to hear it more often. A part of me wants to know she's either happy or being satisfied thoroughly at all times.

"You're welcome," I manage to choke out. But just barely. She's got me so twisted up inside that I can barely speak, much less think clearly.

Her phone buzzes almost immediately with a reply from her sister.

Sofia reads it and then says, "She's relieved, but doesn't know what's going on exactly. Only that our father is in an uproar over something."

"Isn't he always?" I can't help but ask.

Sofia sets her phone down. "He didn't always used to be this way. I remember him being...different."

I snort in response.

"What about your father? While you were growing up, did you have a good relationship?"

"No. He paid more attention to Liam and Conor. I'm the third son and he never paid that much attention to me."

Sofia turns to face me, curling her legs up beneath her. "Did that upset you?" When I don't answer right away, she continues, "I'm the third oldest, too. My

father has always been focused on Gio the most.”

“That’s your oldest brother, right?”

She nods. “It’s Gio then Rory then me. And Luca is the youngest. He’s off finishing school right now and I haven’t seen him in over a year. I don’t think he likes coming home much.”

“Why not?”

Sofia shrugs her shoulders. “Maybe he knows something that I didn’t...at least, until recently.”

“Which is?”

“My father isn’t a good man.”

“Nor was mine,” I say, my voice gruff.

We’re so much more alike than I ever knew. It’s a little disconcerting and throwing me for a loop.

“Let’s not think about them.”

We’re both on the same page and I nod in agreement. “Would you like to make dinner tonight?” I ask her. “We can order whatever you need and have it delivered.”

She gives me a teasing smile. “Curious about my melanzane alla parmigiana?”

“I am,” I admit and open the grocery shopping app on my phone. “Okay, princess, tell me what you need and it’ll be delivered in an hour.”

Sofia runs through the ingredients and I order it all through the delivery service. Then I hit “place order” and send her a grin. “Now how about some clothes? What do you need?”

“I don’t know,” she says carefully. “Exactly how long are you planning to keep me here?”

Forever. The word flashes through my mind, but I don’t dare say it. Even though it’s irresponsible, I don’t want to think about tomorrow. I just want to

live in the little bubble we've created today.

Dangerous, Raff. Thoughts like that can only lead to disappointment and heartbreak.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. My gaze searches hers. "Do you want to leave?"

"I did," she admits, voice low and tentative. I can see the confusion swirling in her hazel eyes and I understand because I'm feeling the exact same way. "But now..."

"Now?" I press, moving closer, my attention focused on her lips.

"Now I want to stay."

Her candid answer is music to my ears and I pull her onto my lap and kiss her passionately. I don't know what's happening between us or how much longer I'll have Sofia in my world, but I'm going to take advantage of every precious moment we have together.

We end up fucking again and it's just as mindblowing as before. We also never order her any new clothes. But, that's okay. I plan to keep her naked most of the time she's here.

Nearly an hour later, Sofia is curled up in my arms and we're on the floor. Shit, I fucked her right off the couch. Being with Sofia turns me into an animal and I'm not going to lie—I don't regret a thing. Right now, I'm nibbling on her ear and she giggles, swatting me away.

"Raff, that tickles," she squeals, twisting in my arms.

I tighten them and then the doorbell rings. "Groceries are here," I announce and lift her up, settling her on the couch. After quickly covering her up with a blanket and slipping my jogging pants on, I walk over to the front door and swing it open. The delivery guy hands me two bags overflowing with groceries and I slip him a tip.

Turning back around, I kick the door shut and grin. "Ready to blow me away with your cooking skills?"

She hops up off the couch with a chuckle. "I'll give it my all. Let me get

dressed first.”

“Damn. I was hoping to watch you cook naked.”

“I don’t think so,” she tells me with a shake of her chestnut waves. Then she turns toward my room. “Meet you in the kitchen in five.”

Watching her saunter away, clad only in a sheet with my smell clinging to her makes my unruly cock twitch. I can’t get enough of her. Bringing myself under control, I swallow down my lust and carry the groceries into the kitchen.

As I unpack the groceries, setting it on the island, I turn thoughtful. Realistically, how much longer can this go on? Keeping Sofia here as my prisoner? Albeit, willing prisoner. I don’t have the answer and Sofia returns shortly. She looks adorable in a fresh t-shirt and a pair of my sweats which must be rolled at least five times because they’re far too big on her tiny body.

I swoop in and place a kiss on her cheek.

“Have a seat,” she tells me. “I don’t need you getting in the way while I’m preparing dinner.”

“Sounds like something your mom says?”

“Yep. Especially when we were growing up. The kitchen has always been her domain and she didn’t care for anyone getting in her way while she was cooking.”

“Like mother, like daughter,” I say.

“I don’t know about that,” she says softly.

“You’re not like your mom?”

“Well, I never would’ve married Matteo Marino like she did.” Her voice turns sad and it makes my heart twist inside my chest. “I’m not sure how they ever got together, to be honest. Sometimes, they seem so very different. They’ve been fighting so much lately. What about your parents?”

I lift a brow. “What about them?”

“Were they close? How did your mom handle your father’s death?”

It's a very personal question and I could easily shut down and not answer. Instead, I find myself opening up to Sofia like I've never opened up to anyone before. "She took it hard," I answer, being completely honest. "Even though my father could be ruthless, my mother loved him. I didn't always understand their relationship—I still don't—but she always stood by his side."

"It sounds like she was a good wife, supportive of her husband. My mom...I don't know. I get the feeling that she doesn't always approve of what my father does. Of his business practices and decisions."

"Maybe she's seeing things she doesn't like and is questioning him."

"I think so. But she doesn't know how to confront him about it."

"I think my mom turned a blind eye to it. She didn't want to know the bad things my dad did."

"Because she loved him."

I nod, watching as Sofia starts opening packages and pulling out bowls, pans and utensils. She knows exactly what she's doing and I follow her every move, entranced. She's truly the loveliest creature I've ever seen.

Dinner couldn't be any more delicious than if it were prepared by a professional chef. We're sitting at the small kitchen table, laughing over childhood stories and growing up as middle children when my phone starts buzzing. I ignore it, but when it starts buzzing again, I swipe it up and see Liam's name on the caller ID.

"It's Liam," I tell her. He drops into voicemail a second time and then immediately calls back again. "And he's being very persistent."

"Answer it," Sofia encourages.

Making a face, I have a feeling my brother's call is about to put a damper on the evening. But, I do as she says, swiping the bar over. "Hey, Liam," I say, sounding less than enthused.

"Where the fuck are you?" he exclaims. He continues before I can say a word. "You haven't been at your house in weeks, Rory's little sister is

missing, but apparently safe, whatever the hell that means, and Matteo Marino is on a rampage. Do you have any idea what or who he's looking for, little brother?"

Damn. Liam is too smart and has eyes and ears all over this city.

"Sofia is with me," I tell him and he immediately launches into a string of curses.

"Are you insane? Have you lost your mind? What the hell is going on? Did you kidnap her? Where is she? Put her on the phone before my wife has a heart attack!"

I pull the phone away from my ear and stifle a groan. Here we go, I think, and send Sofia an apologetic look. Then, I put the phone on speaker and prepare to get blasted by my brother.

SOFIA

I hear Liam yelling over the line and then Rafferty puts the call on speaker.

“Tell him you’re safe, Sofia,” Rafferty tells me calmly.

“I’m safe,” I assure Liam.

“What the hell is going on, Raff? Why is Sofia with you?” Liam demands.

“Sofia?” It’s Rory and I hear the worry in her voice.

“I’m fine, Rory. I told you I was safe and everything was okay.”

“Through a text message! I got worried because you didn’t call and anyone could’ve forced you to send that message. When I didn’t hear back, I panicked.”

I exchange a look with Rafferty and sigh. We’re about to get reamed. Ah, the joy of having older, know-it-all, big bossy siblings.

“I’m okay,” I repeat. “Truly.”

“Matteo is on a rampage,” Liam states. “He has men scouring the city for you, Sofia, and it isn’t safe.”

“It’s true,” Rory confirms. “We didn’t know what was going on, so I called mom. She said he’s lost his mind and he’s fueled by so much anger that she doesn’t know what to do.”

Oh, no. “This is all his fault,” I declare in a firm voice, my own anger

surfacing. “He had Rafferty kidnapped and chained up in the basement cell for weeks.”

“What?” Liam growls and I hear my sister gasp.

“It’s true.” Rafferty reaches over and, for the first time, takes my hand in his and laces his fingers through mine. “Sofia helped me escape.”

“He was going to kill him,” I tell them, our gazes locking, hands tightening. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

“That sonofabitch,” Liam says.

“What happened?” Rory asks.

“I stole the key from Papà’s office, unlocked Rafferty and guided him through the tunnels, down to the riverfront.”

“Sofia saved my life,” Rafferty tells them. “I owe her everything.”

“Why did you go with him, though?” Rory asks.

Our gazes lock and I squirm in my seat.

“Well, he, ah, didn’t exactly give me much of a choice.”

“I kidnapped her,” Rafferty says, not even trying to sugarcoat it.

“Goddammit, Raff, are you crazy?” Liam snaps. “Now every Marino enforcer is out looking for you both.”

“I didn’t have a choice! They caught us and pulled their guns. Using Sofia was the only way I could get out of there alive.”

His words must make sense because Liam stops yelling. For a long moment, no one says anything. Then, Rory says, “Sofia, I want to talk to you. Alone.”

I glance over at Rafferty and he slowly stands up. “Take all the time you need.”

“Just Sofia,” Rory says. “That means out, Liam.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

I hide a smile at my sister bossing her husband around.

“Call me back from Sofia’s phone,” Liam orders Rafferty. In the background, I hear him leave Rory when a door closes over the line.

Rafferty lifts my hand, presses a kiss to my knuckles and then reluctantly releases my hand. As he walks out, my stomach tightens. God, he’s making me feel things and think things that I shouldn’t. I’m on the verge of giving my heart to this man, but I have no idea if he wants it.

“Sofe?”

I take the phone off speaker and lift it to my ear. “Yes? I’m here.”

“Is Rafferty gone?”

“He just left.” I swallow hard, my knuckles still tingling from his kiss.

“What’s going on? Between you and Rafferty?”

Pulling in a deep breath, I push my plate away and bite my lower lip. My sister is far too perceptive and lying to her isn’t an option. Plus, I’m dying to talk to her about what’s been happening.

“I think I’m falling for him,” I admit in a low voice.

“Oh, Lord,” Rory responds. “Dad is going to blow another gasket.”

“Tell me about it. Sounds like he already has from what you’ve told us.”

“How does Rafferty feel?”

“I have no idea.”

“You have to have some clue.”

“Remember when you spent the night with Liam. Your one-night stand?” I remind her.

“Of course.”

“I asked if you’d fallen for him and you said so hard and that it was insane,

but when you were with him, everything was magical, wonderful and perfect.”

“I can’t believe you remember that.”

“I remember because it made my heart sing. I’ve always been a romantic and I want to find the best in everyone. Even an O’Shea.”

“And have you found it in Rafferty?”

“I have. He’s...amazing. When we’re together, it’s magical—just like you said it is with Liam.”

“So, you two have been, ah, intimate?”

I hear the hesitation in her voice. “I’m not a little girl anymore, Rory. I’m twenty-three and, yes, we’ve been intimate. Quite a few times. In fact, I sort of lost count.”

I can hear her swallow hard and I can’t help but smile. My overprotective big sis and best friend. I know she’s worried about me, but I can handle the situation. At least, I hope so.

“Well, no judgment here. But I am concerned. Do you see a future with him? Are you both on the same page?”

I release a pent-up sigh. “I don’t know,” I admit. “He’s so hard to read sometimes.”

“Well, you did start out as his captive.” Her voice drops. “Did he hurt you, Sofe? Force you to do anything you didn’t want to do?”

“No! I mean, things moved really fast, but nothing I didn’t want to happen. He didn’t mention it, but I had been sneaking down to the basement for weeks, feeding him and taking care of his wounds. Tony beat him constantly. It broke my heart.”

“Oh, Sofe. You’re too kind-hearted.”

“You would’ve done the same thing,” I tell her. “He was tricked and then turned over to father. It wasn’t his fault and Papà told him he was going to pay for what you’d done.”

“Shit. I’m so sorry. I never thought he’d direct his anger onto you or anyone else. Please, forgive me, Sofia.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is, though. Me falling in love with Liam has deepened the rift and all we wanted to do was help heal it.”

“You have helped. Forget about our father and look at everyone else. His family adores you and now things are changing once again with me and Rafferty.” I trace my fingers over a scratch on the table. “I have no idea if we’ll come out of this together, but Rafferty is the most amazing man I’ve ever met. Not having him in my life…”

I pull in a sharp breath and tears sting my eyes. The thought is inconceivable.

“Well, I can’t imagine that.”

“You’re falling in love with him, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I whisper. No point in denying the truth. Rafferty O’Shea is everything I ever wished for and dreamed about finding one day. But the situation is so complicated. Will we be able to find our happily ever after together? Does he even see one with me?

Blinking back the hot tears, I sniff softly.

“It’s going to be okay,” Rory assures me. “You’re the one who once said true love always triumphs, sis.”

“I did say that, didn’t I? But that was when it pertained to you. Not me.”

“It holds true for you, too. You’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right, Rory.” Yet, doubts plague me because I have absolutely no idea where Rafferty stands when it comes to a future together.

“Liam wants you both to come to the compound. He said father’s enforcers are searching the city for you. I agree. I think you both should come here as soon as possible.”

“Do you really think he would hurt me?” I ask. I’m not sure of that answer myself, though.

“I don’t know,” she answers in complete honesty. “We’ve never seen him this angry, Sofe. It’s best you come to the O’Shea compound. You’ll both be safe here.”

“I saw things. When he didn’t know I was watching and listening just inside the tunnels. He’s become a monster, Rory. He’s not the same papà I remember growing up.”

“I know,” she whispers.

“I don’t know who he is any more. He’s become a stranger.”

“And that’s exactly why you need to come here. ASAP.”

“I think you’re right. But what if Rafferty—”

“You can stay with me. I already told Liam, and the guest room is ready. Besides, Griffin will love having his Auntie Sofe here. And you’re more than welcome to stay here for as long as you like.”

Relief and love fill my heart. “Thank you, sis. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I know,” she says jauntily and we both chuckle. Then she grows serious again. “Just get here, okay? I want you with us.”

“I’ll see you soon,” I promise.

“Love you, Sofe.”

“Love you, too,” I tell her.

After disconnecting the call, I sit back and think over everything we just learned. I’m looking forward to seeing Rory but, at the same time, I’m sad because the perfect little world that Rafferty and I created is coming to an end.

And that makes my heart hurt. More so than I ever imagined possible.

RAFFERTY

“**W**hat were you thinking?” Liam asks again as I sit down on the edge of my bed. I wanted to give Sofia some extra privacy and now I’m getting another earful from my big brother.

“I needed her to escape.” It’s true, even if he doesn’t believe me. Of course, I could’ve let her go once we got off the boat, not tied her up and dragged her back to my place, but Liam doesn’t need to worry about my decisions.

“Okay, I get that. But I want to know why you kidnapped her, Raff. You could’ve let her go and come straight back here.”

He’s too perceptive and I roll my eyes, mulling over his words which I know are true. And make sense. But I don’t appreciate the scolding. A part of me is tempted to tell Liam to fuck off and mind his own damn business. But, I know he has my best interests at heart and he’s only being an overprotective ass because he cares.

Plus, what I did is pretty damn extreme. I took a woman against her will. And now we’re lovers. Shaking my head, I finally say, “The truth?”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” Liam responds in a dry voice.

“I brought her here because I wanted revenge on Matteo for what he did. He killed our father, Liam. She fell right into my lap and she was the perfect vengeance.”

“Tell me you didn’t hurt her,” Liam growls.

“I didn’t hurt her. My plan was to—” I pull in a deep breath. Saying it out loud makes me sound like a cruel, cold bastard. “To use her then drop her back off on Matteo’s doorstep. But, I couldn’t do it.”

“Why not?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Don’t misunderstand. We’ve been intimate.”

“Oh, Christ,” Liam grumbles.

“But it was consensual. I didn’t force her to do anything she didn’t want to do.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” he says sarcastically. “Otherwise, I’d have to kick your ass.”

I don’t say anything and I hear Liam sigh heavily through the line.

“What made you change your mind?” he asks. “Why didn’t you ever drop her back off?”

Raking a hand through my hair, I wonder the same damn thing. “I wouldn’t ever hurt Sofia. She’s too...special.”

“Special?” Liam echoes.

“Yeah.” I don’t elaborate and I know he wants more, but I’m not even sure myself what’s going on between us. Or how she even feels about me.

“You started caring for your prisoner.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“How much exactly do you care for Sofia Marino?”

Sofia Bella Marino. A fierce wave of protection rises up within me and I know I’ll do anything to keep her safe. “More than I should,” I admit.

“Hmm. You’re being cagey.”

“No, I just don’t know. I’m confused as hell because I should hate her, right? Her and her family. But, I don’t.”

“Who says you should hate her? This rivalry is archaic. It needs to end.” He’s quiet for a moment. “You don’t hate Rory or Griffin, do you?”

“God, no. Of course not.”

“Then why must you hate Sofia? That’s Rory’s sister and Griff’s aunt.”

“I know. This whole situation is such a mindfuck.” I rub my fingers against my temple. “What about Dad, though? Are we just supposed to let it go? Forget about the fact that Matteo ordered his murder?”

“I’m not so sure he did,” Liam says quietly.

“What?” I bolt up off the bed. “What are you talking about? What do you know?”

“Calm down. I haven’t told anyone this yet—except Rory, of course—but, I came across some interesting information.”

I wait on pins and needles for him to continue.

“It looks like Matteo Marino has been busy trying to avoid bankruptcy. I heard he’s having financial problems at his legit companies and his underworld dealings are the only thing keeping him afloat.”

“But you’ve basically handed him all our underworld interests. How isn’t that enough to keep his empire going?”

“I’m not sure yet. But, I’m looking into it. Something strange is going on, and I’m determined to figure it out.”

If anyone can get to the bottom of the situation it’s my brother. He has a nose for sniffing out bullshit.

“Let me know as soon as you find anything out.”

“I will. In the meantime, you and Sofia need to get to the compound immediately. This little stunt you pulled has escalated the situation and Matteo is out for blood. His new enforcer—”

“Tony,” I say in a dry voice. “Believe me, I know his handiwork well.”

“Right, Tony Maggiano. Well, he replaced Dante Rivera.”

“The lunatic who showed up at your wedding dinner.”

“Don’t remind me,” Liam growls.

