

THE
BILLIONAIRE
MAFIA

Arranged
BY THE
MAFIA

AVA GRAY

ARRANGED BY THE MAFIA

THE BILLIONAIRE MAFIA

BOOK FOUR

AVA GRAY

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BLURB

My innocent wife has no idea she's in for a broken heart before I even put a ring on her dainty finger.

As the younger mafia heir, I've lived a life of leisure. I had my fun and my share of women dropping at my feet... Until a threat appeared in the shape of a powerful kingpin... and now I'm suddenly being forced to marry the enemy's daughter in a sham wedding.

It's not just my family vendetta holding me back. I have a deep rooted resentment for the O'Shea family, and their daughter Finley is nothing but a pawn to me.

That is, until I meet her.

Finley is a pretty ball of energy and sass that's somehow irresistible. But my plan for revenge must be completed. I will humiliate her publicly if that's what it takes.

Anything to hurt the O'Shea family...

Even if it means breaking sweet Finley's heart.

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FINLEY

A *re they insane?* I wonder. My gaze moves from one older brother to the next, and their question rings in my ears so loudly it's like a clanging bell. One that's starting to give me a massive headache.

After I close my gaping jaw, I cross my arms and ask the question out loud. "Are you insane?" My voice comes out shrill, but I can't help it. What they're asking of me is beyond ridiculous. It's positively absurd.

And it's most assuredly a hard no.

Liam exchanges a look with his twin, Conor, and Rafferty leans forward, eyeing me with an intense concern in his icy blue gaze.

"No one is going to force you to do anything, Fin," Rafferty assures me.

"Well, I should hope not," I declare with a huff, crossing my arms over my chest.

"All we're asking right now is for you to meet him," Liam assures me. "No pressure."

"No pressure? Really?" I scoff.

"Maybe this is a bad idea," Conor says.

"Gee, 'ya think?" I shake my head, at a complete loss. Narrowing my eyes, I try to calm down the rapid breaths I'm inhaling and force my pounding heart to slow itself down. I know my brothers would never force me into doing this.

There's no need to panic. All the same, I'm surprised they're ready to side with Matteo Marino, our family's mortal enemy.

"Trusting Matteo is a huge risk," Conor continues, leaning his hip against Liam's desk.

"He has something to gain from the union, too," Liam reminds us. "It's the only reason I'm willing to set aside our past differences and work together against our common enemy."

"That bastard is always up to something," Rafferty states, an underlying bitterness coating his words.

And why wouldn't he be bitter? Not too long ago, Matteo Marino had Raff kidnapped, tossed in a basement cell and beaten to within an inch of his life. And now we're just supposed to trust our enemy? My skin prickles and my gut is screaming to be wary.

"You can't trust him," I murmur. "That would be a huge mistake."

Liam sighs, reaching for a notebook and pen. "Let's list the pros and cons." My oldest brother, always the pragmatic one, starts making columns on the page.

A couple of years ago, Liam met and fell in love with Aurora Marino, Matteo's oldest daughter. He had no idea who Rory really was and their whole love story was rather epic and very Romeo and Juliet. Now they have a precocious son, Griffin, who is a little over a year old. He's already quite the charmer who looks just like his father with black hair and bright blue eyes. Yesterday, he handed me a flower and said I was prettier than it was. My nephew is going to grow up and be a world-class heartbreaker. No doubt about it.

"We're at a truce," Conor comments, stating the first positive point. "That's a big pro."

"We can't trust Marino," Raff reminds us. "And that's a big fucking con."

They continue to go back and forth, but I tune them out, lost in my tangle of thoughts. Right now all I can think about is Luca Marino, the man they want me to enter into a marriage of

convenience with. First off, I've never even met him. All I know is he's the youngest Marino. That's it.

And second, how in the world am I supposed to marry a complete stranger? And why is the fate of our entire family falling onto my shoulders?

"Marrying Luca Marino," I add. "That's a definite con. For me, anyway."

"Fin, I know what we're asking is crazy," Liam says calmly, laying his pen down. "But it would be a marriage in name only. After a few months, we'll get it quietly annulled and everyone can move on with their lives."

"You don't have to sleep with the guy," Conor informs me. "Or even sleep in the same bed. You know what an annulment is, right?"

"Of course, I know," I respond in an annoyed tone. God, the last thing I want to be doing is talking about sex with my older, very experienced brothers. I can feel my cheeks heat up. "I wouldn't even kiss him much less anything else."

"Good," Conor states in a gruff voice. "Because he doesn't fucking deserve you. Not even for a few months. And if he lays a hand on you, I'll break it."

"Well, you'd have to kiss him at the wedding," Liam reminds us and Conor growls.

I groan. "This is a horrible idea. I still don't understand how marrying Luca Marino is going to solve anything."

"We've been run off the compound, kicked out of our own home by Desmond. He's taken over our businesses and dipped his toes right back into all of the illegal ventures I pulled us out of. In order to beat him, we need to unite our families and work together. Whether we like it or not, there's strength in uniting with Matteo and having an alliance."

I get what Liam is saying but, at the same time, I hate it. "Can I point out that our families are already united through your marriage and Rafferty's?"

Not only is Liam married to Rory, but Raff is married to her younger sister, Sofia. After Sofia discovered Rafferty locked up in that godawful cell in the Marino's basement, she helped him escape. He ended up kidnapping her as revenge and, somewhere along the way, they fell in love. Now they have a sweet little baby boy named Killian.