The Marino enforcer was supposed to marry Rory and had Matteo’s blessing. But, he lost his mind when she ran off and married Liam instead. Dante showed up with a gun and the intention of taking out my entire family. Thank God Conor shot him dead before he had the chance.

“Anyway, at one of his fights, Conor overheard some of Marino’s men talking. They have orders to hunt you down and shoot on sight.”

Fuck. Me, I understand. But, his daughter? “Sofia, too?” I ask in disbelief.

“We don’t know for sure, but we have to assume Sofia, too,” he states darkly. “I’m going to send security to pick you up. Can you be ready in an hour?”

“Yeah,” I murmur, unable to wrap my head around a father issuing the order to kill his youngest daughter.

“Okay. We’ll see you soon then.”

“Thanks, Liam.”

“What’re big brothers for? Just be careful.”

“We will.”

After we hang up, I toss Sofia’s phone on the bed and rake my fingers through my disheveled hair again. I wonder if Rory told Sofia about her father’s order? Guess there’s only one way to find out. Turning on my heel, I head back down to the kitchen where I left Sofia on my phone with her sister.

Sofia is still sitting at the small table and she’s no longer talking to Rory. Instead, she’s slowly and thoughtfully spinning my cell phone in a circle. She looks lost in thought and my heart goes out to her. I wish there was some way that I could make her feel better.

“Are you okay?” I ask, voice gruff.

Her hazel gaze lifts to meet mine. “I don’t know,” she answers. “Are we?”

“We?” I ask, confused by her answer. I’m expecting her to be upset about her

father's order to kill us on sight. But it sounds like she's second-guessing our relationship and that pisses me off.

She huffs out a frustrated sigh. "Yes, Rafferty, we. After everything that's happened..." Her voice trails off and a frown pinches her brow.

"What're you saying?"

"I'm just not sure where it leaves us."

"It leaves us packing up and getting the hell out of here," I say, avoiding what she really is asking. Because, truthfully, our perfect little bubble has just burst and the real world is calling. There's no time to examine what's happened between us or hold any kind of a conversation about what any of it means. I can't sit here for the next hour and talk about my feelings.

But she's not letting me off the hook that easily.

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

"This isn't the time to discuss—" What? A future? Is that what she wants? What I want? Is it even possible? I huff out a breath. There's way too much to figure it out and no time to deal with any of it. "I need to pack."

I know I sound curt, but I can't get into this discussion right now and if she pushes me, I know how I'll respond. I'm going to pull away and retreat into a sulky silence. Whenever women have pushed for a relationship in the past, I've run. Maybe I'm not meant to be tied down. Marriage and children has always seemed like such a far-off thought. Something I never gave much attention to or even knew if I wanted.

"I have nothing to pack," she reminds me, voice cool. "You stole me away with only the clothes on my back."

My eyes narrow. "None of this would've happened if your father hadn't paid off a couple of thugs to kidnap me," I state in an annoyed tone. I'm not sure where she's going with this, but it almost sounds like she's blaming me. And this shit show isn't my fault.

No, it's Matteo Marino's full fault. And I refuse to take any blame. Not one fucking ounce.

“No. You made a choice to take me after I helped you escape.”

“You’re damn right, I did! You were always a part of the plan, Sofia.” I don’t mean to sound so cold, but the words spill out before I even think them through.

Her eyes widen. “What?”

Shit. Well, no going back now.

“I needed you to help me escape.” I don’t mention my revenge. But I know she didn’t forget the cold words I told her father before dragging her away with me.

“If you so much as raise a hand against her—”

“I’m going to do better than that. I’m going to defile your youngest daughter and after I’ve had my fill of her sweet, little body, then I’ll dump her back on your doorstep. The vile things I have planned would make you sick. I’m going to humiliate her and use her until she’s nothing but a broken ragdoll.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, but I would. And I’m going to enjoy making her scream.”

“I did help you escape!,” she says, interrupting my thoughts. “And in thanks, you put a knife to my throat and told my father you planned to defile me.”

“Didn’t we already have this conversation?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know!” she yells, arms flailing. “I don’t think it was ever properly addressed.”

“And there’s no time to address it now. I’m trying to get you out of here and somewhere safe, and you want to talk about our future? They’re scouring the city for us, Sofia, and your father’s guards have orders to shoot on sight.” I move closer and grab her by the shoulders, on the verge of shaking her. Or, kissing her. “Shoot on sight.”

Tears fill her eyes. “What?”

“You heard me.” I shake my head and release her. “Our situation is impossible.”

I'm feeling overwhelmed and itchy to leave. In the back of my mind, I fear we're running on borrowed time. She has a stunned look that can only be described as betrayal on her gorgeous face and her eyes search mine.

Does she feel more betrayed by me or her father? I wonder.

"You never should've taken me," she whispers, voice hitching.

Maybe she's right, but it's too late for regrets.

"What do you want from me, Sofia?" I ask wearily.

Her shoulders sag. "Nothing. I just want to see my sister."

Her voice sounds monotone, completely desolate. Hopelessness fills the space between us, but I don't have time to analyze it. We need to get out of here. Turning on my heel, I stalk away, not trusting myself to say another word.

Our perfect time together has come to a bitter and screeching end.

SOFIA

By the time security arrives to escort us to the O'Shea compound, Rafferty and I haven't exchanged more than a few words. The drive out to the country is miserable and I can't help but think our lack of communication is a portent of things to come.

Or, in this case, not to come.

It suddenly and overwhelmingly feels like our possibility for a future, a real relationship outside of this, is doomed. Over before it ever truly began.

Especially when Rafferty turns to me and murmurs, "I think it's best you stay with Rory."

My chest tightens and I bite my lip to keep from crying. I don't know how we fell apart so fast. I suppose it was nearly as quickly as we came together. My voice is caught in my throat, knotted by emotion, so I merely nod.

By the time we pull through the estate's large gates, head up the long driveway and park in front of a smaller house, off the side of the main house, my heart is slowly crumbling and doubt plagues me. I feel physically ill.

Rory rushes out and I throw the car door open and hurry to meet my sister. We hug each other long and hard. I'm so happy to see her and she puts her arm around my shoulders, squeezing, and leads me up the steps and into her house.

Liam is walking out and, as we pass him, he smiles at me. "Glad you're here, Sofia. You'll be safe."

“Thanks,” I murmur.

Then he heads out, presumably to talk to Rafferty. I don’t know and, at this moment, I can’t bring myself to care. Something happened on the car ride here. It’s like an invisible wall crashed down between me and Rafferty, and I have no idea why or how to handle it.

I tried talking to him and I know my timing wasn’t great, but he shut down so fast. He could’ve at least said we could discuss things later. And then he tells me to stay with Rory. Tears burn the backs of my eyes as my sister leads me into the kitchen.

“I’m going to make us some tea. We can drink it in the garden, if you like?”

But I shake my head, not wanting to run into Rafferty. “I’d rather stay inside, if that’s okay?”

She frowns as she puts the kettle on the burner. “Of course.”

Rory grabs a couple of mugs and tea bags, keeping busy, but I can feel her concerned gaze flick over and land on me every so often. It’s not until she puts the steaming mug of tea in front of me and then sits down in the stool next to me that she asks, “What’s going on with you and Rafferty? Really?”

The tears burst from my eyes and it’s like a dam just broke. I’ve been holding them in for over an hour and now the salty wetness pours freely. Between sobs and a runny nose, I tell her what happened. “He got what he wanted. We’re done, Rory, and there’s nothing I can do.”

“You can talk to him,” she says encouragingly.

But I shake my head. “No. There was no mistaking the coldness in his voice. It’s over.”

“If you care for him, it isn’t over.”

“It is, though,” I insist, swiping my snot and tears away with the back of my hand.

Rory releases a sigh, gets up and grabs a few tissues for me. “Just give it a few days. Let things settle down. Emotions are too raw right now. Things will look up.”

I know my sister has good intentions, but the sooner I accept the fact that Rafferty and I don't have a future together, the sooner I'll be able to get over his humiliating rejection. Because that's exactly what this whole thing was. He pushed me away because he's done. If I sit here and hold onto the hope that he's going to come looking for me...

Well, that makes me an even bigger fool than I've been already. And my tattered pride won't allow it.

As the week passes, that naive little part of me keeps the fire of faith alive, yearning for Rafferty to come by and ask to talk. But he doesn't. One week turns into two and slowly the flames of hope flicker out.

Time seems to be flying by, yet also crawling at a snail's pace. It's so odd how that can happen. I've settled into a little routine here—morning tea in the garden followed by hanging out with Griffin so Rory can do errands and whatever else she needs to accomplish. After that, I cry in my room and maybe try reading a book. I often look out my window in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Rafferty. That happened once when I saw him dressed in a suit and walking to his car. He looked ridiculously handsome and my heart twisted in my chest.

God, I miss him. So much.

But, he seems to be avoiding me just like I'm avoiding him. I've never felt so used and discarded. The last thing I want to do is go begging for him to talk to me. I've been humiliated enough.

Rory tries to get me to join her and Liam for dinner later that evening—she's tried every night for two weeks and I've said no—and I'm on the verge of declining yet again when something in me agrees. She tells me Griffin is staying the night with Grandma Maeve and the thought of eating alone in my room again is beyond depressing. I know that I need to start living again.

Rory prepares a lasagna, crisp garden salad and homemade garlic bread with red wine. I surprise her when I show up early and help her set the table. I need to shake this funk that's been weighing me down. I'm hoping spending more time with her and Liam will help.

The truth is it only makes me sadder.

Don't get me wrong. I'm so happy for my sister and the love she's found with Liam. But I can't help but wonder—why did it work between them, but not with me and Rafferty? What have they done differently to succeed where we so clearly failed?

I need to know. Did I do something wrong? Is there still a possibility to fix wherever we screwed up? Because despite how angry I was at him, the truth is I miss him terribly. Every day without Rafferty makes my heart ache.

Two bites into the lasagna, I set my fork down with a clatter and Rory and Liam both look over at me.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Is something wrong with your dinner?" Rory asks worriedly, and I wave her question away.

"It's delicious. That's not the problem." I take a moment to look between my sister and her husband. "How did you make it work? I mean, with the entire world rooting for you to fail, how did you two make a successful and loving marriage?"

"It wasn't easy," Liam states. "The odds were definitely stacked against us."

"But that didn't matter," Rory adds. "Because it's true when they say love conquers all."

I frown. "That's just a platitude. It takes more than love."

"You always believed in happy endings," Rory says, voice said. "Now you sound so jaded."

"Love is key, but you're right," Liam says carefully and takes Rory's hand, lacing his fingers through hers. "It takes communication, forgiveness, understanding and a lot of hard work. There are times you have to compromise and try to understand your partner's perspective because you won't always be on the same page."

Rory smiles. "Look how wise marriage has made you, Mr. O'Shea."

"No, you're the one who did it, Mrs. O'Shea," he tells her with a grin.

They lean their heads together and the moment their lips meet, I groan. “Ugh. You guys are too perfect. I feel like such a failure compared to you.”

“Sofe—”

“No, I do. You figured out how to make it work and I can’t. Why? What is wrong with me? And Rafferty? Because he seems just as clueless.”

Liam laughs then straightens up. “Sorry, I’m not laughing at you. But, yeah, my brother is a little clueless, especially when it comes to women. He’s never had a serious relationship before, so he may need you to cut him some slack.”

I suppose that makes a little sense.

“Here’s the thing,” Liam tells me in his wise Dad voice. “Rafferty is a good guy, but if you give him two choices, he will always make the wrong decision. That’s just what he does. I think you’re going to need to help him learn how to start making the right decision.”

“And if anyone can do that, it’s you, Sofia,” my sister says.

“You have too much faith in me,” I say dryly. “I’m hardly a miracle worker.”

“Because you can do this,” Rory states in a firm voice. “Liam is right. Love isn’t easy and marriage is a daily challenge.”

“Daily, huh?” Liam asks, nudging her.

“Daily,” she repeats with a teasing grin.

While those two get lost in their own world, I think over what they said. Communication is key and Rafferty and I haven’t been talking. About anything that happened. Maybe it’s time we sit down and have a long chat.

I wonder if he would be open to that? As scary as it is, it might be worth trying. Especially if he misses me as much as I miss him.

The next morning, I’m sitting in a quiet corner in the gardens, out of sight behind the lilac bushes, sipping my tea with an unread book on my lap, contemplating how to approach Rafferty, when I hear low voices. Turning, I peek through the branches and see Rafferty talking to Conor.

Conor O’Shea, Liam’s twin, is nearly identical to his one-minute older

brother. But the underground fighter is wider in the chest and thicker with muscles. Muscles everywhere. He's a little intimidating and I spot several tattoos poking out from beneath his fitted t-shirt.

Leaning closer, I listen to their conversation.

"So you fucked her. So what? Tell Liam to get off his high horse and deal with it. Your intentions were to use her all along, right?"

My heart speeds up, waiting for Rafferty's response.

"Yeah. Use her and then dump her back off at her father's." His voice is flat, emotionless. "It was the perfect revenge."

"But you didn't do that."

"Plans change, right?"

"Plans or feelings?"

Rafferty sighs then rakes a hand through his dark hair. "Both," he admits, sounding uncomfortable.

"Fuck! You caught feelings for a Marino." Conor shakes his head. "I thought Rory was a fluke and here you go falling for Matteo's other daughter. What am I missing?"

"I didn't catch feelings!" Rafferty snaps.

"Bullshit." Conor crosses his big arms and tilts his head. "Does he have a third daughter? Because that must be some prime pussy."

I see Rafferty's hands ball into fists and I hope he's not stupid enough to hit his much-bigger brother. Instead, he growls, "Maybe you can fuck her brother, Giovanni?"

"No thanks," Conor says dryly. "So, what're you going to do about this?"

"About what?"

"About Sofia, you dense idiot."

"Nothing."

“And why’s that?”

“Because there’s nothing I can do. I’ve had time to think—we both have—and I keep coming to the same conclusion.”

“Which is?” Conor presses.

“She served her purpose. I did what I set out to do—I used her to escape, kidnapped and ruined her. She was my revenge, but that doesn’t mean I should keep using her. I accomplished what I set out to do so why prolong it?”

My heart sinks like a stone in a river.

“Did you, though?”

“Yes,” he grits out.

“Then why do you seem so unhappy about it?”

“Because she didn’t deserve any of it. I’m a bastard.” He kicks a rock and glares at his brother. “She helped me and all I did was hurt her.”

“Wasn’t that your plan all along?”

“Would you shut up about my plan? It was a stupid, fucking plan.”

“Well, you got Matteo’s attention. And now he’s fit to be tied.”

“I made things worse.”

“Yeah, you really did.” Conor slaps Rafferty between his shoulder blades. “Revenge is a tricky thing, little brother.”

“What would you do, Con? If you were me?”

“Honestly? I’d let her go back home. Because as long as Sofia Marino is here, nothing good can come from it.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Rafferty concedes as they start walking away.

His words make me squeeze my eyes shut and I feel bile rise up the back of my throat. Sick to my stomach, I turn and throw up in the lilac bushes. Once I’m done heaving, I wipe my mouth and set my mug down with a hand that

shakes.

He's done with me and he doesn't even have the balls to tell me. Heart crumbling in my chest, I stumble back to Liam and Rory's house, blinded by tears. I've never felt so used or devastated in my entire life. Here I was trying to figure out how to talk to him and he's completely washed his hands of me.

Pulling the door open, I rush up to my room, throw myself on my bed and sob until I have no more tears left. I'm not sure how long I'm lying here and, at some point, there's a soft knock on the door.

"Safe?" It's Rory. "Can I come in?"

I'm on my back, staring blankly up at the ceiling, all cried out. I've never felt so emotionally drained. It's to the point where I felt sick most of the afternoon and even threw up again.

"Sure," I say so softly, I'm not sure she even hears.

But then the door opens and my sister appears. Rory walks over, sits on the edge of the bed and reaches for my limp hand.

"Oh, sis," she murmurs. "What did he do?"

Of course, she instantly takes my side and I'd smile if I weren't so exhausted and utterly depleted. It's like I went through every single emotion—from hurt to anger to hate to denial to acceptance.

And now I just feel empty.

"I heard him and Conor talking. They didn't see me, but I heard everything."

"Oh, no. What did you hear?"

"He said I served my purpose and he did what he set out to do. I was his revenge."

Rory swears under her breath and calls him a foul name.

"Then he said that he's—" The words get caught in my throat, but I force them out. "He said he was done using me. That I should leave."

I didn't think I had any tears left, but my eyes grow wet all over again.

“I want to go home, Rory,” I whisper, tears sliding down my face and soaking the bedspread.

“It’s not safe, sis. You need to stay here with us.”

Pushing up, I shake my head. “I’m sick of feeling like everyone’s prisoner. There’s nothing for me here. You have your own life with Liam and Griffin. And I love you so much, but I can’t live here. I need to go back home and figure my life out.”

“What about father?”

“What’s he going to do? Kill me?” When Rory doesn’t immediately answer, I shake my head wearily. “Rafferty kidnapped me. I may have helped him escape, but I didn’t go with him willingly. If Dad wants to be angry then there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“Just give it a few more days. Please?”

“Why?”

“Because their family wants you here. Liam’s mom is planning a big dinner and I think it’s for you.”

“I don’t want to see Rafferty.”

“Sofe—”

“No. I can stay here a little longer—until things cool off more—but I don’t want anything to do with Rafferty.”

Rory must sense I’m not going to bend on the issue because she finally nods. “Take all the time you need, sis.”

“Thank you,” I murmur. “I just want to be left alone, please.”

Rory looks like she’s about to say something more, but then presses her lips together and retreats to the door. “I’ll have dinner sent up. If you need anything, just let me know.”

“I will. Thanks.”

My sister reluctantly walks out, closing the door behind her and I drop back

on the bed. As much as I'd like to leave here right now, I know she's right and I need to wait it out. Tomorrow, I'll call my mom and see how things are over there. When she tells me to come home, I will.

In the meantime, I'm going to have to deal with the O'Shea's and as much as I want to hate them all, I can't. They've been nothing but nice to me. Well, most of them, anyway.

Crossing my arms over my lower stomach, I mentally tell Rafferty O'Shea to go to hell.

RAFFERTY

Every day that passes leaves me doubting my decision about not seeing Sofia more and more. But everyone keeps telling me to give her space and let her be. Give her room to breathe. And, considering I have no idea how to handle the situation, I listen to my family and Rory.

Except after talking to Conor, I realize I'm fooling myself. I was trying to sound tough and unemotional, like I knew what I was doing and that I had things under control. Because that's how my older brothers always act.

But I miss her desperately. And though I know I should let her go and that I've done enough damage, the urge to see her has me tied up in knots.

As I'm debating whether or not to sneak over to Liam's and find her, it occurs to me that she may still need space. After all, she's not exactly knocking my door down. From what I've heard from Liam and Rory, Sofia needs time to herself to figure things out.

In other words, she's still mad at me.

But she hasn't left and I'm taking that as a good sign.

Determined to talk to her, but knowing I need to move slowly with her, I pull my phone out, bring her name up and decide to text her a message. After nearly ten different attempts, I still can't figure out what I want to say.

Cursing under my breath, I settle back on the couch and look around my empty house. Even though I told Sofia she should stay with Rory, I wanted her here. But that wasn't fair of me, so I let her go. And now I'm thinking I

made a huge mistake.

God, I'm such a fuck-up. Give me two options and, I swear to God, I make the wrong choice every time. "You're a fucking disaster, Raff," I whisper to myself.

My house feels so empty and the joy that Sofia had filled my apartment with is missing here. I used to enjoy my privacy, but I'm hating it right now. I'm missing Sofia like a blind man misses his sight. I want her here, not over at my brother's place.

Gritting my teeth, I lift my phone back up and try to gather my thoughts. Then I slowly write up a message, keeping it short and simple. And, above all else, honest: I miss you.

I wait for an hour straight, staring at my phone, but Sofia never responds. Maybe she didn't get my text. Or, maybe she did and she's ignoring me. Leaning forward, dropping my head between my legs, I grab my hair and twist hard.

She thinks I'm an asshole. And I deserve it.

I messed everything up, made every wrong decision. And that's why you're sitting here alone, I tell myself.

Later that night when I finally fall into my big, empty bed, she still hasn't texted me back. I'm going to have to figure out a way to fix this, but I have no idea how.

The next morning, I meet my brothers over in the main house. We're all in Dad's old office where Liam mostly works now and he's going over the daily reports for our companies. We've made it our mission to distance ourselves from all the shady companies and activities our father ran while he was alive and it's a big job.

As much as I'm trying to focus on work and pay attention, my mind wanders. I'm completely at a loss in regards to Sofia and what to do next. If she won't text me back then she certainly won't want to see me. But, I need to talk to her and apologize. For everything.

"Earth to Rafferty!" Liam snaps and my head jerks up. "Can you repeat one

thing I said in the past half hour?”

I slide my hands through my too-long hair and apologize. “Sorry. I’m having trouble focusing.”

“No shit,” Conor supplies. “Mind on a certain dark-haired pixie?”

My eyes narrow and I don’t like that he calls her that. I’ve always allowed my older brothers to get away with shit and they used to boss me around all the time while we were growing up, but they better not say anything about Sofia. “She’s mine,” I growl.

“Okay, chill.” Conor lifts his hands, as though backing off, and he and Liam exchange a look. Damn twins. They don’t ever have to say a word because they’re so in tune with each other and always know what the other one is thinking. It gets annoying.

Liam closes his folder and pushes it aside. “Okay, Raff, relax. No one is after your woman.”

“She’s not my woman!” I snarl, way too forcefully. Again, they exchange a look with each other then study me closely. With a sigh, I drop my head and squeeze my eyes shut. “I texted her last night and she ignored me.” I can’t hide the hurt and disappointment that fill my voice.

“She’s been locked up in the guest room for weeks,” Liam says. “The only one she talks to is Rory.”

“What the fuck did you do to her, Raff?” Conor asks with a chuckle.

“Fuck you,” I hiss.

“Wow.” Conor looks from me to Liam. “I think he likes her.”

“Ya think?” Liam asks, voice laced in sarcasm.

“I don’t have to sit here and listen to this.” I abruptly stand up, nearly turning my chair over in the process, and glare at them both.

“Sit down,” Liam says.

“Yeah, I didn’t mean to tease you,” Conor adds. “I’ve just never seen you act this crazy over a woman before. Sorry, it’s entertaining.”

“Wait’ll you fall, asshole.” Slowly, I sink back down in the chair.

A moment too late, it dawns on me what I just said.

But they don’t miss a thing.

Liam arches a thick, dark brow. “You have real feelings for her? You’re telling us she wasn’t just a revenge fuck?”

“Yes, assholes. I care about her. More than I’ve ever cared about anyone.”

“What did you text her?” Liam asks.

I swallow back the lump of emotion in my throat and pinch the bridge of my nose. “I told her I miss her. Apparently, the feeling isn’t mutual.”

“Or, it is and she doesn’t want to get more hurt by you than she already is,” Liam explains.

My oldest brother is married now and I’d like to think he’s wiser in the ways of love and women than the rest of us. So, if Liam is going to dish out advice, I’m all ears. Because I certainly know that Conor has nothing important to say. His relationships never last more than one night.

“What should I do, Liam? I miss her like hell and—” They both stare at me like I’ve grown a second head. “And I think I’m falling in love with her.”

A grin curves Liam’s mouth. “There’s something special about those Marino women, huh?”

“So damn special,” I agree.

“Are you sure there isn’t a third sister somewhere because, damn, boys! I feel like I’m missing out.”

“Shut up, Conor,” I say without any force and he starts laughing.

“Not to be a dick, but this is what we were waiting to hear from you, Raff. After what happened, Rory and I weren’t sure what your true feelings for Sofia were and she didn’t want her sister getting hurt more than she already was. We knew keeping the two of you apart would give us the answer we needed. Either that you missed her or you didn’t.”

“I miss her so much it physically hurts,” I say. Maybe they think I’m being dramatic, but I don’t give a shit. It’s the truth. I ache for Sofia’s light and to see her smile again. Not being around her these past few weeks has made me see how much I want her in my life.

No, more than merely want. I need her by my side. To walk with me through this life and be my support, my anchor, my love. She’s my sweet Sofia. The one I want to go to bed with every night and wake up next to every single morning.

I stand back up again, more determined than ever to go get my girl.

“Hold on there, loverboy,” Liam says, raising a hand. “Don’t just go charging into my house and demand she talk to you. That’s not the right way to go about this.”

“No,” Conor agrees. “You have to woo her.”

“What the hell do you know?” I demand. “You’ve never had a serious relationship in your life.”

“You might be surprised at what I know,” he says with a mysterious smile.

Rolling my eyes, I turn my attention back to Liam. “What should I do?”

“You’ve given her space and now it’s time to make your move. Subtly, though. She’s in a fragile state and you don’t want to pressure her. Because don’t forget just because you want to be with her doesn’t mean she wants to be with you. You pulled some serious shit, Raff.”

“I know,” I say, dropping my head back. “I fucked up and now I want to make amends. Need to make her understand.”

Liam nods. “Let me talk to Rory. We’ll see what she says and go from there.”

“Okay.” I pull in a deep breath. It’s going to be alright, I try to convince myself. “And thanks, Liam.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Liam says.

That doesn’t sound very positive or reassuring, so I wait with baited breath for the rest of the afternoon. When Liam finally calls my cell, I slide the bar

over and bark, “What did she say?”

“Rafferty, you need to get a grip.”

“Sorry. I’m a freaking mess over here.” I’ve been pacing back and forth, practically wearing my carpet away.

“Mom is going to make a big dinner tonight at the main house and Sofia will be coming. But it’s up to you to make things right.”

“Got it. I can do that.” At least, I hope so.

The next couple of hours drag by at a snail’s pace and by the time seven o’clock rolls around, I’m a bundle of nerves. I walk over to the main house early and meet my mom in the kitchen where she and my younger sister Finley are cooking up an Irish feast.

“Don’t be nervous, Raff,” Finley says. “We’ll help you win Sofia back.”

“What do you know about it?” I ask, taken by complete surprise that my sister is aware of the situation with Sofia. God, I live with a bunch of gossips.

“Just that you messed up and Sofia has been crying in the garden almost every morning.”

Shock hits me hard. I had no idea. “She has?” How did I not know this? Why the hell didn’t anyone tell me? “I haven’t seen her in the garden and I walk through all the time.”

“Because she hides behind the lilac bushes, dear,” my mom says as she pulls a pan of potatoes out of the oven. Maeve O’Shea always seems to be in tune with her surroundings and always knows what’s going on with all of her children.

I frown. “How did I not know this? And why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Because, we’re on Sofia’s side,” Finley announces unapologetically. “At least, until you get your act together.”

“And it appears as though you have. We’re so glad, sweetheart.”

For a moment, I stand there completely dumbstruck. They’ve all been waiting on me to figure out my feelings and get my head out of my ass. Sofia, too? I

wonder.

It seems as though my family knows more about what's going on than I do. Shaking my head, I watch as they finish preparing dinner, chattering away about how excited they are that Sofia is finally coming out and joining us for supper.

Of course, they've all met before because Sofia came to visit Rory and Griffin a few times. But she'd sneak in and out so fast that I never met her. Never even saw her. The first time I laid eyes on Sofia was when I was locked up in their basement and she appeared before me like some kind of angel from above.

"I really messed up," I say in a low voice, sliding my fingers through my hair and tugging.

"Don't do that," my mother says and pulls at my arm. "You'll go bald by the time you're forty."

I instantly release the strands of hair.

"You need a haircut, Raff," she states with a frown.

"Desperately," Finley adds, making a face. "You look greasy."

Fuck. I run a self-conscious hand through my hair. Does it look that bad? I wonder. "Guess that's what happens when you're locked away in a basement cell for two weeks."

"You've been back almost three weeks," my mother reminds me. "And thank God for that. We were so worried." She presses a quick kiss to my cheek.

Finley motions for me to sit in a nearby stool. "C'mere and have a seat. I'll give you a quick trim. Make you look all handsome for Sofia."

I do as they say and ten minutes later, Finley has the sides short again and the top still stylishly long, but no longer stringy. My bangs always fall in my eyes and I toss them back much easier now. "Thanks, Fin," I murmur with a smile.

"You're welcome." She leans in and gives me a fierce look. "Now don't screw this up. We're all rooting for you two. Even though I don't know her

very well, I really like Sofia. From what I do know, though, I think she'd make an excellent sister in law."

"I'm going to try," I promise her and Finley's face instantly softens.

"I know, big brother." She presses a kiss to my cheek.

I'm going to try really damn hard to win over the woman I'm falling in love with. I could kick myself for being such a dolt. Why does it take me longer than everyone else to figure things out? I'm always the last one to see what's clear as day to everyone else.

Pulling in a deep breath, I stand up and then offer to carry the platters of food into the dining room.

Time to win my princess back. I just hope she's in a forgiving mood.

SOFIA

Something isn't right.

I know my body very well and it doesn't feel right. I've felt off all week and all I can think about is all of the unprotected sex that Rafferty and I had. Maybe he assumed I was on birth control, but I'm not.

And now my period, which arrives like clockwork, is officially late. Three days, to be exact, and that's never happened to me before. My cycle is exactly 28 days and it doesn't waver.

Shit.

I should've been more vocal about him using a condom. But there's no point in beating myself up over it now. Passion and inexperience drove me and now I feel sick to my stomach. Literally.

After hurling again this morning, panic set in because deep down, I know the truth.

I'm pregnant.

The thought scares the crap out of me, but my cycle never alters and I never throw up. Not since I was 5-years-old and had the flu. I'm healthy as a horse and I don't get sick, other than the occasional snuffle, so I know when something is wrong.

And right now, something is very wrong.

After some debating, I find Rory and tell her I need her help. She's in the rocking chair in the bedroom, feeding Griffin a bottle, and he's almost asleep.

"What do you need?" she asks in concern, looking up at me.

My heart is thundering and I wipe my sweaty palms down my leggings. "A pregnancy test," I whisper.

Her eyes go wide as saucers. "Oh, my God."

"Yeah, I know." I start chewing my lower lip and my sister sets the bottle aside and stands up, all business.

"C'mon. Let me put Griffin down for his nap and I've got an extra one in the bathroom."

"Thanks, sis," I murmur. Rory has always been there for me when I need her and I appreciate it so much. More than I can ever adequately express.

Once Griffin is laying in his crib, already sound asleep, Rory motions for me to follow her down to the bathroom connected to her and Liam's bedroom. She pulls a cupboard open and starts rifling through it.

"I know I have one in here somewhere," she says, head all the way inside the cabinet and searching. "Ah ha!"

Rory sits back on her heels, lifts the small box and waves it triumphantly.

I take it from her with a slight grimace.

"I'm not sure it'll make you feel any better, but I know exactly how you feel," she says, standing up. "It wasn't that long ago when I was going through the very same thing."

"Crazy, right?"

My sister studies me for a long moment and her eyes drift down to the box I'm clutching so hard that my knuckles are white.

"Do you love him?" she asks in a soft voice.

I nod, trying not to cry. "But it doesn't matter."

“Of course, it matters. It’s what matters the most,” she insists.

“Not if he doesn’t love me back.”

“Oh, sis.” She pulls me in for a hug and I fight the tears back. I’m not going to cry. Not yet, at least.

When we’re done hugging, she once again looks over at the box in my hands.

“It’s pretty simple. Just pee on the stick. I’ll be right outside the door if you need me, okay?”

I give her a brave nod and she walks out, quietly closing the door behind her. With a huge sigh, I open the pregnancy test and when it blurs before my face, I frown. Then, I realize the stupid tears are rolling down my face. I can’t seem to stop crying lately and I’ve been so emotional.

“Probably pregnancy hormones,” I tell myself. Squeezing my eyes shut, I draw in a deep breath then get to it. I don’t like to be kept in suspense and I need to know immediately if I’m pregnant or only imagining things. Once I know what the situation is, I can make a game plan.

I skim the instructions then toss them on the counter, not bothering to read them thoroughly and, instead, I do what Rory said. Even though I should know my answer in 3-5 minutes, the waiting is the hardest part. If I’m pregnant, my life will be tied to Rafferty O’Shea’s forever. We’ll have a child together.

Granted, I have no idea if he’d want anything to do with either of us, but I’d like to think he would. When he texted me the other night, I didn’t see it until the next morning and then it seemed too late to write back. I also was still mad at him, so I didn’t respond.

Maybe I should have. If I had, we might be talking right now.

Oh, well. I’ve chalked it up as a missed opportunity because I can be far too stubborn for my own good. I definitely lived up to his nickname of “princess.”

My head is spinning. Am I ready to be a mother? An image of Griffin pops into my head and I smile. I would love having a little baby of my own to love

and take care of. That doesn't mean I'm still not interested in pursuing a nursing career. Just the opposite—I'd love to do both—and I'm going to need a way to support myself and a little one. Especially if Rafferty disappears on us and my father banishes me like he did Rory.

It makes me sad that he'd choose to not be a part of his grandchildren's lives. And his daughters' lives, too. But if a rivalry is more important than his own flesh and blood then there's nothing I can do about it. He's a lost cause and will end up dying a very bitter, old man.

Slowly, I turn the stick over and I stare at the results.

Positive.

And just like that, my entire world flips on its head. Deep down, I already knew it, though. We were careless and now I'm going to have Rafferty's baby. I have no idea what the future holds for him and me, but I'm hoping with my entire heart that he's going to want to give us a chance.

Walking over to the door, I open it and Rory is right there, waiting patiently.

“Well?”

“You're going to be an aunt,” I declare, showing her the stick. She grabs it, tilts it toward her and gasps.

“Oh, my God, sis!” Her eyes search mine. “Are you okay? You know I'll be with you every step of the way and you can have all of Griffin's things. He's growing so fast and I'm not going to lie, I'm so excited for him to have a cousin to play with. Gah, Sofe, I hope you're happy because I'm so excited for you.”

Her enthusiasm makes me smile and I hug her. “Thank you, Rory. I have a feeling I'm going to need your help. Like a lot of your help.”

She pulls back. “You don't think Rafferty will want to be involved?”

“I have no idea. Guess we'll find out when I tell him tonight after dinner.”

“Speaking of which...” She glances over at the clock. “We should walk over. Are you ready to see Rafferty?”

I force a nod. “I have to be.”

Together, my sister and I form a united front and head over to the main house. We’re the last ones to arrive and my nerves kick in when we step into the foyer. To my surprise, Rafferty is standing there, leaning against the wall, waiting.

Waiting for me?

My heart stutters and our gazes lock. Those ice blue eyes of his pierce my very soul and I realize I’m holding my breath. He hesitates.

“Can we talk?” he finally asks.

Even though I want to scream no, I glance over at Rory and she nods. Then she disappears through the doorway, heading into the dining room.

“I know we don’t have much time,” he says, moving closer. I notice the dark smudges beneath his eyes. He looks tired and when I hear him sigh, I wonder if he’s been sleeping as poorly as I have. As much as I hate to admit it, I miss him. Terribly.

“I didn’t come to you sooner because I wanted to give you time. Obviously, a lot has been happening and I figured you needed to sort through your feelings. Figure out some things after the time we spent together.”

I wonder where he’s going with this and suddenly I don’t have a good feeling about it. My stomach starts to hurt and I fold my hands over it.

He’s going to officially dump me and tell me to forget all about him and the time we spent together. I just know it.

My lips feel glued together and I don’t know what to say, so I wait for him to continue. Wait for him to break my heart.

“What happened between us...”

Here we go. I prepare myself for the worst.

“It was amazing. But—”

There it is. But...

My entire body tenses and I stare down at my clasped hands.

“But I need to hear where your head is, Sofia. Now that you’ve had time to think, where are you?”

I refuse to lay my heart out there first for him to destroy. “Where are you?” I ask, throwing the question right back, finally finding my voice. He’s so hard to read and I have no idea what he’s thinking right now.

“I want to be honest with you,” he says and I nod, though I really don’t want to hear it. My heart is thundering, ready to break into a million pieces. “I’m not relationship material. I never really wanted a serious girlfriend or spent time picturing myself happily married or having a family.”

My head drops and I fight back the onslaught of tears that threatens to pour from my eyes. Don’t you dare cry. Not in front of him.

“At least not until you,” he adds.

Wait, what? My head snaps back up and my mouth drops open.

Before I can respond, Maeve yells, “Dinner time!”

“Great timing,” Rafferty says dryly.

Closing my mouth, I send him a small smile. “We should, ah, go in there.”

“Right.”

Neither of us moves.

“Talk after dinner?” he asks.

“Okay,” I murmur.

Together, we walk into the dining room where the entire O’Shea family waits. They all turn to stare at us as one and I swallow hard. I know they’re curious about our relationship, but I have no idea what’s going on so I can’t very well tell them anything.

“Come,” Maeve says, encouraging us. “Go sit over there.”

My gaze lands on the two empty chairs beside each other. I have a pretty

good feeling that his mother wants us to be together. And that makes my heart happy. Because despite all of the drama, I love this family. Becoming a part of the O'Shea clan would be such a blessing. Something I'd be honored to do. Of course, that would mean becoming Rafferty's wife and who knows if that will ever happen.

First things first. I need to tell him about the baby.