“Matteo never acknowledged either of our marriages and was so furious, he disowned both of his daughters.” Liam tosses his pen and rakes his fingers through his dark hair.

“Now he wants to show his full support of our families. He thinks by having a big, fancy wedding between you and Luca and inviting everyone, it will show a united front and declare an official end to the war between the O’Shea’s and the Marino’s.” Even as Rafferty says those words, I can hear the uncertain tone in his voice.

I cock a brow at my brothers. “And you really think that will happen?” Beating our evil Uncle Desmond is important. I get that. After our father was shot down and killed, Desmond returned from Ireland, kicked us out of our family home and took over the compound where we all used to live. He’s taken control of the businesses and once again started dealing in the shadowy side of things that Liam tried so hard to disengage us from. Things like drugs and prostitution. Also, Liam cut ties with thugs and eliminated enforcers that had worked for our family for years. Because they seemed to fight and kill more than protect. He also stopped paying bribes to cops and city officials. My brother has worked so hard the last two years to make our family business on the up and up.

And now Desmond is destroying all that we’ve accomplished.

But does that mean I should be punished? Forced to marry a man I don’t love? Even if it is only temporary?

A lot has happened with Desmond and he wants us all eliminated. The idea of him sending enforcers to gun down my brothers, mother and nephews is gut-wrenching. And he would do it, too. Without a doubt. Desmond is an evil man who is power hungry and bitter because my dad ran everything while Desmond was sent to Ireland to look over our business

interests there. Exiled is a better word because the two of them had a falling out and couldn't get back on the same page. I have no idea what happened exactly, but Desmond was sent away and my dad continued to run the kingdom here in Chicago. It was a slap in Desmond's face really.

Something he obviously never forgot and still harbors ill will about.

The last thing I want is for anything bad to happen to the people I love. At the same time, I can't promise myself to Luca Marino without ever having seen or met him. It's crazy.

With a big, very weary and resigned sigh, I hold up a hand. "I can't make any promises, but I will meet Luca." Once again, my brothers exchange a look. "Don't get too excited. I may hate him on sight."

"It would only be for a few months," Liam assures me. "Until we can overthrow Desmond and regain control of the compound and businesses."

"What if you can't?" I ask. Of course, that's the worst case scenario, but a definite possibility. One we have to potentially prepare to face.

"We will. We don't have a choice."

I hope Liam is right because I am not about to sacrifice the next few months of my life for nothing. "You three need to get it done. If I do this—and I'm not saying I will—but if I do, I need to know we'll get our home back. I don't want to be the sacrificial lamb, but I also don't want to keep living in a hotel and worrying that Desmond is hunting us down and trying to hurt us."

"He's not just trying to hurt us," Conor states in a low grumble.

I know he's referring to the fire that Con and his wife Emma barely escaped from with their lives. It was awful and I even panicked despite escaping before the hotel we were staying in was consumed by smoke and flames. The whole experience was way too scary and something I never want to have to deal with ever again.

We know Desmond's thugs set that fire. He's hellbent on killing us off—the rest of his family—so he can assume full control of the O'Shea dynasty once and for all. And now it looks like it's up to me to help stop that.

Well, me and Luca Marino.

Gritting my jaw, I repeat my earlier statement. "I'll meet him. But I'm willing to guess he's going to be on the exact same page as me. Why in the world would he want to marry a complete stranger?"

"To save his family," Liam says quietly in his low, raspy voice.

Damn you, Liam. Now he's guilt-tripping me.

"Don't guilt-trip her," Rafferty snaps, sticking up for me. We're closest in age, only four years apart, and I've always been closer to Raff than the twins who are both thirty. Yet even though I'm twenty-four, my life experience is dismal and doesn't consist of much more than a college diploma and living with my mother. God, I'm pathetic.

"I'm not!" Liam barks. "I'm just keeping things real. If we don't find a way to defeat Desmond then we're all fucked."

"Flannigan, too," Conor adds. "That rat bastard is the one who caused this whole mess."

Sean Flannigan used to be my father's lawyer and closest confidant who helped oversee the family business for years and years. Since before I was born. After our father died and Liam stepped up, one of the first things he did was fire Sean. The man is a weasel. Completely sneaky and untrustworthy. And, he's the one who ran off to Ireland and informed my uncle about what was happening here in Chicago. Needless to say, he's on all of our shit lists.

When Desmond and Sean showed up, they kicked my mom and I out of the main house where we lived on the family compound. My brothers each have a house there, too. Or, at least, they did. Now we've scattered. My mom and I are staying at various hotels and my brothers are living at their places in the city with their wives.

But it's no way to live. Not permanently, anyway. I barely had time to pack a suitcase before Desmond coldly tossed us out onto the curb. He and Sean claimed they had a legal contract that gives Desmond control over everything. Liam has a new lawyer who is fighting Desmond's claim, but it's been a long, drawn-out process and Sean Flannigan is doing his best to keep things tied up in the court system.

Probably just long enough to give Desmond the time he needs to hunt us all down and eliminate us permanently.

A shiver runs through me. It's never been so clear how dire the situation actually is until right now. Maybe they're all right. Maybe the only way to beat Desmond is to unite our feuding families and work together to defeat our common enemy.

My eyes slide shut as I reluctantly accept my fate. How it ended up falling on me, I have no idea. But it looks like the best way to accomplish our goal and protect the people I love is to marry the enemy.

What's that old saying?

Keep your friends close but your enemies closer.

And I guess that's what we're about to do.