Skirting around the table, I follow Rafferty to the two empty seats. Our gazes collide as he pulls my chair out and my pulse starts racing. Gah, those eyes of his are beyond stunning. The lightest, brightest blue I've ever seen. He cut his hair, too. It's still longer on top and I'm glad because I love the sexy way his bangs always fall on his forehead and how he's forever shoving them back.

"Thank you," I murmur and sit down.

"Welcome," he responds and sits down beside me.

When I look up, everyone is staring and I shift in my seat, uncomfortable under the weight of all those probing stares. I have no idea what to say and it feels like there's a spotlight on us. Instead of speaking, too nervous to utter a word, I reach for my napkin and lay it across my lap. His family must realize that they're staring because they immediately begin to chat with each other. About the weather, about some new television show, about how good of a cook Maeve is. About everything and anything but us.

The pressure eases and when Rafferty's thigh brushes mine under the table, I suddenly can't focus. I can only feel Rafferty's large body beside me, touching me. Feel the energy pouring off of him and hitting me. Smell his masculine scent which always makes my stomach drop. Clean yet with a touch of spice.

The baby is probably the size of a bean, but I swear it flutters in my uterus when Rafferty leans closer and in a low voice asks, "How are you holding up, sweet Sofia?"

Shifting in my seat, I dare to meet his penetrating ice blue eyes. "I'm... okay," I answer carefully. I'm not sure what he expects me to say, especially in front of everyone, and I start fidgeting with my silverware.

Thankfully, he doesn't push me and his family is kind and accepting. His

mom, Maeve, makes me feel comfortable right away and starts talking about the Irish dinner she prepared. It's a veritable feast. I eat a lot of Italian food, obviously, so I'm not quite as familiar with the dishes she's made, but she takes the time to explain them all—from the creamy mashed potatoes with cabbage to the shepherd's pie.

"It's all so delicious," I exclaim, tasting everything.

"Did you try the Irish soda bread?" Rory asks. "It's my favorite."

"No, not yet." It's on the other side of the table and Rafferty instantly reaches for the plate.

"Here, I'll get you some," he offers, picking up a slice. When he sets it on the edge of my plate, I give him a small smile. He's being so sweet and I have no idea that dinner is about to take a turn for the worse when Liam and Rory start talking about how Griffin has been fussy lately.

"I didn't think he'd ever go to bed last night," Rory says.

"Four AM," Liam states with a yawn.

"Maybe he's tired of all the fighting and wants a truce between our families," Conor comments dryly and I tense.

"It's all rather ridiculous," Finley adds and sends an easy smile my way. "You and Rory are amazing. Rory is the sister I never had."

"Love you, too, Fin," Rory says, and the girls share a smile. Though she's only twenty-two, Finley is a little ball of energy and so welcoming. I really like her and Rory always speaks so highly of her. I know they've grown close since Rory moved in with Liam and a part of me wishes I could be here, too. Close to them. It sure beats the cold, lonely brownstone where Gio stomps around, always broody and sarcastic. And since Rory is gone and Luca hasn't been home in over a year, I've pretty much been on my own.

Not for long, though, I think, and lay a hand on my stomach.

"Or maybe he's just a grouchy baby with the personality of his dad," Conor jokes.

"I'd slug you if I were closer," he tells his twin. "And, excuse me, but I think

I've mellowed out quite a bit since marrying Rory."

"Sometimes that's all it takes," Maeve says. "The love of a good woman."

I don't miss the side look she sends toward me and Rafferty. Clearing my throat, I take a drink of water, pretending I didn't notice.

"Exactly," Liam says, eyeing his younger brother. "I almost let a good thing slip away because of my stubbornness."

"Two good things," Rory states and they reach for each other's hands.

"Well, you two are lucky you were both on the same page," Conor draws. "Not everyone is ready for babies."

"Babies? Plural?" Liam blurts out and sends a panicked look at Rory.

"Baby," she states. "We have one baby and that's about all we can handle right now."

"Thank God," Liam mutters, swiping a nervous hand through his hair, and I can't help but smile.

"No thanks," Conor grumbles. As much as I love my nephew, I'm leaving fatherhood to you, bro. What about you, Raff?"

"What about me?" he asks, shifting in his seat and suddenly looking nervous.

"Are you ready to be a Da'?"

"I'm only twenty-six," he says, avoiding the question. "There's no rush."

Swallowing hard, I glance over at him. I feel Rory's gaze on me, but I don't look at her. My heart is pounding so hard and I set my fork down.

"Besides," he continues, "do we really need more children getting caught up in this feud's tangled web any time soon? I think we've all been hurt enough."

Too late, I think, and slowly push up to my feet. "Excuse me," I mumble.

"Sofia?"

I ignore Rafferty and stalk out. The last thing I hear is Rory telling him to

give me a moment.

God. So, there it is. Rafferty doesn't want children right now. Wonderful.

My heart hurts as I hurry through the large house and then shove the front door open. It feels like the walls are closing in on me and I need some fresh air. The father of my child basically just announced to his entire family that he doesn't want any children. At least not now.

Well, surprise, Mr. O'Shea.

If that were the case then he should've used a condom.

Suddenly, I'm running, but I have no idea where I'm going. Confusion and anger and overwhelming sadness propel me forward, and I take off toward the treeline ahead as tears begin to stream down my face. How am I ever going to tell Rafferty that I'm pregnant?

At this point, I just want to curl up into a ball and go to sleep. Forget about all of my problems and fears, and close my eyes for the next year. Unfortunately, that's not an option. I need to suck it up and be strong. Put on a brave face and get through the challenges ahead.

With or without Rafferty O'Shea.

But, for the next ten minutes, I'm going to allow myself a good cry. I'll let it all out then I'm going to pull myself together, come up with a game plan and take responsibility for my actions. I've never been one to sit around and feel sorry for myself and I refuse to start now.

Especially since my decisions from this point forward don't only affect me. Now, I have a baby to consider, too. And, in a strange sort of way, that gives me the strength and comfort I need to get past the sadness weighing me down. To focus on the future and keep moving.

Swiping at my eyes, I stumble into the woods and don't pay much attention to where I'm going. I'm too caught up in my thoughts. Maybe twenty minutes later, I abruptly stop when I hear a sound. It definitely wasn't the normal scurrying of a critter through the underbrush. It sounded more like boots crunching along through the foliage.

Spinning around, my heart sinks when I see Tony Maggiano. He looks even bigger, scarier and more dangerous than I remember.

“What’re you doing here?” I ask, my heart beating hard. “This is private property.” The moment the words are out of my mouth, it occurs to me that I must have wandered off the O’Shea compound. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Instead of answering, he rushes toward me and, with a squeal, I turn and start running. But Tony is a beast who is far too fast, and he easily catches up and overtakes me. Grabbing me around the waist, he yanks me to a halt, roughly pulling me against his monstrous chest. My feet lift right up off the ground and I try to scream, but his big mitt of a hand slaps over my mouth.

“Shut up,” he growls in my ear. “I’m taking you back to your father.”

Biting down on his finger, I begin to kick furiously. With a grunt, he gives me a hard shake and it feels like my brain rattles around in my skull.

“Do that again and you’ll regret it,” he warns me.

I know the brutality he’s capable of, so I go slack in his arms. Which makes him have to hold me up. With a sharp curse, he easily picks me up and tosses me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Tony carries me out the other side of the woods where an SUV and two more Marino enforcers are waiting. He yanks open the back door and shoves me inside. Sprawled across the seat, my eyes slide shut.

Whether I like it or not, I’m going back home. And I’m dragging all of my baggage and secrets with me.

RAFFERTY

After Sofia rushes out, I'm on the verge of following her when Rory tells me to give her some space. Relenting, I drop back down in my seat and wonder what I did? Because if there is a way to screw up, I'll find it. And, of course, I did.

"You have no clue, do you?" my mother asks, exchanging a look with Rory and Finley.

How do these women always know what's going on and I'm sitting here, completely lost and more than a little clueless?

"No clue," Rory confirms, crossing her arms over her chest.

"He's always been a little late to the party," Finley adds, and I frown.

"What're you all talking about?" I demand. Even Liam and Conor lean forward, wondering what's going on. At least I'm not the only one confused here; at least the women seem to be a little wiser than us. Okay, a lot wiser, I mentally concede.

"It's not our place to say, Rafferty, but that girl clearly has feelings for you and you just announced to everyone that you don't want children anytime soon and, well, I don't think I'm the only one who's noticed poor Sofia throwing up out in the garden every morning for the past week."

My jaw drops. "What?"

"Get a clue, big brother," Finley states.

My gaze zeroes in on Rory. If anyone knows the truth, it's her. "Is she..." I blink, unable to get the rest of the words out. They're stuck in my throat like glue. "I mean, is Sofia, uh, pregnant?"

I have to force it out and my stomach plunges when Rory gives me a very slight, nearly imperceptible nod. "It's not my business to say one way or another," she says sagely. "But, I highly suggest you talk to Sofia."

Jumping up, I shove my chair back and jog out of the dining room and out the front door. My gaze scans the yard, all the way down to the treeline, but I don't see Sofia anywhere. Apparently, she spends a lot of time in the garden, so I head that way.

Pregnant? Holy hell. Although, I shouldn't be surprised. This is what you secretly wanted all along, Raff. Admit it.

I did want it; but, I wanted it for all the wrong reasons.

I wanted to hurt Sofia, destroy Matteo and avenge my father's death.

But now it all seems so pointless. Especially since Liam doesn't even think the Marino's were behind Dad's murder. I don't know how that's even possible, but he's been digging up new information and leads. So only time will tell.

For all we know, we have a new enemy.

But, I can't worry about that right now. I have to find Sofia and I need her to tell me the truth.

Is she expecting my baby? How long has she known? So many questions are running through my head and we need to talk. I'm kicking myself for waiting this long. I should've ignored my family's advice and made her stay with me from the very beginning. Now we've lost precious time and I hope that I can fix things between us. Get them back to how they were when we were at my apartment, alone and happy and enjoying each other on every level.

When I reach the garden, I head straight to the lilac bushes and walk around them. The small wicker chair beneath their fragrant branches is empty and I release a sigh.

Where is she?

She probably went back to her room at Liam's house, I decide, and start walking over there. But after climbing up the steps and stepping inside, I notice it's far too quiet. Still, I wander up to the guest room and poke my head inside. It's empty.

"Sofia?" I call. No answer. Something on the bed catches my eye and I walk over and pick it up. My t-shirt. Has she been wearing it to bed still? Like she did when we were together?

Lifting it up to my nose, I draw in a deep breath and her floral scent fills my senses. The overpowering need to get her back fills me, and I toss the t-shirt back on the bed and go back downstairs and slip back outside.

Would she have gone wandering out by the woods? Near the perimeter of the property? The cameras and guards don't go into the thick copse of trees back there and, technically, our property line ends where the trees begin.

Something in my gut clenches and that's not a good sign.

Trying to tamp down the sick feeling that's growing and spreading through me, I start walking toward the woods, my pace fast and measured. Determined.

"Sofia!" I yell, speeding it up until I'm jogging. I keep calling her name and when I reach the trees, I step onto the overgrown path and pause, listening.

The usual sounds of birds chirping and leaves crunching beneath small animals fill my ears. While Sofia said she used to play in the tunnels when she was little, my siblings and I roamed these woods. I used to know them like the back of my hand and I start down the leaf-strewn trail, my eyes searching for the woman who I need like the very air I'm breathing.

Because I'm no longer falling in love with Sofia Marino. I am head over heels, crazy in love with her, and the possibility that she's pregnant with my baby makes me want her even more urgently. The need to claim her thrums throughout my entire body and I call her name over and over.

On the other side of the woods, I step into a field and the first thing I see is tire tracks. Deep ones that an SUV would've made.

Fucking hell.

Hurrying over, I drop down and run a hand over the turned-up dirt. They're fresh tracks. Dusting my hands off, I stand back up and squint, following them as far as my eyes can see. They head back up to the side road and everything in me screams that something isn't right.

First of all, no one ever drives back here and our nearest neighbor is over three miles away. Second, Matteo wants his daughter back and now Sofia is missing. I know it in my heart of hearts—someone took her.

With a feral growl, I spin around and race back through the woods as though my ass were on fire. By the time I make it out the other side, it's a miracle that I didn't trip over a root and sprain my ankle. Or, with my luck, break it.

I'm sure dinner is over by now, but I run to the main house, yelling for Liam at the top of my lungs. My family is still sitting around the dining room table, drinking Irish coffee and looking worried.

The panic and terror in my voice makes the conversation come to an abrupt halt and Liam stands up. "What is it? What's wrong?" he asks, bright blue eyes full of concern.

"I can't find Sofia," I tell him, breathing hard, trying to catch my breath. "I think she was in the woods and someone took her."

"What?" Rory jumps up. "Why do you think that?"

Instead of answering—because it's mostly a gut feeling—I turn my attention back to Liam and say, "We need to check the security cameras. Now!"

Liam nods and we all head straight for the small corner office at the back of the house where a system is set up to monitor the exterior of the compound. Liam got rid of all the old school enforcers who used to guard us and patrol the grounds, and now a private security firm has taken over. Even though the estate has always been safe, they still keep watch over the property, inside and out, and monitor everything.

Apparently, they weren't being as vigilant as they should and when we swarm into the room, the man at the desk looks up in surprise. "Mr. O'Shea. Is everything okay?"

“I don’t know, Smith,” Liam says. “We need to pull up all exterior security footage from the last hour.”

“What’re we looking for?” he asks, instantly alert and bringing his mouse to life.

“Sofia,” I instantly say. “She left the main house and we need to see where she went.”

“On it,” Smith replies and starts clicking, bringing up various images.

“Did you see anything suspicious today? Or in the past week?” Liam asks, leaning forward, studying the images that Smith pulls up on the screen.

“No, Sir. Nothing. It’s been quiet.”

No matter what he says, my gut is telling me Sofia is in trouble. “When was the last time you went out and patrolled?” I ask.

“Not quite an hour ago,” he tells us.

Which would’ve given Sofia the perfect window to run across the back lawn and disappear into the woods beyond.

Cursing under my breath, I try to be patient as Smith and Liam start going through footage. There are at least twenty cameras on the property and I rake a frustrated hand through my hair, shoving it off my face.

“This could take all day,” I complain. “Can you check the camera that faces the woods?”

With a nod, Smith hits a button and suddenly we’re looking at grainy, black and white footage of the backyard.

“Okay, rewind it to when you were out on patrol,” I tell him.

It takes a couple of minutes, but I spot a glimpse of Sofia. “There! Slow it down!”

We all lean forward as he finds the moment when Sofia races across the back lawn. There’s no mistaking the fact that she’s swiping tears from her face and my heart clenches. God, I’m such an ass. Regret assaults me as I watch her disappear into the thick treeline.

“Does she ever come out?” Rory asks.

Smith starts fast-forwarding and when the recording catches up to the present moment in time, we have our answer.

No. My sweet Sofia never came out of the woods.

“Could she have gone around? Exited a different way?” my mom asks.

But I look at my siblings and we all know the answer is no. We spent endless hours getting lost in those woods. Unless she walked through the trees and out the opposite side, there’s only one main trail that would bring her back to the house.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I suddenly feel so helpless. Sofia was taken and didn’t leave willingly. And I wasn’t there to protect her. “I found tire tracks on the other side of the trees. An SUV.”

“Don’t worry,” Conor says and places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing. “We’ll find her.”

“It had to be my father’s men,” Rory says. “Sofia wouldn’t have run off like this on her own.”

“We need to go to the city,” I say, determined to get my woman back. I’m going to storm into the Marino brownstone and rescue my princess. I’ll do whatever it takes and I don’t care if I have to burn down the city to make it happen.

“Whoa, relax, Raff,” Liam says. “Let’s come up with a plan before we show up, half-cocked and waving guns.”

“I’ll fight anyone for her,” I growl.

“We know,” Conor says, exchanging a look with Liam.

“There’s someone who can help us,” Rory says. “Someone on the inside.”

“Your mother?” Liam asks and she nods.

“I’ll call her and find out what’s going on over there.”

“Good idea, a ghrá,” Liam says. “Once we have more information, we can

come up with a solid plan.”

“Finley and I will watch Griffin,” my mother says. “The rest of you, go and bring Sofia back. She belongs here with us, not there.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I murmur and press a kiss to her cheek. Ever since our father died, she’s stepped up and come into her own. She can no longer hide in his shadow, and seeing her blossom has been a beautiful thing. I’ve never admired her more.

“Let’s call Anna,” Liam says, reaching for Rory’s hand.

My mother and Finley stay here with Griffin while Liam, Rory, Conor and I walk over to Liam’s house. Once we’re inside, I start pacing and can’t seem to stand still. My mind is all over the place and I have to believe that Matteo wouldn’t hurt his daughter.

Yet, I have no faith in the man. The last thing I heard from him was his order to shoot us on sight. I have no idea whether those instructions were only meant for me or if they included Sofia, too. Either way, I’m worried as hell and racking my brain for some sort of plan.

“Mom!” Rory exclaims, talking on the phone now. “Is Sofia there?”

I wait, trying to be patient, but instead, I continue my pacing and listen to the one-sided conversation as Rory explains everything that’s going on. They talk for a little bit and the moment Rory hangs up, I pounce.

“Well?”

“She said our dad told her he was getting her back, but my mom hasn’t seen her yet. Her bedroom is empty and she can’t find her anywhere. She’s really worried. When she asked our father what was going on, he brushed her off and said Sofia will come to her senses eventually.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I ask, an uncontrollable rage filling me. If Matteo Marino hurt one hair on Sofia’s head, I swear I will kill him.

“I don’t know. He has to have her, right? If he didn’t send his men to get her...” Her voice trails off and she frowns.

“He did,” I state without doubt. An image of the cell in the brownstone’s

basement fills my head and his words haunt me.

Sofia will come to her senses eventually.

The pieces click. “I think I know where she is,” I tell them.

“Where?” Liam asks.

“In the basement, locked up in that goddamn cell. And I know exactly how we’re going to get her.”

Everyone nods, waiting to hear my plan. I just hope when the time comes, I can remember how to maneuver my way through the tricky tunnels without getting lost.

Hang on, sweet Sofia. We’re coming.

SOFIA

My head drops back against the damp stone wall and I look down at the unlocked handcuffs that had secured Rafferty's wrists not long ago. At least, Tony didn't put the cuffs on me. But I am locked up down here in this god awful cell and I listen to the soft plink of water dripping in the nearby tunnels.

It's so very quiet down here. And dark. Every once in a while, I hear someone walk across the kitchen floor above, but there's no point in calling for help. The walls and floor are too thick and no one will hear me. So, instead, I save my breath and try to conserve my energy.

Why am I down here? I wonder for the thousandth time. Maybe my father has finally gone off the deep end and his hate for the O'Shea's has completely unhinged him.

It wouldn't surprise me.

The sound of the door opening at the top of the stairs has me sitting up straighter, and the bare lightbulb flicks on above. I see a pair of legs wearing neatly-pleated trousers walking down the steps. My dad. Pulling in a deep breath, I watch him take the key off the hook on the wall, unlock my cell and open the door. He crosses his arms and looks like a dark thundercloud, ready to boom the heavens and burst with rain.

The look on his face can only be described as utter disappointment and something else. Disgust maybe? I don't know for sure.

All I know is it makes my heart ache. He may believe I betrayed him, but he's the one who betrayed me.

"Don't give me that look, Sofia Bella Marino. You brought this all on yourself when you decided to help our enemy escape."

My face screws up. "He's not our enemy—"

"What's your last name? Have you forgotten? Need I remind you again? It's Marino."

Anger coats his voice and there's a rage simmering just beneath the surface of his words. He's trying to remain in control, but I notice his clenched fists and the twitch beneath his eye.

He's furious.

Standing up, I know that I should play this out carefully, keep my mouth shut and play along, but I can't. All my life, I've been a dutiful daughter and done exactly what my father told me to do. Things have changed, though. I'm a woman who has fallen in love and now I'm going to have a baby.

It's time to finally stand up for myself and make my feelings known. Even if it makes my dad angry.

"Papà," I begin carefully. "I know you don't like what's happening between our families—"

"Don't like?" he interrupts in a scathing voice. "Your sister is sleeping with the enemy and—"

"Liam isn't the enemy! He's kind and decent and loves Rory and Griffin with his entire heart."

His face turns a mottled red. "I don't want to hear it."

"Well, maybe you should listen. Maybe it's time to bury this archaic feud and find a way for our families to make peace."

"The O'Shea's have always hated us and that won't ever change."

"No, they don't," I tell him.

“That bastard kidnapped you, and God knows what else he did. And, if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes, I’d say you didn’t put up much of a fight. Why did you help him escape?”

I let out a shaky breath. “Because he didn’t deserve to be punished. Rafferty didn’t do anything. I understand you had a beef with Nolan O’Shea, but he’s dead now.”

“And it’s a good thing, too.” He spits on the floor. “Don’t fool yourself, Sofia. All of those O’Shea’s are the same. They will slit your throat the minute you look away.”

I shake my head. “I don’t believe that and nothing you say will change my mind.”

A muscle flexes in his jaw and I take a tentative step toward him.

“Papà, please, listen to me. Rafferty and his family treated me kindly. They didn’t ever hurt me.” I glance around my dismal surroundings. “And they certainly never locked me up in a dark basement.”

His eyes narrow. “You have no respect.”

“And you’re too stubborn and set in your ways to see the truth!” I retort angrily.

“The truth? Oh, please, enlighten me, Sofia. What truth do I not see?”

His words drip with venom and a sadness fills my heart. I don’t think I can say anything to ever change his mind, but I’m willing to try.

“The truth is the rivalry between the Marino’s and the O’Shea’s died the day Nolan O’Shea was gunned down. Liam is in charge now and he gave up all the illegal, underground businesses. Unlike you, he wants nothing to do with them. His concern is for his family and making sure everyone has what they need. Especially Griff and Rory.”

“And you don’t think I take care of my family? I didn’t send you to the best private schools in the world? I didn’t put a roof over your head and make sure you were taken care of?”

“It’s not the same when it’s done out of duty and not love,” I whisper.

Our gazes clash.

“You don’t think I love you?”

Tears burn my eyes. “I don’t know, Papà,” I admit with a sniff. “Maybe in your own twisted way. But I’ve learned there’s so much more to love than paying for someone’s education. An education that’s useless in the real world, anyway.”

His nostrils flare and I have a feeling I may be going too far, but I don’t stop. In for a penny, in for a pound, right?

“You think love and control go hand in hand. You use one to achieve the other.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he hisses. “You’re caught up in some make-believe fantasyland where everyone gets along. The truth is this isn’t a Disney movie and if you don’t take out your enemies first, they will hunt you down and eliminate you with zero hesitation.”

Sadness washes over me and I realize he’s never going to alter his opinion. He will always hate the O’Shea’s and there’s nothing anyone can say or do to change that.

“Rafferty would never hurt me,” I insist. And I know that with all my heart.

“You’re such a fool, Sofia! He tricked you into letting him out and helping him escape. And you’re sitting here thinking he still has use for you. Well, let me be the one to tell you he doesn’t.” His dark eyes narrow. “Did he follow through on his threats? Did he touch you? Hurt you?”

“He didn’t do anything that I didn’t allow or welcome.”

“Jesus, Sofia,” my father huffs and grits his jaw so tightly that I’m surprised he doesn’t crack a tooth.

“I know you’re not going to understand this, but the truth is…” My voice cracks. “I love him, Papà. I love him so much and—”

“No!” he roars. “I will not lose another daughter to an O’Shea bastard.”

“It’s too late,” I say softly.

“Is it?” he asks furiously. “Because I think you just need some more time to think about it.”

He steps out of the cell.

“Please, Papà! Please, listen to me,” I beg, but he closes the barred door and the lock clicks.

“No, you’re going to listen to me. Until you come to your senses, you can remain down here. You are not in love with Rafferty O’Shea. He used you, nothing more. Get it through your head.”

“You’re leaving me down here?” I cry, fingers wrapping around the bars.

“You need to get your head on straight, Sofia. And until then, I want you out of my sight.”

Anger explodes through me as he turns and walks away. “Papà!”

He pauses, glances over his shoulder and says, “When you come to your senses then I will let you out.”

Sagging against the bars in defeat, I watch him walk back up the stairs. The door opens and closes, and he’s gone, leaving me to stew with my thoughts. At least he left the light on for me. I understand that he’s angry, but so am I. But, even more so, I’m determined to get out of here.

I don’t know exactly what I plan on doing yet. Find my mother, I suppose, and confide in her. Then, of course, call Rory and let her know where I am. If I thought Rafferty loved me and wanted to be with me, I’d head straight back to the O’Shea compound. But doubts plague me and the last thing he’s going to want to hear is that I’m pregnant.

I have to tell him, of course. But first, I need to escape this stupid cell.

My first priority is to pick this lock. But that proves much more difficult than I anticipate. I quickly realize why Rafferty wasn’t able to escape this blasted prison. It’s like Fort freaking Knox.

I try everything within my reach to open the lock, but nothing works. Not the small piece of wire I manage to snag just outside the cell or the hairpin I pull out of my bun that I bend and twist. The lock is old and sturdy. It doesn’t

budge.

Defeat washes over me and I slump against the wall and slide down to the floor. God. I'm just as stubborn as my father, I realize. I need to play this smarter, not harder. If he wants to hear that I'm over Rafferty O'Shea then fine. That's what I'll tell him.

At this point, I'll do whatever it takes to get out of here.

It'll all be lies, but whatever. I'll tell him what he wants to hear.

Just as I'm wondering what time it is and trying to figure out how many hours I've been stuck down here, the door opens again. Thank God. Getting ready to tell my father what he wants to hear, I stand up.

But it isn't my dad. It's Tony Maggiano and I don't like the look on his face. It's almost...bloodthirsty and the blood in my veins chills.

"Where's my dad?" I ask, lifting my chin, trying not to let him see how intimidated I am by him.

"Your father is done with you, Sofia," he informs me, unlocking the cell and opening the door.

"What do you mean?" I ask, trying to sound as haughty and in-control as possible. Praying that my voice doesn't waver.

"He's given me the go-ahead to take care of you." His dark eyes gleam with cruelty and there's an unmistakable excitement present. He's loving this.

"W-what?"

"That's right. He's washing his hands of you."

I shake my head, overcome with disbelief. "I don't believe you."

"I'm going to kill you, Sofia," he informs me, sounding eager, and he looks beyond ready to do it.

An icy fear skitters down my spine. "No."

Cracking his knuckles, he says, "But, I want to have some fun doing it."

When he pulls the knife from the sheath in his boot, my fight or flight mode kicks in and I try to bolt out of the cage.

“Hold up,” he says, blocking my way. “Not quite yet.”

Heart hammering, palms sweating, my gaze moves to the steps behind him. There’s no way I can dart around him and make it to the top of the stairs before getting a blade to the back. My eyes slide to the tunnels. But I might have a fighting chance if I head in the opposite direction and attempt to lose him in the dark maze of the tunnels.

Tony seems to know exactly what I’m thinking and he grins. He’s just as cruel and despicable as I’ve always believed.

“I’m going to give you a head start, little rabbit. And then I’m going to hunt you down and end you. But first, I may use you just like that O’Shea filth did. Because he did, didn’t he, Sofia? Followed through on his threat and fucked you hard. Am I right?”

My gaze dips to the front of his pants where there’s a bulge, and I try not to notice that this whole scenario is turning him on. Feeling sick to my stomach, I cover my mouth with my hand. Oh, God. I can’t get sick. Please, baby. Don’t do this to me now, I beg. I need to save our lives, not get knifed while puking.

Getting the nausea under control, I straighten up and glare at Tony, refusing to show him just how terrified I am. “You’re not even half the man that Rafferty is,” I tell him and his dark eyes narrow into angry, little slits. “I suggest you move out of my way and allow me to pass.”

“And I suggest you run, little rabbit.” He glances down at his watch. “Because in less than one minute, I’m coming after you. And I’m going to filet you like a fish.”

With a squeal, I skirt around him and race headlong into the dark tunnels. I can’t see a damn thing because it’s pitch black. In my head, I’m counting down the seconds until he gives chase.

I know the tunnels better than Tony, but if I make one wrong turn and he catches up, I could wind up cornered. There’s only one way out and if I screw up then I could be as good as dead. Or, even worse, Tony could follow

through on his threat to hurt me. I don't want to think about the depraved things he probably has planned. My stomach threatens to hurl its contents and I clap a hand over my mouth and keep running.

“Oh, little rabbit...”

His taunt echoes all around me and I stumble, nearly wiping out on the damp ground. It's slippery, but I quickly right myself and keep moving forward, trying to remember the exact way I recently led Rafferty out of here. I messed up a couple of times, though, and had to turn around and retrace my steps.

I hope to God that doesn't happen right now. Staying ahead of Tony and not getting lost is my main objective.

Luckily, my eyes are adjusting to the darkness, but it's still so freaking dark and I can barely see two feet in front of me. Oh, God, please let me make it out of here alive.

Unfortunately, I can hear him gaining on me. How is he moving so fast? And why does he know these tunnels so well? He must've already been down here already, scoping it out. Which means he's been planning this.

Ugh. I feel sick, but I force myself to keep moving and pay attention to where I'm going. My eyes dart back and forth, looking for the markers that I know: the large gouge in the rock that resembles a heart. Go left. The pair of matching boulders in the middle of the path. Circle around them and continue straight. The tunnel split where our initials are carved into the wall. Mine, Gio's, Rory's and Luca's.

God, I love them. The thought of never seeing them again...of dying down here scared and alone and at the hand of Tony makes me start running faster. Picking up my pace, I try to ignore the thump of boots behind me and the way he calls out every so often.

“I'm going to catch you...”

Skidding to a halt, I hit a deadend. “Shit!” I hiss, panic hitting me like a bucket of ice water. What did I do wrong? I'm so scared I can't think straight.

Get it together, Sofia! I scold myself. For the baby.

And then it occurs to me where I messed up. The deep puddle at the base of the wall. I missed it.

Oh, God. Spinning around, needing to get back on track as quickly as possible, I nearly slam right into Tony. Running into his body is like hitting a brick wall. Hard and unyielding. Painful. As I bounce off him, he reaches out and wraps thick fingers around my upper arm, squeezing hard and grinning maniacally. My gaze moves to his other hand where he grips both a flashlight and the knife.

“Where do you think you’re going, little rabbit?” he asks and laughs.

I try to twist away, pulling my arm, but his grip is like steel. He is not going to beat me. No way. Wasting no time, I slam my heel down on the insole of his foot. He howls and his fingers loosen just enough for me to slip free and I take off, running back in the direction I just came from.

I wish I’d never left the dining room, where I was surrounded by Rafferty’s family. People who I’m growing to like and care about, despite my father’s wishes. People who have been more kind to me than my own blood.

Why did you leave? So stupid, I berate myself. I could be sitting safely in the house, probably laughing over dessert and surrounded by people who care about me; instead, I’m running for my life in these dark tunnels, a maniac hunting me down.

Picking up my pace, legs pumping, I know I need to get away from Tony. In the back of my mind, though, his words haunt me.

“Your father is done with you, Sofia. He’s given me the go-ahead to take care of you.”

I can’t believe my father actually issued an order to have me killed. Although this is the second time I’m hearing something similar. Rafferty had said my father’s order had been to “shoot on sight” before.

If it’s true then I’m devastated by his betrayal. And if I live through this nightmare, I will never forgive him.

But I can’t think too hard about it right now because I’m running for my life and my baby’s life. I can’t miss a turn and mess up again. Our lives depend

on it. One more wrong turn will be a death sentence and I can't let that happen.

I refuse.

Squinting through the darkness, I send up a silent prayer and keep running in what I hope is the right direction.

RAFFERTY

“We’re going to sneak in through the tunnels,” I say and my brothers and Rory nod.

“I can help guide you,” Rory offers. “Although it’s been a long time since I’ve been down there.”

“Absolutely not,” Liam says, voice firm, shutting it down fast. “You’re going to stay here with our son where it’s safe.”

“But, Liam, this is my sister!”

But, he shakes his head, adamant. “Sorry, a ghrá. You’re staying put.”

“But—”

He silences her with a kiss. Then, pulls back and whispers, “I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you down there. I need you here and ready to call your mom if we need help on the inside.”

His words seem to placate her and she nods.

“Okay, I can do that,” she relents. “I just want to help.”

“I know. And we may need you to make that phone call.”

Conor rolls his shoulders back and turns to me. “You were just down there, Raff. What kind of tunnels are we dealing with?”

I try to ignore the shiver that runs through my body. I never planned on

returning to those damn underground tunnels, but I'll do anything for Sofia. Even if that means getting caught and locked up again. Because she's worth the risk.

And the idea that she may be pregnant fuels me with a fire to bring her back here and make her mine, once and for all.

"They suck," I say with no intention of sugarcoating it. "They're pitch black, so we're going to need flashlights. They're also cold and wet which makes them slippery and difficult to navigate."

"They're a maze," Rory adds.

"Big time. Sofia took a couple of wrong turns and they just abruptly dead end in places."

"Plus, they're so old. Cave-ins were always a potential hazard."

Rory is right. The possibilities for this to go sideways are endless and I hope to God we can pull this off.

"How're we going to know which way to go?" Conor asks.

"There are markers. Subtle ones, but Sofia pointed some out to me and I'm going to try to use them. But, even if we miss a turn, we can always turn around and back up. We just have to remember which way we came from and where we're going."

"And once we get inside?" Liam asks.

"I think Sofia is in the basement. We're going to need to unlock the cell door, but the key should be hanging on a hook right there. Then there's also the handcuffs. If she has those on then we're going to need to be able to break them off her."

Rory rubs the frown between her brows. "I can't believe he would lock her up like that."

"Yeah, well, it was bad enough when he lost you to Liam. But now he thinks he may have lost his only other daughter to another O'Shea. We've all heard what's happening. He's flipping the fuck out."

“Raff is right,” Liam says. “There’s no telling what he’ll do, so we need to expect the worst.”

“I hate this,” Rory murmurs and Liam takes her hand, squeezing it. “Please, be careful. I need the three of you and my sister to return back here in one piece.”

“We will,” Liam promises and gives her a quick kiss.

Then, he turns to me and Conor. “Let’s get flashlights, some tools and our guns.”

Determination fills me and I give a sharp nod.

It’s time to go rescue my princess.

After telling Rory to stay by her phone in case we need her to call Anna to provide a distraction, my brothers and I get into Conor’s Jeep and head for the city. Adrenaline and fear for Sofia is making me antsy and my brothers pick up on it. I can’t stop my knee from bouncing and my fingers from drumming on every surface back here.

“Chill, Raff,” Conor says, looking at me in the rear view mirror.

Liam turns around in the front passenger seat and eyes me. “How confident are you about guiding us through these tunnels?”

“I can do it,” I tell him, my voice confident. I have to; there’s no other choice.

With a nod, he turns back around. “We’ll get her, Raff.”

I’m not exactly sure when I fell in love with Sofia Bella Marino, but there’s no denying that I have and now I’m going to tell her. And if she’s pregnant then that means I’ll have two more people to love. Two more precious souls that I’ll be grateful for every single day for the rest of my life.

Because the dark alternative—that I will lose Sofia and our baby—isn’t going to happen. I won’t let it happen because I’m going to fight for her. If need be, I will go down and die fighting. In such a short time, she’s flipped my entire world upside down and not having her there with me these past couple of weeks has been hell.

I'm not doing this by myself anymore. We're doing this life together from here on out.

I just hope she's on the same page or I may have to tie her up again and convince her until she is.

But from what I know, my Sofia is a very forgiving woman who loves fiercely and with her whole heart. If she offers her beautiful love to me, I'm going to cherish it for the rest of my life.

I just pray that I'll have the opportunity to tell her how much I love her. The alternative is too crushing to consider.

Hang in there, Sofia. Just a little longer. We're coming.

Once we get into Chicago, Conor drives us straight over to the waterfront and I direct him to the general vicinity of where I remember stumbling out of the tunnels after my escape.

"It's across from the docks. Turn left here," I direct him, and Conor turns the Jeep, slowing it down.

"Now what?" he asks, looking around. "I don't see anything."

Squinting, I study the riverfront and try to see where the door is hidden among the rocks. My heart sinks when I don't immediately spot it. I know it's here somewhere.

"There!" I shout and point straight ahead. I'm already throwing the back door open as Conor pulls over to the side of the road. Hauling ass over to the wooden door, camouflaged by rocks and weeds, I instantly spot the silver chain and large padlock keeping the door which I broke open closed securely once again.

But not securely enough.

"Bring the sledgehammer!" I call out to my brothers. They've got the rear of the truck open and they're grabbing the small bag of tools and supplies we organized.

I'm on the verge of kicking the damn door down when they appear on either side of me. Conor lifts the sledgehammer and steps closer.

“Move over, bro. I’m about to destroy this door.”

I let him have the honors and watch in satisfaction as the rotted wood splinters and shatters completely beneath my brother’s muscles. He’s really strong and it doesn’t take him long to get the job done. The door breaks in two and I take a flashlight from Liam and flip it on. At the same time, I remove my gun from the holster at my back.