LUCA

My father has officially lost his damn mind. There is really no other explanation to account for the words coming out of his mouth. Because they don't make any sense to me. Not even a little bit.

"I'm sorry, what?" I ask blankly.

Matteo Marino shifts in his office chair and winces slightly. He's still recovering from several gunshot wounds and I can tell it still pains him somewhat. Truthfully, I think he should retire and take it easy. My family has more money than we'll ever be able to spend, and it's not necessary for him to continue working as hard as he does. But I suppose he likes bossing people around and playing the role of don in our Italian family.

"I think you heard me," he says, dark gaze focused intently on me. Like two sharp points of obsidian. "But let me say it again, just in case. I'd like you to consider entering into a marriage of convenience with Finley O'Shea."

"You want me to marry a complete stranger? And our mortal enemy? Why?"

"Don't be dense, Luca." His condescending tone makes me bristle. "What better way to defeat our common enemy than by uniting our families together? We will crush Desmond O'Shea with a powerful, combined assault. And that starts with your marriage to the youngest O'Shea girl."

For twenty-four years, my father has basically ignored me. He was always so focused on his businesses or grooming

Giovanni, my older brother, to take over. Not having a dad who pays you an ounce of attention starts to hurt after a while. But I learned to ignore it and spent much of my time abroad, going to school far away and then traveling around. Always searching. I'm not even sure what exactly I'm looking for, but something brought me back to Chicago and my family brownstone here in the city.

So here I am. Still searching for...something. And now my father has the nerve to ask me for a favor. Hell, this is more than a mere favor. The great Matteo Marino who never looked twice my way is now asking me to marry a complete stranger to help him achieve his goals.

How interesting. And it's also going to be a big fuck no from me.

I study my father closely, noticing how tired he looks. There are also a lot more wrinkles showing up on his face and he's sporting gray hair at his temples. Of course, I expect him to age, but I think the last few months have really taken a toll on him. My father is used to being in power and holding all of the cards. Somehow, Desmond O'Shea managed to return to town and usurp that power from him and everyone else. And he's livid.

Working together, uniting our family with the O'Shea family, makes sense. But why should I care? I've never been privy to any of my father's business dealings and he's never tried to include me or even bothered to ask if I wanted to learn anything. It was always Gio, Gio, Gio.

To be honest, I don't mind all that much because my interests lay elsewhere. I enjoy traveling, spending time roaming around with no responsibilities and...

And what?

Again, I feel that empty ache that's been slowly taking over. Maybe it would be good for me to have something to focus on since I've been struggling lately. I'm only twenty-four so this can't be a midlife crisis. But, at the same time, there's this hole inside of me that's growing and I need to fill it with something. A hobby? A job? A girlfriend? A temporary

marriage to a total stranger? Internally, I scoff. Yeah, right. I'm not that desperate or quick to do my father's bidding.

I can't deny the fact that I like this on some level, though. The tables have flipped. For once, my father is paying attention to me and I have the upper hand. He's turning to me for help and I have a choice—tell him to screw or get married to help him. And, ultimately, to help my family and the O'Shea family.

Yeah, I'm not onboard with it. Not even a little. But my perverse side does enjoy making him sweat. Make him think I'm actually considering this insane idea when I've actually already made up my mind.

"You don't think this is asking too much?" I challenge him.

My father's face screws up. "A good man will sacrifice anything and everything for his family."

My jaw clenches tightly and I ball my hands into fists on top of my thighs. "I guess I'm not a very good man then," I grit out. "Because my answer is a resounding no."

"Luca—"

But I'm already standing up and shaking my head. I refuse to listen to another word of this utter bullshit. "Have Gio marry her. I'm not interested."

"Giovanni is dealing with other things."

I pause halfway to the door and turn slightly. "What other things?"

My father presses his thin lips together. "Ask him yourself. Besides, you and Finley are the same age."

"So what? That doesn't mean I should marry her." I start toward the door again.

"Luca Salvatore Marino," my father barks, and I instantly stop walking again when I hear my middle name being used. Like I'm still a little kid. "I've never asked anything of you, but this is important. The most important thing you may ever do."

"Important to you. Not to me."

"How can you forsake your family? Your mother and sisters?"

“Not my family. Just you.” Before he can say another word, I march out of his office and the more I think about our conversation, the more angry I get. Goddammit that man has a lot of nerve. Who does he think he is? He ignores me my entire life and now he expects a favor. Hell, more than just a favor. He wants me to give up my life and marry the daughter of our family’s biggest enemy.

The whole thing is absurd.

I’m pissed. Fuming, actually, and I know that I need to get out of here. The more I think about it, the more determined I am to get as far away as possible. Even though I’ve only been back home a short while, I decide to leave again. And the sooner, the better. I want nothing to do with Matteo Marino or Finley O’Shea.

I resent my father for several things but mostly because he never paid me an ounce of attention, and I even confronted him about it once. A long time ago. I told him that I felt invisible in his eyes. And do you know what he said? My chest tightens as his icy words flood my head.

“You may as well be invisible, Luca, because you don’t matter when it comes to the business side of things.”

All because I’m the youngest son and Gio is the one who our father put all of his energy into grooming. I love my brother and it’s not his fault Matteo Marino is such a cold-hearted asshole. But I never forgot that and I’ve always hated him for saying such a terrible thing to me.

Needing to clear my head and have a good, stiff drink, I stomp down the street, heading for the nearby corner pub. I’m going to pack my stuff back up and get out of here. Maybe I’ll head back to Europe. Or, maybe I’ll go to some exotic and tropical destination. A place with palm trees and the ocean. I can lay on the beach all day and not give a rat’s ass about what’s happening here in Chicago.