“Ready?” I ask, directing the light’s beam in front of me and flashing it into the blackness ahead.

“No, but let’s do this shit anyway,” Conor mutters, dropping the sledgehammer and reaching for his gun.

“We got your back,” Liam assures me. “Just look for those markers you mentioned.”

“On it,” I murmur and step into the musty tunnel.

My flashlight’s beam cuts through the gloom and I walk forward with determined steps. But I don’t go too fast because I can’t afford to get us lost. The last time I did this, Sofia and I were moving in the opposite direction and she was leading. I wish I would’ve paid closer attention than I did, but I’d been in some decent pain from Tony’s most recent beating and didn’t have a clear head.

So here goes nothing, I think, and lead my brothers deeper into the yawning blackness ahead.

“It stinks down here,” Conor mutters.

“That’s because these tunnels are over one-hundred years old,” Liam states. “Can you imagine all the booze they used to sneak in through here?”

“Barrels of it, I’m sure.” Conor nearly bumps into me when I abruptly stop. “What’s up?”

Cocking my head, I listen closely, trying to hear past the dripping water, wishing I could see beyond the looming obscurity and endless shadows ahead. “I thought I heard something.”

My brothers pause and listen, too. There it is again. The sound of running feet

and a muffled voice.

“Someone’s coming,” I hiss in warning, and they lift their guns.

“Should we go back?” Liam asks in a hushed voice.

Then I hear the eerie, singsong taunt more clearly, “Coming to get you, little rabbit,” and I clench my hand tighter around my gun. It’s Tony.

“No,” I whisper. “Stay against the walls, blend all the way into the shadows and wait for me. I’m going to need backup. Tony’s coming and I think he’s chasing Sofia.”

For once, my older brothers do exactly as I say without question, and I flip off my light and keep moving up the tunnel. The sound of running feet heading straight toward me has my heart in my throat. Turning the corner, I pause when I find myself looking at a tunnel split.

Left or right?

Hell if I know.

Again, I tilt my head and listen hard, trying to determine from which tunnel Sofia and Tony are coming from, but the echo makes it hard to know. Bracing myself, I stand in the middle and lift my gun.

A moment later, Sofia comes flying out of the tunnel on the right and I grab her. She screams as I swing her around, trying to slow her momentum.

“Sofia, it’s me! I’ve got you. You’re okay.”

The moment she hears my voice, her body goes slack in my arms, but she’s shaking like a leaf.

“He’s coming,” she cries and before the words are even out of her mouth, Tony appears, looking like a raging bull intent on tearing my Sofia apart. He’s brandishing a flashlight in one hand and a wicked-looking knife in the other. With zero hesitation, I fire off a bullet.

The shot is ear-numbingly loud in the small area and the bullet misses Tony. It’s too damn dark in here and as soon as the thought passes through my head, Tony flicks his light off.

And we're thrust into pitch blackness.

"Go to my brothers!" I shove Sofia toward the exit and to where my brothers are waiting. A second later, Tony crashes into me and my back slams against the stone wall. Fuck. That's gonna leave a bruise.

We start pummeling each other and in this kind of close quarters combat, he has the edge on me with his knife. My gun is useless because he's too close. But I can still use it, I think, and slam him up against the side of the head with its handle. He roars then takes a wide swing with the knife and I manage to jump back, but still get nicked across the stomach with the sharp blade.

Damn.

Then he's colliding into me again and we go flying backwards, rolling across the muddy ground. Pinning me down, lifting the knife high, he suddenly freezes, eyes caught in the beam of light from a flashlight that suddenly turns on, catching him in its beam. The bright light must temporarily blind him and I don't waste one second. I lift my gun and shoot.

Once, twice, three times.

When the giant finally topples over, a rush of air leaves my lungs and I pull myself up into a sitting position. All I'm thinking about is Sofia and I squint, black spots still dancing across my vision from the light. Where the hell is she?

"Rafferty!" Sofia calls and races around my brothers. She drops down beside me and cups my face in her hands. "Are you hurt?"

Relief fills me and I'm about to say no when the stinging sensation on my stomach penetrates my adrenaline-fueled brain. I glance down to see blood soaking through my t-shirt and Sofia gasps.

"He's hurt!" she cries and Liam moves over to take a look.

My brother lifts my shirt and grimaces. "I think it looks worse than it is," he states.

"He only nicked me," I tell them. My gaze slides over to Tony lying not too far away and Conor who's hovering over the downed brute. "Is he dead?"

Conor nods. “Yeah.”

Another wave of relief floods me and then Liam and Sofia are helping me up onto my feet. Together, we turn and head out of the tunnel of doom. Once we step outside, I look up at the moon and send up a silent prayer of thanks to whoever is listening.

We all made it out alive and I couldn't be more grateful.

SOFIA

The moment I ran into Rafferty in that tunnel, everything became so clear. He was there to save me, to risk his life, and that could only mean one thing: he cares.

The moment his arms go around me, a relief like I've never felt before pours through me and I know I'm safe. The danger is over, Tony Maggiano is dead and I'm going home. But to a new home. A place where a family that is supposed to be my enemy has shown me nothing but love and kindness and embraced me as one of their own. As far as I'm concerned, I'm never returning to that old brownstone to live under my father's thumb. He can keep his wrath and hate. I want nothing to do with it.

Because I have a bright future ahead of me. Rafferty and I have a lot to talk about, but I'm ready for it all. Plus, now that I know he cares, it's going to make telling him about the baby a little bit easier and a lot less scary.

On the way back to the O'Shea compound, I tell Rafferty to keep pressure on the wound that Tony inflicted. Luckily, it's not too deep, but the slash is still enough to give me anxiety because it could've been so much worse. While Liam calls Rory to let her know everything is okay and that we're heading home, Rafferty holds my hand the entire way and I'm dying to be alone with him so we can talk.

As we roll up in front of Conor's house, my heart hitches in my chest. The entire O'Shea clan is outside waiting for our arrival. My mouth drops open at the warm reception and the moment I step out of the car, Rory embraces me

in a crushing hug.

“Mio Dio,” she whispers. “I was so worried about you.”

“I’m fine,” I assure her with a shaky smile. “Rafferty is the one who got injured.”

“What happened?” Maeve demands, marching over. After hugging me and welcoming me back, she moves over to her son and checks on the wound. “Luckily, it’s superficial. But you’re going to need to clean it.”

He nods and she presses a kiss to his cheek, whispering something in his ear while he’s bent over and she can reach it. Maeve is barely 5’4” and all three of her sons tower over her.

“I’m so glad you’re all okay and safely back here,” Finley announces. “I swear, I almost had a heart attack.” She holds Griffin in her arms, bouncing him, and he’s gurgling softly.

Even though they have a million questions, I turn to Rory and say, “Maybe Liam and Conor can tell you everything that happened while I take care of Rafferty’s wound.”

Rory gives me a knowing nod and another hug. “If you need anything, we’re right here.”

“Thanks, sis.” I turn my attention to Rafferty. “C’mon. I want to clean you up.”

Taking his hand in mine, we walk over to his house together. I haven’t been inside it yet so when he opens the door, I get my first look at his place.

And I like it.

The layout is open and welcoming. It’s cozy and maybe a bit too masculine, but it’s all Rafferty. I breathe deeply and it even smells like him—clean with a touch of spice.

“Where’s your First Aid kit?” I ask.

He motions for me to follow him upstairs and down the hall to the guest bathroom. “Under here,” he says.

When he opens the cabinet and starts to bend over, I move in front of him and place a hand on his arm. “I’ve got it. You take that muddy shirt off and sit on the counter.” While he follows my instructions, I reach under the sink and grab the kit.

Turning, my heart free falls when I see the slash across his firm abdomen. There’s definitely going to be a scar and I immediately open the small box and pull out ointment, hydrogen peroxide wipes, gauze and cotton balls. Then I get to work, cleaning my man up. We didn’t just go through all that and escape to have him catch some awful infection from Tony’s most-likely dirty blade.

Moving to stand between his sprawled legs, I cover a cotton ball with hydrogen peroxide and very carefully wipe away the dry, crusty blood. The moment I frown, he presses his index finger between my brows, smoothing the worry lines out.

“I’m fine,” he assures me.

“Maybe we should take you to the ER for stitches.”

But he just laughs. “I don’t need stitches, sweet Sofia. But I appreciate your concern.”

“Are you sure? Because—”

“I’m sure,” he tells me.

Not completely convinced, I continue working on the wound. After cleaning it, I carefully cover it with clean gauze and do my best to tape it to his hard, flat stomach. “Okay, all done,” I say and lay my hands on top of his thighs. “But I’m still worried that it may get infected or re-open.”

“I’ll live,” he says.

“Raff—”

“But I won’t live if you don’t tilt your head back right now and let me kiss you.”

His hand slides around my neck, cupping the back of it, and I let my head drop back. His mouth covers mine in an instant and the kiss makes my toes

curl. It's deep, thorough and full of emotion. I think we both know how close we were to losing each other and now all we want to do is make up for lost time. To bask in each other's presence and, dare I hope, love?

Breaking apart, Rafferty presses his forehead to mine. "I was so scared I'd lost you, Sofia. So damn scared."

"Oh, Raff—" My voice breaks. This man is my everything and I wrap my arms around his neck and whisper, "I have something to tell you."

His mouth edges up. "What, princess?"

My nerves kick up, but I press on, finding the courage to say, "I'm pregnant."

"I know," he whispers, completely calm and relaxed.

"You know?" I exclaim, pulling back. "How? Did Rory tell you?" I'm going to kill my sister.

"No, she didn't. Not exactly, anyway. But your reaction at the dinner table when I mentioned not wanting kids any time soon coupled with the fact that the women all told me you'd been throwing up out in the garden every morning for the past week kind of clued me in."

"Oh," I murmur, calming down. "I suppose it shouldn't exactly be a total shocker since we never used any protection. Like ever. And, well, we did it an awful lot."

His mouth edges up and he searches my eyes. "What would you say if I told you I wanted this. From day one."

"You wanted to knock me up?" I ask in disbelief, eyes going wide, and he chuckles. The low, deep rumble makes my stomach flip flop. But, wait. "You did mention something about wanting to humiliate and defile me to get your revenge on my father."

"Sofia, that all changed the moment I got you back to my apartment. I didn't want to hurt you even if it did give me the revenge I wanted. I just wanted to give you pleasure like you'd never experienced before."

"And now?" I whisper, my hands sliding down his chest and resting on top of his thighs again.

“And now I want to give you even more pleasure. I also want to spend the rest of my life with you and raise our child together. That is, if you’ll have me.” My mouth drops open, but before I can respond, he continues, “That’s not all. When you disappeared and I thought I might lose you for good... That was the worst moment of my life. I don’t ever want you away from me again. You’ve become my everything, Sofia Bella Marino, and I love you so damn much. More than anyone or anything in this whole world. Will you stay here with me?”

His words cause a warmth to spread through me and I smile. “I love you, too, Raff. I think I started falling for you the first moment I saw you down in that basement cell. And, yes, I’ll stay. Wherever you are is where I want to be.”

“I remember opening my eyes and seeing you, standing there lit up by the flashlight’s glow, looking like an angel who’d come to save me. And you did, Sofia. You saved me in every way possible. Thank you,” he adds softly.

“Thank you for saving me right back,” I murmur and press a kiss to his lips. He instantly deepens it and I sag against him. And then remember his cut. With a yelp and quick apology, I pull back, but he holds me tight.

“Don’t you ever apologize for kissing me,” he says in a husky voice.

“But your stomach.”

“It’s not my stomach that’s aching right now.”

Yeah, I can feel the hard bulge in his pants pressing against me. “We can’t...”

“Oh, yes, we can,” he says, sliding off the counter and swinging me up into his arms.

“Raff! Be careful. I swear, if you open that cut up—”

“What’re you going to do to me?” he asks, ice-blue eyes glowing with mischief. “Are you going to punish me? Because that doesn’t sound half bad.”

I grin as he carries me into his bedroom and tosses me onto the bed. “Maybe,” I tease.

“How about maybe you take your clothes off?”

“I can do that,” I murmur. “Just as long as you take yours off, too.” Before the words are even out of my mouth, he’s yanking his pants and boxer briefs down in one fell swoop. After tossing them, he grabs my leggings and panties, removing them so fast, I’ve still only got my shirt halfway off.

“You’re moving way too slowly,” he growls. “Hurry up or I’m going to blow.”

My gaze dips down to his bobbing erection and I quickly unsnap my bra which he grabs and discards. Then his hot blue gaze slides down my body, appreciation flaring in its depths.

“Spread your legs, sweet Sofia,” he orders. “It’s been far too long since I’ve tasted you.”

My face flushes as I let my legs drop open, exposing myself, and he lowers down before me. His hands cover my knees, drawing them further apart.

“Christ, you’re beautiful. So wet and pretty. Just for me.”

The moment his head dips and his mouth covers my dripping core, I cry out, arching up off the bed. No one can make me feel like this except Rafferty—desired, wanton and so very loved. He knows exactly how to touch me. How to please me and drive me straight to the edge and over into pure oblivion.

My inner muscles begin to pulse and contract. The response to him is immediate and all-consuming. The more he sucks and laves and worships me, the more I scream. It’s the most unbelievable and sweetest torture I’ve ever experienced.

“That’s right,” he murmurs, lips brushing against my inner thigh, his fingers sliding into my core. “Scream my name.”

I don’t need any more encouragement. With his fingers thrusting in and out, I yell, “Raff!” and ride out my release.

Dazed, overcome with the way he commands my body so effortlessly, I fall back against the pillows. He moves up, settling himself between my legs and circles his hips, teasing me with his hard cock.

“Are you ready?” he asks, nibbling on my neck.

I lift my hips in response, unable to find the words because I can't speak after that mind-blowing orgasm he just gave me.

“Tell me, princess. Tell me you want me inside you.”

“Yes, I do! I want you inside me now, Raff! Please...”

The moment he sinks inside my welcoming body, we moan in unison. This is how it's supposed to be, I think. No words can completely or accurately describe what it's like to love someone on such a deep, emotional level and to know that they love you back just as much. It's overwhelming, exhilarating and so powerful.

Our bodies move together, slick with sweat, desire driving us forward. It doesn't take long before I'm spiraling into orgasmic oblivion again. Rafferty knows exactly where my sweet spot is and how to make me come hard. Until I'm screaming his name and clawing my nails down his back.

Breathing hard, I open my eyes and watch him climax above me. With a long groan, he empties himself inside me and I wrap my legs around him tighter, drawing him deeper. Then he drops down beside me, panting hard, a hand landing on his chest. Without a word, he reaches for my hand and lays it over his rapidly-beating heart.

“It's all yours, Sofia,” he finally says, voice thick with emotion.

“Your heart?” I ask in a soft whisper.

“My heart, my body, my very soul.”

Tears prick my eyes. “Oh, Rafferty. I love you so much.”

“I love you more, my sweet Sofia. I'm so sorry if you were ever scared of me. Even though I was going to hurt you.”

“I never believed you would hurt me, Raff. Never.”

“Good.” His fingers lace through mine and he moves his other hand over to touch my stomach. “I can't believe our baby is in there.”

The awe in his tone hits me hard. He's truly happy and so am I. I'm not

exactly sure how we got here, but now that we're together in this moment, I never want it to end. There's something very magical about it.

"He or she is probably the size of a bean," I say with a soft chuckle. "But there's definitely a baby in there. And Baby Bean reminds me every day when I throw up."

"Aww, I'm sorry. But I'm here for it. All of it. And if that means holding your hair back while you puke then that's what we'll do. Because from this point forward, we're a team."

I squeeze his hand and for a long moment we stare at each other. This could've all ended so differently. So tragically. "We're so lucky," I whisper.

"Let's make it official," he declares.

"What?"

"Marry me, sweet Sofia. Be my princess forever and I'll do my best to be your wicked prince."

"Are you sure?" I ask, my eyes searching his bright blue ones.

"More sure than I've ever been of anything ever before. Will you marry me and make me the happiest man in the world?" He presses a kiss to my knuckles and tears fill my eyes.

"Yes!" I cry. "There's nothing I would love more."

Rafferty drags me into his arms and we kiss passionately. And it feels like time stands still as our mouths and bodies meld.

RAFFERTY

When morning comes, I wake up to find Sofia's head on my chest, her dark hair spread all over me like a silken waterfall. I sift my fingers through the gorgeous, thick strands and the light scent of lilacs fills my nose. This woman is amazing and I spent all night showing her just how much I love her.

It wasn't enough, though, and I could spend every day, all day, making love to her, holding her close and planning our future together. A future that was almost ripped away from us by a madman with a knife. A future that I need desperately and immediately with this woman.

For the first time in my life, I know I've made the right decision. I'm marrying Sofia as soon as possible.

Eventually, Sofia's eyes flutter open and the smile she gives me fills my heart with the purest joy. Before Sofia, I never could imagine myself being so in love, so happy with a woman. And here we are. There's no way I'm going to risk losing this woman and the sooner I make her mine, the better.

"What?" she whispers, voice hoarse with sleep.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" I ask, trailing my fingers up and along her jawline.

She yawns. "I must look like a hot mess."

"Hardly."

“I barely got an hour of sleep. You, ah, were very vigorous last night.”

I chuckle, sliding my hand down and over her flat belly. It won't be that way for long and I'm looking forward to seeing it swollen with my child. Our child. “Get used to it,” I tell her.

“I'm going to start needing naps,” she murmurs, snuggling up against me.

Turning onto my side, I draw her back against me, throwing a leg over her thighs and lowering my face into her fragrant hair. With Sofia in my arms, my world is right. Nearly perfect. We just need to make it official now. I just hope she's on the same page as me.

“Sofia, I want to marry you.”

She giggles. “I had a feeling since you proposed last night.”

“I mean like today. Now.”

“Now?” she echoes and laughs. “I was hoping to wear a nice dress and not be naked.”

“I love you naked,” I rasp, pulling her ass right up against me, letting her know just how much she affects me. Because she does—on every possible level.

“Ohh,” she murmurs when she feels my straining hard-on. “Someone's up and ready to go.”

“He certainly is.”

Sofia turns in my arms and meets my lust-filled gaze. “Before we, ah, do that, can we talk about what you just said?”

I arch a brow and slide my hand along her side, trailing it up and down. Her skin feels like satin and I'm having trouble focusing. “About the fact that I want to marry you today?” My hand dips between her legs and she whimpers.

“Mmm. You're trying to distract me.”

“No, I'm not.” I nibble on her earlobe and massage her clit. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“Raff!”

“Sorry, I can’t seem to help myself where you’re concerned. I want all of you, all the time.” When I pull my hand back, she groans in protest and I chuckle. “So what do you want? To talk or to feel my cock inside you?”