As tempting as that is, though, I do care about my mother, sisters and Gio. My first inclination is to always run away and distance myself from potential problems, from my family, from everything that causes stress or anxiety. I’ve never been

very good at facing my problems head-on. It always just seemed so much easier to run away from the issue and pretend ignorance. I suppose by doing that, I haven't allowed myself to be very open to others.

Maybe that's why I feel like something's been missing lately in my life. I have no idea why I'm even feeling this way. Being carefree and a rolling stone never bothered me before. I preferred it.

I am getting older now, though, and since being home, there is a comfort in being with Rory, Sofia and my nephews. It's fun hanging out with them and spending time with the little ones. I never thought much about being an uncle, but I've come to enjoy it a lot.

Since I probably won't ever have children of my own, hanging out with my nephews is a great way to scratch that itch. Plus, I get the best of both worlds because I can play with them and then they go home afterwards.

Relationships with women have always been fleeting. Extremely temporary. I have no problem getting laid; the issue is they always want more. Something I'm just not capable of giving. Whenever a woman tries to corner me into a relationship, I jet. My biggest joy in life is that feeling of freedom. It's why I'm always traveling and on the move. I don't like the idea of being tied down to a woman who wants babies and a permanency that I always seem to be running away from.

Loose and carefree. It's my motto and I don't plan on changing it anytime soon. Especially not for my father.

When I get to the pub, I push the large wooden door open and amble up to the bar. After I sit down and order a whiskey, my phone buzzes. Pulling it out, I see a text from Gio. Curious, I open it up and he wants to know where I am. Since I haven't spent that much time with my older brother since returning home, I tell him and invite him down to join me.

My brother arrives five minutes later and I think every female eye in the place turns and watches as he walks over and sits down on the stool beside me. Tall, dark and broody, Giovanni

gives off “I don’t give a fuck vibes” and, for whatever reason, that’s catnip to most women.

“Hey, little brother,” he murmurs and lifts a hand, signaling the bartender for another whiskey. “How’d your chat with Dad go?”

The edge of his mouth curls up in a half smile because Gio already knows it went badly. I’m a rebel by nature and my brother knows me too well.

“As if you haven’t already guessed.”

“So no marriage in your near future?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Gio chuckles and I shake my head then down the rest of my drink, enjoying the way it burns my throat and hits my stomach, all liquid heat. For whatever reason, I think about sex and take a quick glance around the room. I may not be as pensive and sulky as my older brother, but I do just fine with the ladies. And even though several are staring my way, I turn my attention back to Gio. None of them interest me.

I’m big when it comes to an immediate spark. Either you feel it or you don’t. And if it’s not there when I make eye contact with a woman, I walk away. A fierce chemistry is important to me because I want that all-consuming passion. People say it fades over time but, since I avoid anything serious, I really wouldn’t know.

“I told him *you* should marry Finley O’Shea,” I say and eye my brother closely, waiting to see his reaction. “But Dad said you’re dealing with other things. What’s that mean?”

Gio tenses slightly then shrugs a shoulder. “Nothing.”

I narrow my eyes, but he doesn’t say anything further, refusing to elaborate. Just continues to sip his drink. “I haven’t seen you in a while, so I don’t know what’s been going on here.” I wait for him to offer me some information, but he clams up. *Hmm. Interesting.* Somehow, I’m not buying it.

“Have you ever seen Finley?” Gio asks, changing the subject.

“Nope.”

“Hmm.”

When he doesn't offer any further comment, I frown. “Why? Have you?”

He slowly nods.

“And?” I press when he doesn't share any details.

My brother looks at me, dark brown eyes glowing. “She's gorgeous.”

His words make my pulse speed up a little. I plant my forearms on the bar and find myself leaning forward a little. “Really?”

“Bright blue eyes...long reddish-gold hair...curves for days...”

I start drumming my fingers on the bartop, trying to picture her. *No, stop it*, I order myself. It doesn't matter what she looks like. This is about helping my father out and that's something I refuse to do.

“Sweet, too. Seems very innocent.”

“I don't like red hair or the inevitable freckles that always come with it,” I say and signal the bartender for another drink. Actually, that's not entirely true, but it's what I need to convince myself of so I stop wondering what Finley O'Shea looks like. Because it doesn't matter.

“Well, if she has any freckles, they're not on her face,” Gio informs me in a low voice.

A shot of heat makes all the blood in my body start coursing south, straight down to my dick, and I start imagining where those secret freckles could be hiding. *Dammit*. Now I'm curious about Finley and wondering what she looks like. Is my stubbornness making me miss out on spending time with a beautiful woman? That seems damn foolish.

As though Gio is reading my mind, he says, “If I were you, I'd at least meet her. What's the harm of spending some time talking to a gorgeous woman?”

I sigh and slowly turn the glass in my hand, watching the amber liquid slosh slightly.

“It’s all temporary, anyway. Just a show. You don’t have to kiss her or sleep with her. If you don’t want to,” he adds sneakily. “Although, if I were you, I may not want separate bedrooms.”

“So why don’t you marry her?” I can’t help but ask.

“Because I can’t be distracted from the business.”

What a cop-out. “So, you’re telling me that if you were in my shoes, you’d seriously marry a complete stranger?”

“The whole thing will be over before it even begins,” he reminds me, not exactly answering my question. “And it’s hardly a sacrifice, Luca.”