“Both. I suppose we could always talk later,” she murmurs.

I flip her over onto her back with a deep laugh. “Sounds good to me.”

After frolicking around in bed for another hour, we finally get up and shower. Of course, that leads to more fun and by the time we’re dressed and downstairs, it’s after 11 AM.

Sofia makes herself tea, I pour myself coffee and we settle down at the island. I’m ready to get down to business and seal the deal. At the same time, if Sofia has dreamed about the perfect wedding since she was a little girl, I don’t want to take that away from her.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I murmur, studying her closely.

“Me? You’re the one who wants to walk down the aisle today,” she reminds me.

“There doesn’t have to be an aisle. We can do it right here in the garden, surrounded by family. But if you’ve been dreaming of the dress, tons of bridesmaids and a big party, I want you to have that. Despite wanting you now—desperately—I don’t want to steal your dream wedding.”

“All I need is you,” she says, dark eyes shining with love. “If we get married today or tomorrow or next year, that doesn’t change anything. So why not now?”

My heart has never been so full of love. “God, I love you,” I say and clasp her face in my hands. After kissing her long and hard, I pull back. “I’ll tell my family. How does getting married at sunset sound?”

“Like a dream come true.” She smiles then says, “I’ll tell Rory and I’d like to call my mom, too. I want her and Gio here—if he’ll come. Luca is still in Europe, so that’s not a possibility.”

I nod and after we finish our drinks, I allow Sofia some privacy to call her

mother and go find my family. My mom is delighted and can't wait to be able to call Sofia her daughter in law. Finley is thrilled, too. By the time I reach Liam's house, word has spread and Rory is already over at my place helping Sofia prepare for our sunset nuptials.

"I already called the officiant who performed our wedding," Liam states then slaps me on the back. "Congratulations, little brother."

"Thanks." Conor is there, too, and he offers his best wishes as well.

"Last man standing," Conor says and grins. "And I plan to keep it that way for a long while."

"When it happens, it happens," I tell him.

"And there's not a damn thing you can do to stop it," Liam adds wisely.

"Nope. Not gonna happen to me any time soon," he assures us easily. "I spend all of my time either here or in the ring. And, trust me—there aren't any women hanging out at my fights. None that would interest me, anyway."

"You're going to jinx yourself," I tell him.

"Not a chance in hell I'll find the love of my life at an underground fight."

I exchange a look with Liam. Stranger things have happened. I don't say anything more, but it'll be interesting to watch Conor fall in love. He's never had a serious relationship and keeps his liaisons private. He never talks about love or women—at least not when it comes to finding his forever with someone. Personally, I think my brother keeps his heart closed off to women and would rather focus on his fight club. He once said he believes relationships are the beginning of the end.

But now that I know better, I disagree. Because I'm on the verge of my beginning and I can't wait to dive in fully and make it official with the woman I love more than anything.

It's summer now, so the days are longer. Which means we won't get married until later this evening. But the day is busy, preparing. My mom is whipping up a feast, Rory is helping Sofia get ready, Liam and Conor are making sure there's enough alcohol to celebrate and that the garden is in tip-top shape,

and set up to accommodate everyone. Meanwhile, Finley has been decorating it with ribbons and flowers.

Everything is coming together and I couldn't be happier.

After spending the afternoon in a jewelry shop, I finally decide on the perfect ring. A flawless, princess-cut diamond for my princess. I just hope she loves it as much as I do.

By 6 PM, I'm wearing my suit and standing just outside the garden with my brothers. I'm not going to lie—my nerves have kicked in and I'm starting to sweat. This fear that Sofia has changed her mind for whatever reason is making me nervous as hell.

"I'm not being too pushy am I?" I ask. Christ, the ring in my pocket feels like it weighs a ton and I swipe a hand across my brow. "I know this is all so last minute and what if she changes her mind?"

"Jesus, relax," Conor says, eyeing me. "You look like you just ate a bunch of hot peppers."

My face is red and flushed and I lightly lay a hand over the itchy bandage beneath my white shirt. Everything feels like it's sticking to me and I let out a slow, shaky breath. If Sofia changes her mind, I'm going to be devastated.

"Are you gonna puke?" Conor asks, grinning evilly, and I glare at him.

"C'mon, Raff, get it together. You're about to walk down the aisle and you're sweating up a storm."

"No shit. Because I'm nervous as fuck."

The twins exchange a look.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Liam asks carefully.

"Hell no," I grumble. "I'm scared she is!"

They chuckle, not worried at all.

"She's not," Liam states confidently. "Last time I was at our place, Rory said Sofia was so happy. And that she never looked more beautiful. She's ready, little brother. Are you?"

I immediately nod. “Beyond ready.”

“Okay then. Everything will be fine. You’re overthinking things.”

I hope Liam is right and I do my best to calm my frayed nerves. After taking a few deep breaths, I straighten my suit jacket for probably the hundredth time and peer through the shrubs. Everyone I love is sitting in front of the garden trellis which is covered in fragrant pink and white roses. It’s beautiful and the perfect place for us to exchange our vows. I’m happy to see Anna Marino sitting out there, too, and I know Sofia will be, too. However, I don’t see her older brother Giovanni, which, of course, pisses me off.

Shoving that thought aside, I smooth my palms down my jacket lapels and tell myself to relax. Since Matteo Marino won’t be walking his daughter down the aisle, I asked Liam if he would and he said he’d be honored.

“I probably should go find Rory and Sofia,” Liam says, as though reading my mind.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “For walking her down the aisle.”

“Of course. I already told you, it’s my absolute pleasure. There’s something damn special—magical—about the Marino sisters.”

I grin. “Damn straight there is.”

“Are you sure there isn’t a third sister somewhere?” Conor asks again.

“Pretty sure, but maybe we can hook you up with Giovanni or Luca,” I say and Conor flips me off.

“Alright, boys, I’m off to find the bride and my lovely wife. I’ll see you up there. Good luck, Raff. You’ve got this.”

As Liam walks off, Conor turns to me. “Ready, bro?”

I nod and then we turn and walk over to the rose trellis. My heart is ready to pound right out of my chest and I smooth my hands down my tie and swallow back the nerves threatening to choke me.

But then I look out over my family and they’re all smiling. They give me the reassurance I need and I glance over at Conor who stands beside me.

“You got this,” he says in a low voice, repeating Liam’s words, and I give him a sharp nod.

After what feels like an eternity but is probably no more than a couple of minutes, Liam pokes his head out the side door of the house and signals Finley. She immediately hits play on her phone and soft music echoes through the overhead outdoor speakers.

Here we go. Time to take the first step toward my future with the woman I love.

Rory is out first and she’s wearing a light purple sundress, looking as fresh and pretty as the lilac bouquet she carries. Once she’s up the aisle and standing across from me, I look over and she sends me a wink.

Reassurance fills me and the music changes to the Wedding March, signaling that my bride is about to start her walk down the cobbled, rose petal strewn pathway. Courtesy of Finley and her decorating skills. I’m holding my breath and when she appears, her arm linked through Liam’s, I release the air in my lungs in a slow whoosh.

She looks so damn beautiful and my chest tightens. Wearing a flowy, white dress and with her long chestnut waves gathered together at the side of her face and strewn with flowers, she looks like an angel. My angel who saved me so many weeks ago from rotting down in that basement cell.

As they make their way up to the rose trellis, I can’t look away. My eyes are glued on her and love fills me. When they finally reach me, Liam takes her hand and places it in mine.

“Congratulations,” he says and then moves up to stand beside Conor.

Words are caught in my throat so, instead of saying thank you, I force a nod. Unable to look away from Sofia, we face each other, holding hands.

“You look stunning,” I finally murmur.

A smile lights up her face. “Thank you. And you sure know how to wear a suit.”

I chuckle and beside us, the officiant clears his throat.

“Let’s begin,” he says.

Everything seems to pass by in a blur. By the time it’s my turn to say my vows, my nerves have smoothed out because I have everything I need standing right in front of me. One look from Sofia and I suddenly possess all the confidence in the world. At least, that’s what it feels like.

“Sofia Bella Marino,” I begin and look into her bright hazel eyes, “I know that we met under, ah, interesting circumstances, but the night I opened my eyes and saw you looking down at me, I’ve never been the same. I’ll never forget the way the light lit up your beautiful face and I could’ve sworn you were an angel and I’d died and gone to heaven. And I was absolutely fine with that.”

Sofia squeezes my hands and I continue, “We formed an instant connection right away. You took care of me when I needed someone most and I will be forever grateful to you. And now I want to take care of you. I want to be the best man, husband and father in the world. I promise you that I will never let you down and whatever you want, whatever your heart desires, I will make it happen. You mean everything to me, sweet Sofia, and I love you.”

I see tears shimmer in her eyes and I brush a tear away as it slips from the corner.

“Oh, Rafferty, I couldn’t love you more if I tried. I started falling for you the moment we met and, yes, it was under, er, unusual circumstances, but I’m beyond grateful to have you in my life now. I know this won’t always be easy, but I’m willing to always listen and have your back and love you so very hard.”

“Right back at you,” I tell her.

“You are my everything, sweet prince, and I look forward to spending the rest of our lives together.”

A few “aww’s” and sighs fill the air as I reach into my pocket and pull out the ring. I lift Sofia’s hand, promise myself to her and slip the diamond onto her finger.

She gasps, blinking back a fresh onslaught of tears.

“You like it?” I ask.

“I love it,” she gushes. “It’s absolutely perfect.”

I smile, lift her hand to my lips and press a kiss to her knuckles. “Not nearly as perfect as you.”

Beside her, Rory plucks out a silver band from the pocket in her sundress and hands it to her sister. Sofia vows to love and cherish me and then slips the ring on my finger. I have no idea when she managed to get me a ring and I arch a brow.

“I’m surprised we didn’t run into each other at the jewelry store earlier,” she jokes and everyone chuckles.

Then the officiant concludes the ceremony and tells me I can kiss my bride.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” I murmur and capture Sofia’s lips in a kiss that promises forever and probably lasts a little too long. But I don’t care. She’s officially all mine and I want the entire world to know it.

A cheer fills the air, and the sun just fully set in a spectacular show of reds, pinks and oranges. As we pull apart, the entire garden comes alive with tiny fairy lights.

“Ohh,” Sofia murmurs and we look around, completely in awe. Finley claps her hands in delight and I know this is her doing. I send my little sister a thumbs up then draw my bride against my side and press a kiss to her temple.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Rafferty O’Shea!” Conor booms and a chorus of whistles and more cheers explode from our family.

As we walk back down the pathway amidst the tiny, glowing lights and endless flowers, my heart is so full it’s near bursting. Plying my bride with kisses, she laughs and looks up at me with shining eyes.

“I’m not going to lie. I’m glad my father kidnapped you.”

“And I’m glad I turned around and kidnapped you right back, princess.”

We laugh then turn around to hug our family and bask in their congratulations and endless good wishes.

Life has never been so good.

EPILOGUE

SOFIA

Eight Months Later...

Every single day that passes, I think our lives together can't get any better. And every single day, Rafferty surprises me in some new way to show me that marrying him was the best decision I ever made. And it truly has been. He's become my reason for why.

Why I smile, why I laugh, why I feel so cherished every moment of every day. I've never experienced anything quite so wonderful and I'm grateful more than words can say. More than all the stars in the sky.

I also adore his family and being so close to Rory again is the best. We're always hanging out together and she's helping me get through my pregnancy. It hasn't been easy, but since she's already gone through it, her advice has been priceless. Our mom has been visiting a lot, too, which makes me so very happy.

Of course, not everything is sunshine and roses. One day when we're sitting together at Rory's house, hanging out with Griffin and talking, my mom tells us that Papà has washed his hands of us. I know he's claimed that before, but this time it's for good. That makes me angrier than anything and I instantly start fuming.

"Does he have any idea how much he's hurt me? And Raff?" I demand, crossing my arms. I feel like a volcano about to blow.

"Whenever I try to talk to him about it, he shuts down," my mom says softly.

“I’ve tried, girls. I really have.”

“Did you know he gave Tony orders to shoot Rafferty and I on sight? And then Tony told me that father was done with me. When he came down to the basement that day, after Papà left me in that cell, Tony said he was told to kill me.”

My mom shakes her head. “I confronted Matteo about that. He told me he never told Tony to hurt you. He went rogue.”

“And you believe him?” I ask.

She sighs. “I want to, but...”

“But what?” Rory asks, pressing her.

“But your father has changed over this past year. He’s not the same person I married. And every day I see him spiral a little more out of control.”

At this point, I have limited sympathy for my father. Sliding a hand over my very large belly, I sigh. “He chose the rivalry and revenge over us, Mom,” I remind her. “He’s the one who chooses not to know his new family, his first grandson and the child I’m about to have. This is all his fault and if he doesn’t change his ways, he’s going to die alone and bitter.”

“I know,” she whispers.

It’s clear his decision to cut Rory and I out of his life pains my mother. But there’s nothing I can do. My father hasn’t tried to talk to either of us. And it saddens me that Giovanni seems to be following in his footsteps. My oldest brother hasn’t attempted to contact me or come visit. I suppose it would be weird for him to come here but, at the same time, he could’ve at least called or texted or emailed. Sent a letter. Something!

“Gio is just as bad,” I murmur.

“He texts me,” Rory says and my eyes go wide. This is news to me and I study my older sister closely.

“Gio does? Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask with a frown. Suddenly, I’m feeling out of the loop.

“He asked me not to. I’m sorry, sis.”

“What has he said?” I’m so curious that I can’t stand it. I know Rory and Gio were close at one point, at least closer than Luca and I ever were to him. Still though. He’s my big brother and I miss him.

“He asks about you and Griffin. He wants to make sure you’re happy. Of course, I told him you’ve never been happier and he knows the baby is due any day now. He’s trying to play middle man, though. Placate Papà.”

“But by doing that, he’s sacrificing his relationship with us. With me. I haven’t heard a word from him.” My voice is tinged with sadness. I push the sorrow aside and in a firm voice declare, “This rivalry needs to end.”

“I know,” Rory says.

“I’ll work on your father,” my mother promises.

We nod, but the truth is, my dad can be a very stubborn man and I don’t have high hopes.

“I think he’s been having business troubles,” she tells us, voice low. “He hasn’t confided in me about it, but I hear him talking.”

“Business troubles?” I echo. “How is that even possible? His companies rake in billions.”

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but I know something isn’t good,” my mom says. “If I find anything out, I’ll let you know.”

Rory and I exchange a look. “And Luca? Is he back yet?”

“Next week,” my mom tells us. “He knows a little about what’s been going on, but not everything.”

“He never understood this silly feud, either,” I say. “I’ll reach out to him and fill him in on everything that’s happ—”

Out of nowhere, an unbelievable pain shoots through my lower body and my knees would’ve buckled if I wasn’t already sitting. With a cry, my hands drop, covering my belly, and I grit my teeth.

“What’s wrong?” Rory asks, leaning forward, face scrunching up in concern.

My mom reaches for my elbow. “Is it the baby?”

“I think I just had a contraction,” I tell them. They both smile.

“Where’s that husband of yours?” my mom asks.

Panic fills me. Even though I knew this was coming, I’m terrified. “He’s with Liam and Conor at the main house.”

“I’ll get him,” my mother says, standing up, all business. “Rory, hand me Griffin and help your sister down to the car. I’ll have Rafferty grab Sofia’s overnight bag and drive you both to the hospital. Then we’ll meet you there. Make sure he calls the doctor, too.”

Thank God she’s taking charge because when the next contraction hits, I nearly fall over. Crying out, I clutch onto my sister’s arm and I can’t even think straight. The pain is ungodly.

“I can’t do this,” I exclaim, tears springing into my eyes.

“Yes, you can,” she assures me, patting my arm. “Just hang in there. Once they drug you up, it’s much better.”

A choked laugh bursts from my throat. “That’s reassuring.”

“You’ve got this, Sofe.” She looks me in the eye. “You’re going to have a baby, about to witness the miracle of life, and I promise you—it’s worth the pain because it’s the most beautiful thing in the world.”

Easy for her to say. She’s not the one who has to give birth soon.

I’m glad my sister is so confident, but I’m not. And when Rafferty appears with a wild, panicked look in his ice-blue eyes, I want to laugh again, but another contraction strikes. Then my water breaks.

“Let’s go!” Rory calls, ushering me over to the SUV.

“I have to change!” I declare, horrified at my wet pants.

“You can change in the car,” she tells me, helping me climb into the backseat. “Rafferty! Move it!”

Rafferty snaps out of his deer in headlights, completely frozen stance and

bolts to the driver's side. "Yeah, right, we got this." He jumps in, turns on the car, and I'm trying to change my leggings as he slams on the gas.

Rory and I get thrown back against the seat as the car roars up the driveway and squeals out the front gate and onto the road.

"Raff, are you crazy? Slow down!" I yell, one leg in, one leg out of my pants.

"I am not slowing down," he informs me, eyeing me in the rear view mirror. "There's no way you're having our baby in this car."

Rory laughs. "She's probably got hours until—"

Another pained cry erupts from my throat and I squeeze my sister's hand so hard she squeals.

"And you were saying?" Rafferty asks dryly.

"Hit the gas," Rory orders and the car lurches forward, even faster than before.

"Oh, my God," I cry, gripping my belly with one hand and my sister's with the other. "This is pure torture. Why would anyone want to have a baby?" My eyes narrow at the dark head in front of me. The man who caused this. "Rafferty O'Shea! I swear to God, if you ever try to knock me up again, I will—"

With a whimper, I bend over—well, as much as someone who's nine months pregnant can—and curse my husband and his cock.

Since Rafferty is driving like a bat out of hell, it doesn't take long for us to arrive at the hospital. He pulls right up to the main entrance and he and Rory practically carry me out of the car and up onto the sidewalk. An attendant meets us with a wheelchair and I drop down into it with a huff.

Looking up into my husband's worried eyes as he races along beside me, keeping pace with the attendant pushing the wheelchair, I say, "This is not going to be fun."

"You're going to do great," he says, trying to encourage me. He looks scared, though, and I turn to glance up at Rory as I'm wheeled into the elevator.

“You’ve got this, sis.”

They’re so full of encouragement which is nice, but they’re not the ones about to push something the size of a watermelon out of a very narrow opening.

God, it’s unnatural.

Ironically, it’s the most natural thing in the world, I remind myself. But, right at this moment, it sure doesn’t feel that way.

We reach the private room and I’m transferred to the bed. When the next wave of contractions hit, I scream to the high heavens and Rory is yelling for them to give me drugs. Rafferty looks white as a ghost, and he might be clutching my hand harder than I’m clutching his.