“You’re taking Dad’s side?” I ask in disbelief.

“I’m taking our family’s side and, right now, the best thing we can do is unite with the O’Shea’s.”

Suddenly, I’m starting to feel outnumbered and I don’t like it.

“Besides,” Gio continues, “this is about more than just Dad. Desmond kidnapped Conor’s wife, Emma, and what’s to stop him from targeting our women next? He needs to be handled or everyone we love remains in danger, especially Rory, Sofia and their babies.”

Dammit. I know he’s right and now I feel like a selfish ass for putting my wants and needs above theirs. Very reluctantly, I say, “Maybe I could just meet her. But I’m not making any promises.”

Gio nods. “That’s all anybody is asking.”

“And I’m doing this for our sisters and nephews. Not our father.” I want to make that perfectly clear because as far as I’m concerned, Matteo Marino can disappear and I wouldn’t blink or give it a second thought.

He ignored me for so long and the last thing I want to do is make his life easier. Fuck that.

“I’ll tell Dad to set up a meeting,” Gio says and finishes his drink. “No matter what you ultimately decide, I don’t think you’ll be disappointed when you see her.”

Easy for him to say. There’s no one pressuring him to get married to a woman he’s never met. With a long-suffering sigh, I decide it can’t hurt. After all, it’s just a meeting, right?

FINLEY

The next day arrives far too fast and I'm not sure if I've ever been this nervous before in my entire life. I wipe my sweaty palms down the front of my jeans and try to listen to what Rory and Sofia are telling me about their youngest brother as we drive over to the Marino brownstone together.

But I'm not going to lie—I'm having trouble focusing on anything but the nervous flutter in my stomach. And I know it's silly to be feeling so anxious. It's not like we're actually going to get married. The whole thing is silly and probably nothing more than a waste of my time. His time, too. Because I'm willing to bet anything that we're both going to be on the exact same page.

The only reason I'm doing this is to appease my brothers. Of course, I can't help but be a little curious, too. Especially after Sofia describes what Luca looks like. I've always been a sucker for tall, dark and handsome, and it sounds like Luca is sporting all three in abundance.

When Rory pulls the car up to the curb and I get my first close look at the Marino family home, my stomach plummets. Even though Rory and Sofia are with me and have my back, I get the feeling that I'm about to step inside the lion's den.

Pulling in a deep breath, I slide out of the car and wipe my hands down my jeans again. I didn't want to get dressed up or anything. It seemed a little too desperate. Like I would be trying too hard to impress Luca, and I certainly don't want to

give that impression. But now I'm wondering if I'm too casual.

"You're going to be fine," Sofia murmurs and gives my shoulder a quick squeeze.

"Hell, we're nervous, too," Rory admits. "We haven't been back home since our father cut ties with us."

Together, we head up the steps and I breathe a soft sigh of relief when Anna Marino throws the large, beveled-glass paned door open. "Come in!" she says with a big smile and quickly hugs both of her daughters. "It's been so long since you've been home."

I follow them into what appears to be the main living room area and Anna starts gushing about her grandsons, asking how they are and telling the girls she plans to visit them soon. Even though Matteo has wanted nothing to do with Rory and Sofia since they married my brothers, Anna visits them any time she can. With a smile, Anna turns her attention to me.

"How are you doing, Finley?" she asks.

I force a smile and nod. "I'm good. How're you?"

"Very well now that my girls are here again and my youngest has returned."

"It's so strange to be back," Rory says softly, looking around. Beside her, Sofia nods.

"Matteo and Luca should be down soon," Anna states. "I already called up and told them you were here."

Once again, my stomach flutters. *Why am I so nervous?* I wonder. A shaky breath escapes my lungs. I think it's because I feel like I'm under a microscope or something. Or, like an animal on display at the zoo, and everyone is looking at me and judging me in some capacity.

A moment later, Matteo walks into the room with a very tall, dark-haired man and my heart kicks up a notch. The other man is rather scowly with hooded, dark eyes and not what I imagined Luca to be like, for whatever reason. Plus, he looks older than twenty-four, so I'm a little thrown.

The girls immediately hug him.

“Oh, my God, Gio! It’s so good to see you!” Rory exclaims.

“Still as handsome as ever,” Sofia adds teasingly.

Ahh, okay. It’s Giovanni, the eldest Marino son. *Whew.* I can’t help but be a little relieved he isn’t Luca. Gio has a cool, broody presence and that scowl he’s perfected puts me a little on edge. I would have no idea how to talk to him. He’s far too intimidating.

After the sisters warmly greet their older brother, they say hello to their father in a much more reserved, cool way. The tension in the air is obvious, but Matteo offers them both a smile and welcomes them home. Almost as if nothing has happened which I find rather strange. Because let’s face it—a lot has gone down between our families over the last couple of years. Then, Matteo turns to me, gaze inspecting me from head to toe, as though he’s determining whether or not I’m good enough for his youngest son.

“You must be Finley,” Gio says, a smirk curving his lips and I look over. “I’m Gio.” When he offers his large hand, I politely reach out and shake it. I’m sure he could crush it if he wanted to, but he doesn’t squeeze it too hard. However, he does have a firm handshake and a hard-to-read expression on his face. Almost like he’s amused. But it’s hard to tell and his eyes are like twin black pools. Very deep and dark. And, no doubt, full of mysteries.

Yeah, Giovanni Marino is extremely hard to read and makes me nervous.

I clear my throat. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” he responds, finally releasing my hand.

When I hear another throat clear, a much deeper one, I glance over and see another man standing at the edge of the living room in the doorway. And he’s staring at me with an intensity that rivals Gio’s.

Our gazes latch for a long moment and no one says anything. Truthfully, one look at Luca Marino and I forget anyone else is even in the room. Everything else seems to fall away and it’s

as though time stands still as I'm pulled deep into his dark molasses stare. Like Gio, he isn't easy to read, but I think I see interest flare brightly and my heart thunders when he walks over.

"I'm Luca," he says, introducing himself, eyes holding mine. "You must be Finley."

I can't help but notice the warning look Luca slants in his older brother's direction. It clearly says back off and Gio grins mischievously before stepping back.

"Hi," I murmur, suddenly unable to find my voice. *Damn.* I was expecting him to be decent-looking, but not this attractive. Not so ridiculously handsome that I bite down on my lower lip and my attention dips to his mouth. It's a very kissable-looking set of lips he's sporting and I force my gaze back up before I make a complete fool of myself.

Because I'm one step away from drooling.

"Why don't we leave them alone," Anna suggests, backing out of the room.

"Yes," Rory agrees. "Let them get to know each other a little bit."

"I need a hug first," Sofia exclaims and throws herself into Luca's arms.

"I missed you, Sofe," Luca murmurs in a low voice that makes my toes curl. It's ridiculous, but a part of me is jealous at the way his eyes light up when he's embracing his sister. Then he looks over her head and extends his arm to Rory. "C'mere."

Rory joins their hug and the three of them all start talking at once. The girls told me they haven't seen Luca in two years, so I know they're excited. And who could blame them? I know I'd miss him, too. Although in a much different way than a sibling would.

Luca is lighting a fire inside me and right now it's simmering at a very hot temperature. And there's no denying the possibility it could build into a scorching inferno if I let it. Physically, he's everything I've always found attractive in a man. The question is does he have an equally appealing

personality? There are a lot of good-looking assholes out there and it's probably one of the reasons I've never been able to find anyone.

Of course, I have also lived a very sheltered life. My experience in the dating world is practically non-existent. But I do know what I like and what catches my interest. And Luca Marino seems to be exhibiting it all.

Hmm. We shall see. I'm not ready to jump into marriage with a total stranger quite yet. But I'd be lying if I said I'm still completely against it. This man has me considering things now. A whole lot of things...

The issue is I'm a dreamer. I live for beautiful, romantic stories with happy endings. If there's not a happily-ever-after then I don't want to hear about it. I truly believe that love conquers all and there's nothing better in this world than finding your soulmate.

Falling in love must be the greatest gift anyone could ever receive.

The only catch is it has to be mutual. Because unrequited love must be pure hell. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

After Luca and his sisters promise to catch up later, everyone sort of backs out of the room, leaving us alone and giving us some privacy to talk. He gestures to the couch. "Why don't we sit?"

"Sure." I follow him over to the navy blue sofa and lower myself down, telling myself to relax. But, of course, I immediately start fidgeting. The whole situation is beyond awkward and my knee begins to bounce as my gaze looks everywhere but at Luca.

"Finley?"

My heart thunders at the way he says my name. So low and sexy.

"Yeah?" I finally look over, meeting his warm brown eyes. Eyes I could fall into and get lost in.

"Breathe."

I swallow hard, frustrated with myself for showing my nerves. Am I that easy to read? But I do as he says and pull in a deep breath, allowing my lungs to expand and hoping my nerves will subside.

“I know this is a completely insane situation,” he continues smoothly. “So thank you for taking time out of your day to cross enemy lines and meet me.”

There’s a slight twinkle in his eyes and I feel myself relax a bit. “It is a little nerve wracking,” I admit.

He tilts his head, gaze searching mine. For what, I have no idea. Am I what he expected? Is he disappointed? I really have no clue because he’s so flipping hard to read.

“Don’t worry. I don’t bite,” he jokes.

Even though his mouth edges up in a slight smirk, his dark eyes seem to be saying something else. Like I’ll bite if you want me to, and that sends a little shiver of electricity down my spine.

“Good to know,” I respond.

“So tell me something about yourself,” he says.

“What do you want to know?” I ask. “I lead a pretty boring life.”

“And why is that?”

When he leans forward, I get my first whiff of him. I’m not sure if it’s his soap or a light cologne, but he smells like warm amber and my nostrils try to suck in more of his scent. Because damn he smells delicious.

“I’m living at a hotel with my mom right now. Ever since we, ah, got run out by Desmond.” A muscle flexes in his jaw and I continue, “So I spend most of my time hanging with her. But I did go away for school.”

“Where did you go?”

“Boarding schools and then University over in Europe.”

“Me, too. Did you like Europe?”

I shrug. “It was fine. Sometimes it felt really far away.”

“And you wanted to be closer to home?”

I nod. “I missed my family. Especially if I wasn’t able to come back for the holidays.”

He studies me for a moment too long then sits back and crosses an ankle over his opposite knee. “I was glad to get away. Sometimes Europe didn’t feel far enough,” he adds, voice dropping.

That surprises me. “You don’t get along with your family?”

“For the most part, I do. But sometimes...” His voice trails off. “My father and I don’t always see eye to eye. Anyway, what do you think about all this?”

How in the world do I answer that question? I wonder. At least without insulting him.

“And I won’t be insulted,” he adds as if reading my mind.