My mom shows up and immediately manages to calm the room, and me, down. It also helps that the anesthesiologist gives me an epidural. Once that takes effect, I focus on my breathing and the steady stream of comforting words Rafferty begins whispering in my ear.

Despite all the chaos on the drive over, we’ve managed to come to terms with what’s happening and help each other relax. As much as possible, anyway. My labor is moving along faster than anyone thought it would and, for three hours, Rafferty stays by my side, whispering soothing words and keeps telling me the most beautiful things. Like how I’ve changed his life and how excited he is for the baby. And how very much he loves me.

Needless to say, I’m no longer cursing him or his manhood.

We decided not to find out the baby’s sex, so the excitement is building to a crescendo as we near the finale of my pregnancy. I can’t believe I’ve kept it together, but here we are and I couldn’t have done this without Rafferty and my family by my side.

“Everyone’s out there?” I ask.

Brushing a lock of hair off my sweaty face, Rafferty nods. “Our moms, Rory, Liam and Griff. Finley is passing out cigars—she’s convinced we’re having a boy—and Conor keeps going outside and smoking them.”

He rolls his eyes and I chuckle. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Rory said Luca’s been texting. And Giovanni.”

“Really?” My eyes fill with tears. That may be the nicest news I’ve heard all day.

“They’re both looking forward to becoming uncles.”

“That makes me so happy. I want our families to unite and to heal, Raff. So very badly.” My voice catches and I swipe my palm over my wet eyes.

“We’ll get there,” he tells me, stroking a hand over my head, smoothing my hair back. Then he wipes a stray tear away and the end of my labor begins. After some more contractions, a lot of pushing and a few more curses, I give birth to a perfect, healthy, handsome baby boy.

After they clean him off, the nurse lays him on my chest and I look into the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen. Well, there’s no doubt our son has Rafferty’s ice-blue eyes and I’m thrilled. He also has a head of dark hair already and wonder fills me at the tiny person we created.

My sister was right. This little baby we created and brought into the world is an absolute miracle and we’re going to love him like crazy.

“He’s perfect,” I whisper. Glancing over at Rafferty, I see he’s overwhelmed with awe as he strokes a finger over the baby’s soft, pink arm.

“I can’t believe we have a son,” he murmurs. We share a long look full of love and then he presses a kiss to my lips. “Thank you, Sofia.”

I arch a brow. “For what? Not killing you on the car ride over here?”

He smiles. “Thank you for being the most amazing woman I’ve ever met and making me the luckiest man in the world.”

The nurse walks back over, checks my vitals and asks, “So, have you decided on a name yet?”

Rafferty and I exchange a knowing smile.

“What do you think?” he asks. “Are we going with choice A or B?”

I look down at the little munchkin in my arms and say, “Definitely A. With your ice-blue eyes and dark hair, he’s all Irish.”

Rafferty grins from ear to ear. “Our son’s name is Killian O’Shea,” he announces proudly.

Killian. I look down at the little baby—our son—and know he’s going to grow up to be a heartbreaker. How could he not? After all, it’s clear he’s Rafferty’s mini-me.

Eventually, everyone comes into my room to visit after going down to the nursery to see Killian for the first time. And it’s amazing to be surrounded by such a loving group. It saddens me that my father isn’t here, but that’s his choice. I hope my brothers will visit soon, and I look forward to introducing them to their new nephew.

In the meantime, I’ve never felt more loved. Everyone is gushing about baby Killian and telling me how well I did. It’s all a big whirlwind of happiness, love and family. There’s no judgment or rivalry. My emotions are hitting me hard and suddenly, I’m exhausted. Rafferty must notice because he discreetly shuffles everyone out and tells them that I need to rest.

After all, I did just have a baby.

Once they all leave, I drop back on my pile of pillows and sigh. “Thank you,” I whisper as Rafferty slides into bed beside me, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me close.

“You’ve had an exhausting day,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple. “You need your rest.”

“Have I told you yet today how much I love you?”

“I believe I remember you saying something about keeping my dick in my pants from now on,” he reminds me dryly.

A laugh bursts from my throat. “Did I? Sorry, but I was delirious with pain.” After cuddling closer, I tilt my head back and look into his gorgeous eyes. “I love you, Rafferty Joseph O’Shea. With my whole heart.”

“And I love you. You’re my heart and soul, sweet Sofia.”

“And your princess?”

“Always,” he assures me and kisses me softly.

His kiss brightens my world even more than it already was and I look forward to our little family of three returning home.

I’m not sure if my father will ever make peace with me and my sister marrying the so-called enemy. But I know one thing for sure—I’ve never been happier. I was lucky enough to find my happy ending and I’d like to think our families will, too.

It’s funny, but I feel like we’re more than halfway there.

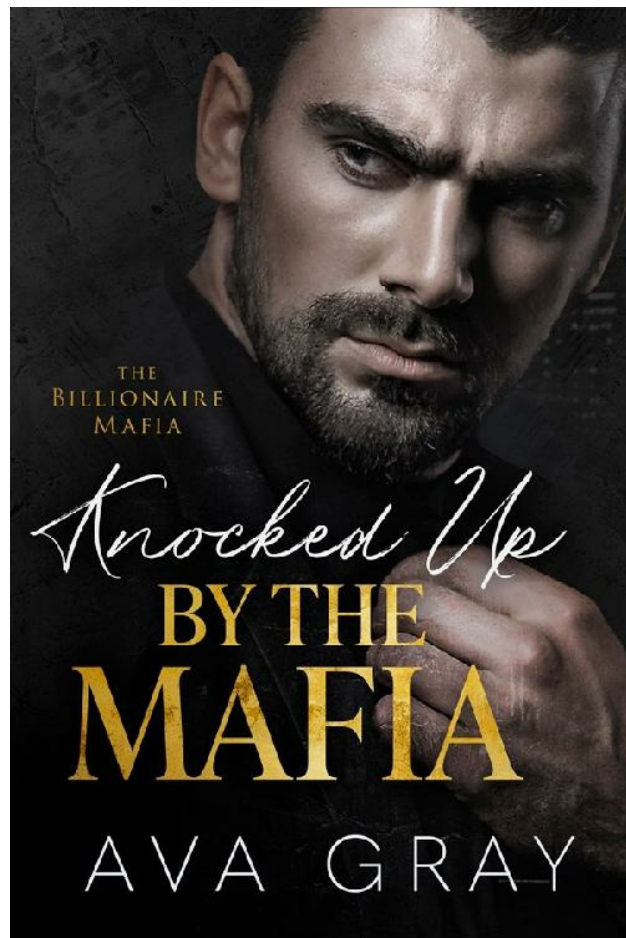
Right now, I have everything I need and life is good. We’re coming together, letting go of old hurts and past beliefs, and things are improving every single day.

I suppose love has a way of healing all eventually. New marriages, new blood and new babies will do that. Provide a beautiful hope for a united future. A way to remedy the old rift between two warring families.

I’ve never felt more at peace and, as I close my eyes, snuggling up against my husband, I know our future will be one that is bright, full of laughter, love, forgiveness and a new hope.

And I’m so ready to embrace it all. Because with Rafferty by my side, the best is yet to come.

EXCERPT: KNOCKED UP BY THE
MAFIA



He's the handsome, dominant stranger I picked to take my innocence... And then everything went to hell.

Here's the thing about being a mafia princess: I don't make my own decisions. My powerful father has picked a man for me to marry, but I can't give myself to someone fully without experiencing *something* first...

That *something* happens to become Lee, a gorgeous, darkly twisted man I meet in a bar, and give my cherry too.

When I disappear the next day, I don't think of the consequences. But soon enough, my belly starts showing, and I quickly realize one reckless night left me *pregnant* with the *enemy*.

Because my mysterious, hot hookup's name isn't Lee at all...

His name is Liam O'Shea, and he's a mafia billionaire my father wants *dead*.

***Knocked Up by the Mafia* is the first full-length novel in The Billionaire Mafia dark romance series. One-click for your dose of naughty, forbidden mafia men!**

Rory

My future has been decided and it feels like the final nail in my coffin.

The sad thing is I haven't been allowed to give any input. Ever since I can remember, my father has made every decision regarding my life. Where I go to school (boarding schools followed by University in Europe), what I study (only subjects appropriate for an obedient young woman, commence eye roll), when I'm allowed to visit home or friends (exactly twice a year—my family on Christmas and a summer holiday with one of my girlfriends). He's used to controlling everything and everyone around him. As the reigning Don

of the Marino family empire, he gives an order and people follow it, whether they agree with it or not.

Because Matteo Marino is too scary to say no to and the consequences of rebelling against him would most likely result in death. My father rules Chicago with an iron fist. He has legitimate businesses, corporations that make billions of dollars, but he also plays in the darkness, ruling over the shadows with a ruthlessness that makes my stomach turn. It's a part of himself that he keeps away from me, well hidden in the shadows, but I don't like to think about it. The rumors I've heard about his legendary viciousness make my skin crawl. I have a hard time reconciling the family man I see who takes care of my mother, me and my siblings with the monster who has supposedly committed horrendous acts of violence.

Currently, I'm sitting in a chair on the opposite side of my father's desk, and I wonder if the terrible rumors are true. Does he enjoy threatening and killing people? Is that how he's made so much of his money? It's something I try to avoid thinking about and I shift in the uncomfortable chair and study his face which looks like it's carved from stone. It's all hard planes and angles and not even his slightly round nose looks soft. His dark brown eyes appear black and his thick, dark hair is smoothed back, held in place by a gel that smells like sweet tobacco.

"You're turning 25 this year, Aurora," he states. "It's time for you to take on your duties and responsibilities, and that means marrying Dante and producing heirs to carry on the Marino family legacy."

My eyes slide shut at the mention of Dante Rivera. He's my father's top enforcer and almost ten years older than me. I want nothing to do with him, but there's no missing the way he looks at me. He knows we're supposed to get engaged this year and I'm sure he's counting the days down until he can slide into my bed and ravish me.

A chill runs through my entire body. I have no interest in sleeping with a man like Dante much less becoming his wife. But what can I do? How can I possibly tell my father no?

No one says no to Matteo Marino. Ever.

I would be the first...if I can gather my courage and face off with him. But

that would result in disaster. He'd probably cut me off, punish me, maybe even toss me out of here and onto the street.

Am I being ungrateful by not wanting to do as he says? He's provided me with everything that I've ever needed my entire life.

"Aurora?"

My head snaps up and I stop wringing my hands in my lap. "Yes, papà?"

"This is a good match. Dante is strong, competent and has been a loyal warrior to me for years."

"You make it sound like I'm a prize," I murmur, unable to help myself.

A muscle twitches in his angular jaw. "I suggest you take the time to get to know him better because your engagement will be announced soon."

And that's it. He doesn't want to have a discussion or hear that I don't love Dante Rivera. To be honest, I don't even really like him. But now I'm just supposed to declare vows before God and my family, fall into his bed and start bearing his children.

The thought makes me ill.

I can't deal with this conversation any longer and I just want to run far away and hide. "Yes, papà," I say docilely, not prepared to fight. It's so much easier to merely agree with him and slink away. Maybe I'm just a coward, destined for an unhappy future with a man who is practically a stranger.

"Good. Now go find Dante and make an effort."

With a slight nod, I stand up and walk out, my head hanging between my shoulders like a scolded child. Once I'm in the hallway, I close the door to my father's office and let out a frustrated sigh. The issue is I am not a child anymore. I'm a 24-year-old woman who has wants and needs of her own.

Straightening up, I know I should find Dante because my father will ask him later if we spoke. Even though I want nothing to do with him, I head over to his private quarters. My family owns several homes—a brownstone mansion here in downtown Chicago where we are now, a villa in Italy and another home located about two hours away in the Illinois countryside. I've been

back with my family now for almost a year after spending the last 12 years or so studying abroad.

Up until this past year, my life has consisted of boarding schools, University and an occasional visit home with my family. I feel like I barely know my older brother Giovanni anymore. He's almost five years older than me, but sometimes it feels like 50. We have nothing in common and he's being groomed to take over for my father when the time is right. Although Gio is intelligent and strong, I don't think he has the ruthless nature our father possesses. When he steps into the role of Don...well, it will be interesting.

I'm much closer to my younger sister Sofia and brother Luca. We're all a year apart and get along well. Sofia and I are best friends and confide in each other about everything, so she knows how much I resent this pairing with Dante. Yet, she also knows that I don't have a choice.

Luca, the youngest, is away at school right now. He's immersed in his studies and I probably won't see him until Christmas. Suddenly my heart stutters. No. Most likely, I'll see him at my engagement party. Ugh. I feel sick and I pause outside of Dante's private apartment, hands squeezed into fists and refusing to knock.

He's probably not even in there, I tell myself. He's always running off to do my father's bidding and take care of business. Sometimes he has his nose so far up my father's ass that I wonder how he doesn't feel like a parasite.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I'm about to knock when I hear a scuffle from inside. A voice raises and then the sound of muffled cries penetrate the wooden door. Dio Mio. It sounds like someone is hurt and even though I don't care for Dante, I don't want to see him in pain.

I lift my hand and rap on the door. After a few grunts and a loud thump, the door swings inward and Dante stands there. Breathing hard and his face red with exertion, Dante's eyes look dark and wild. But when he realizes it's me, I see the surprise register on his face and he grins.

“What a nice surprise. What're you doing here, Rory?”

Being forced to carry out my father's order, I think dryly. “I thought we could talk about—” I can't even get the word “engagement” out of my

mouth. It sticks in my throat like glue. “Uh, things,” I finish lamely.

“Of course,” he responds. “I, ah, just have to finish attending to business.”

For the first time, I glance down and notice the blood on his knuckles and my stomach sinks. Leaning to the side, I peer around his shoulder and spot a man lying on the floor looking beaten to a pulp. To within an inch of his life. My eyes meet his briefly before they flicker closed and I think he’s on the verge of passing out. Or worse. He looks young and his probably once-handsome face is swollen, bruised and smeared with bright red blood. I can’t help but notice the unnatural curve of his arm and a shiver runs through me. It looks broken in several places.

“Who is that?” I whisper, trying to hide my horror.

“No one,” Dante says, voice laced in disgust. “Just an enemy of your family. But don’t worry. He won’t be for long.”

“Help me...please,” the man on the floor moans. Then he starts coughing and hacks up blood which sprays all over the cream carpet.

I feel sick and take a step closer, overcome with the need to help him.

“Don’t,” Dante warns me, lifting an arm to block me from coming inside.

“But he’s in pain,” I argue.

“As he should be.”

“Dante,” I say, trying to reason with him. “It looks like he’s paid for whatever transgression he’s committed. Why don’t you let him go?”

“He works for the O’Shea family,” Dante spits out. “You still think I should release him? Let him go crawling back to that Irish filth?”

My heart pounds and I look down at the broken man who works for my family’s biggest enemy. The O’Shea’s hate us with every fiber of their being, but compassion fills me. I don’t even fully understand the reason for the rivalry and the bloody man looks like he’s had about all he can take. He’s clearly at his limits and any more of a beating will likely kill him.

“Please,” I say softly. “Just let him go.”

Dante's eyes narrow. "You're too soft, cara. This is why Matteo will have Gio take over eventually. Although, I question whether he can handle this."

I can hear the slight jealousy in his voice and it occurs to me that Dante would be much better at carrying out the vicious side of my father's business than Gio. My siblings and I don't possess that kind of bloodthirsty mentality that my father, Dante and his men in his organization do.

"Now go," Dante says and pushes me backward, starting to close the door. "Come find me later and we'll talk about our engagement. I'd like to start getting to know you better, cara. Much better."

My stomach sinks in dread and then the door shuts in my face. But, I don't leave right away. Instead, I press my ear against the door and wait, listening. Hoping that Dante will do as I asked and show the man mercy and let him go.

Instead, I hear several muffled thwacks and a long, drawn-out groan. I squeeze my eyes shut as it occurs to me that Dante is kicking the man. Emotion wells in my chest and I bite my lip, not sure what to do.

Then I hear Dante curse the man in Italian and tell him he's going to die.

I can't take it anymore, and I pull away from the door, turn and stumble down the hall, trying to get away away from the pathetic moans which just turned into a scream that makes my blood run cold.

Sick to my stomach, I hurry back to my family's main residence and rush up the steps to the third floor where my bedroom is located. Racing inside, I slam the door and turn the flimsy lock.

There's no way in hell I can marry a monster like that. A man who will kill another man and enjoy it. I know Dante claimed the man worked for the O'Shea family, but does that mean he deserves death?

Dropping down on my bed, I know one thing is for certain. I don't love Dante and I never will. I've been an obedient daughter and student my entire life, always following the rules and never causing trouble. Until recently, I've never questioned my father or his organization. But now I am questioning it deeply.

I'm also questioning myself and how I'm supposed to hand my virginity over

to Dante. I've been a good Catholic girl and never slept with a man. Sure, I've had innocent friendships with boys and a "sort of" boyfriend at one time, but nothing ever happened. I didn't get emotionally or physically involved. While other girls snuck out and ran off with boys from the village, I stayed in the safety of my room and read books. There was never a desire to be bad and I didn't want to disappoint or embarrass my family.

But now I feel backed into a corner. Even though I've left the dorm and I'm back home, I'm feeling more restricted than ever before. A rebelliousness I've never experienced before is starting to burn within me and I don't know what to do with it.

I think what it boils down to is I abhor the idea of marrying a man I don't love and who is showing me a side that scares me. I don't want to give myself to Dante and I certainly don't want him as the father of my children.

Flopping onto my back, I look up at the ceiling and realize I could choose to sleep with someone else before him. I could pick a man I'm attracted to and give him one night. It would be a gift to myself. One that I think I'm due. Especially since I'm expected to sacrifice my happiness for my father's organization.

Dante is too cruel and cold for me. The idea of him kissing and touching me—being inside me—makes my eyes burn with angry, unshed tears.

No. I refuse to let him be my first. I may have to marry the bastard, but that doesn't mean I have to give him the gift of my virginity.

Sitting up, I run a hand through my long, dark hair and decide to do something about it. Tonight, I'm taking my life into my own hands and making a huge decision that affects me. No more waiting for orders from my father.

I'm going to sneak out, find a man I'm attracted to and go to bed with him.

I think I've earned it.

Besides, I'd much rather choose a stranger to hand my virginity over to than give it to Dante. He doesn't deserve it.

My mind made up, I slide off my bed and go over to my vanity. Sitting down

on the stool, I gaze at my reflection in the mirror. I'm going to do my makeup darker than usual, put on a nice, little, sexy outfit and take an Uber to the other side of town.

Then I'm going to see who I'm attracted to and, for the first time in my life, I'm going to seduce a man.

[Read the full story HERE!](#)

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