We both chuckle and I find myself relaxing. “It’s a little strange,” I admit. “When my brothers first brought up the idea of a truce and uniting our families, it all sounded like a great idea. But then somehow everything fell onto my—I mean *our*—shoulders.”

“Right? How nice of them to put all the pressure on us.” He gives me a devastating smile and leans closer. My heart knocks against my rib cage. “So, Finley O’Shea, how do you feel about the situation now?”

My mouth goes dry. He’s being quite the charmer and the flirty tone in his voice is making my stomach somersault. “I don’t know, Luca Marino,” I say, playing along. “There’s a tiny possibility that I may be warming up to you. Just a smidge.”

“A smidge, huh?” He bursts out laughing and the sound is rich and deep. And it covers me like a thick maple syrup that’s sweet and tempting. He sits up again, voice dropping. “I find you very interesting. And more than just a smidge lovely.”

Heat warms my cheeks and a pleasant sensation washes over me at his unexpected compliment. “Thank you,” I murmur,

trying hard not to look as embarrassed as I feel. As crazy as it sounds, I find myself actually considering going through with this. With a fake marriage to him.

And it's utterly insane.

I didn't expect him to be so handsome and charming. He's making me imagine a potential future. I know the marriage wouldn't be real, just a temporary situation, but the romantic dreamer in me is starting to fantasize and picture this whole thing turning into a real love story.

There's an undeniable chemistry happening between us. I feel it every time his gaze slides over me, so warm and full of interest. Maybe Luca might be on the same page. Could it be possible that he's wondering if we should go through with this, too? Oh, my God.

"But that doesn't mean I'm about to marry a stranger," he adds and my heart sinks like a stone in a pond, reality crashing over me.

"Of course not," I say, trying to play it off as though I'm on the exact same page. Jesus. I suddenly feel like an absolute fool. While I'm sitting here with a dreamy, probably foolish expression on my face, he's clearly not interested.

"My father's plan is absurd and I'd never do it, of course."

"Of course," I say as wave after wave of humiliation pummels me. Of course, I quickly agree so I don't look like an idiot, but I'm also starting to feel a little insulted. Despite his earlier compliment, am I that unattractive and dull that he can't even fake it with me for a few months?

Annoyance flares within me and I realize I was about to take a leap of faith with this man and he isn't prepared to do the same with me. Instantly, I feel my walls rising and I close off, needing to protect myself.

Time to end this farce before I say or do something stupid.

"Well, I should get going." I stand up without waiting for him to respond. At this point, there's no point in hanging out and getting to know each other better. Luca made his stance clear and there will be no marriage.

I know I should be relieved, but I'm actually feeling more than a little mortified and a lot embarrassed. I feel rejected and that's a terrible thing.

Luca stands up, too, but I don't wait for him. Just sashay straight for the exit and pray I don't look as foolish as I feel.

"Finley—"

"Nice meeting you," I interrupt, barely glancing over my shoulder. Then I walk out without another word. I mean, what's the point? He probably has a girlfriend, anyway. How could he not? He's absolutely gorgeous.

With a soft sigh, I realize that the other possibility is he just didn't like me. And that sucks.

LUCA

As Finley walks out of the room, my hungry gaze slides over her long, dark red hair and down to appreciate her curvy backside. Those jeans fit her ass like a second skin and my mouth begins to water.

To be honest, I'm a little shocked by the immediate response I had to her. That doesn't usually happen to me. I can't deny that my body would love to get to know her better, definitely more intimately, but my mind refuses to cooperate. I'm too pissed at my father.

And not even a pair of gorgeous blue eyes and a tempting rack is going to make me change my mind. Maybe I'm far too stubborn for my own good, but Finley O'Shea is trouble. I can feel it in my bones. And I don't mean trouble in the usual way. I mean trouble as in she could potentially have the power to reel me in and make me want things I've never even considered before. The power to upend my entire life and I don't like that. Not one little bit.

Giving my head a good, hard shake, I stand up and stretch. So much for that, I think, and mentally brush my hands of the whole affair. I'm barely alone for a moment though before my entire family comes parading into the room. Even Rory and Sofia come in and I find myself looking over their shoulder for Finley. But she's not with them.

And why would she be? I told her there would be no marriage. I'd assumed she would be onboard, but she almost looked... hurt.

“What did you do?” Rory demands, hands on her hips.

I cock a brow. “What do you mean?”

“Finley didn’t look happy,” Sofia adds, glaring daggers at me.

I give a shrug. “I didn’t do anything. We both agreed that the situation was crazy and we weren’t going through with it.”
Didn’t we?

“You didn’t find her attractive?” Gio asks, his deep voice laced in disbelief.

“Of course, I did. But that’s not here or there.” My attention turns to my father and his dark eyes narrow into slits. If I look close enough, I think I can see steam rising off him. *Good. Mission accomplished.*

“Luca, dear,” my mother begins. “No one is going to make you do anything you don’t want to do. Don’t look so defensive.”

Her words make me bristle. “I’m not,” I say between gritted teeth even though I know I am.

“I don’t understand why you’d be a jerk to her,” Rory says. “Finley is the sweetest person you’ll ever meet.”

“Really, Luca?” Sofia adds, taking my sister’s side. “She looked like she was going to cry.”

I blink in surprise. She did? I feel like a dick because the last thing I meant to do was hurt her feelings.

“Let’s talk,” my father grates out. “In my office,” he adds under his breath and storms out.

I want to yell at him that I have things to do and that he isn’t going to change my mind. That the whole reason I said no is because of him. But he’s already gone and I huff out an annoyed breath.

“Go talk to your father, honey,” my mom encourages me.

“And you might want to reconsider,” Gio states.

My older brother looks disappointed and I’m not sure why. Is he upset because now he might have to do something to unite

our families? The thought of him marrying Finley makes my gut curdle and my blood boil. *Hell*. Did I just screw up?

Annoyed with all of them, I turn and stomp out. Yeah, okay, I liked Finley. But, for fuck's sake, that doesn't mean I'm going to marry her. Why am I the only one thinking clearly around here? Frustration pours through me as I head down to the corner office where my father normally resides like a king.

I step inside and move to the front of his desk. He's already sitting down in his big, leather chair, fingers steepled and studying me intently. I tilt my chin up, refusing to be cowed by him or to bow down before him in any way.

"What didn't you like about her?" he asks.

Crossing my arms, I send him a defiant look. "I liked everything about her." It's the truth. Besides, Finley isn't the problem here and I want him to know that.

"Then what the hell, Luca? Why're you pouting and playing games? Our family's future is hanging on by a thread."

"I don't owe you an explanation and—"

"Like hell you don't!" he snaps.

I grit my jaw as a bright anger flares to life. "I make my own decisions! You never included me in anything and now you just expect me to do your bidding. Well, screw that."

"Ah, so that's what this is about. You're having a tantrum because I didn't pay enough attention to you? Very adult of you, Luca."

My hands fist at my sides. No one knows how to get under my skin better than my father. *Bastard*. "You're not going to guilt-trip me into marrying her. I don't give a shit about your stupid empire. You shut me out years ago and—"

"Cry me a fucking river." His dark eyes blaze with anger and I know his control is on the verge of snapping.

Good. I don't give a shit and I'm glad he's actually showing some emotion toward me for once in his goddamn life. But my father is smart and reels it back in quickly, cooling his jets. He

knows he can't convince me to do anything this way. I'll fight him until my last breath.

His gaze cools and then he sits back in his chair. "Maybe I haven't been the best father to you, Luca," he concedes.

I snort. *No shit*. That's the understatement of the year. Maybe of the decade.

"But it's because I've spent all of my time building this business so I could take care of my family. Make sure you had, and still continue to have, the best of everything."

I don't buy it and my guard goes up. He's up to something. "You always had time for Gio," I remind him, maybe a little petulantly. But I don't care because it's the damn truth. It hurts to know I was never a priority. Sometimes, I wonder if I was even an afterthought.

Most likely, I was a mistake. As the youngest, that thought has crossed my mind more than once.

"You know I have to prepare Gio to take over. Don't act like an ungrateful, spoiled brat."

Once again, my temper and defiance flare to life. "And don't expect me to save your business. Because guess what? I don't need you to take care of me and, I promise you, I'll be in the front row, enjoying my popcorn as I watch it all burn down to the ground."

Dramatic? Maybe a little. But it's the damn truth.

"You're an ungrateful shit," he snarls.

It's nice to know I can get under his skin just as easily as he can get under mine. "Good luck saving your empire, *Dad*. Because I am not marrying Finley O'Shea."

My father heaves out a sigh. "Then Desmond is going to crush us all. It's over."

"Not my problem." I'm done. Turning on my heel, I head for the door.

"You're officially cut off!" he barks.

I stop in my tracks then turn and look back over my shoulder. “Good. Because I want nothing to do with you.”

His face turns a mottled shade of reddish-purple and if I know anything about my father, it’s that he hates feeling out of control. But then he surprises me when he suddenly slouches down in his chair and clutches his heart. *Shit*. I sure hope he’s not having a heart attack.

When I take a step toward him, he lifts a hand. “You’re going to be the death of me, Luca.”

A part of me wants to ask if he’s okay. Instead, I stand there, full of hesitation. Feeling like a huge asshole.

“Are you okay?” I finally force out.

“No, Luca, I am not okay. I was shot three times and nearly died. And now I’m trying to save our crumbling empire before Desmond snatches it all away. And you refuse to help me. So, things aren’t looking very good.”

Once again, I get the feeling he’s trying to guilt-trip me. And I don’t appreciate it. “You’ll figure it out. You always do.”

But he shakes his head. “Not this time. At least not without your help.”

For a long moment, I don’t say anything. He’s cornering me and I need to get out of here. I immediately turn and walk out. Even though I’m more stubborn than a mule, my father is extremely persuasive. And I refuse to let myself cave in to him.

No one is around and I make my way through the brownstone and to the large side porch. Dropping down, I rake my fingers through my hair and scowl. But then an image of Finley flickers through my mind and my frown turns into a small, slight smile. Somehow, she has the power to make me smile even when I’m angrier than a hornet. I have no idea how, but it intrigues me.

She intrigues me. Even more than maybe I’d like to admit.

The idea of marrying Finley and spending the next few months with her isn’t the issue. It’s giving in to my father that’s

leaving a bad taste in my mouth. Truthfully, I can't stop thinking about Finley and I'm beginning to wonder what it would be like to kiss her. To breathe her floral scent in more deeply and to touch her. Is her skin as soft as it looks? Would she taste as sweet as she seems?

These are very dangerous thoughts to be having. I've never met a woman like Finley and she's tempting me to give in despite my reservations. I didn't know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't the vivacious red-headed beauty. The truth is, my attraction to her shook me.

I know I need to ignore it, though, and tamp it down because giving in to my father isn't an option. He spent most of his life ignoring me and that always hurt. Deeply. I've yearned for his approval, of course.

I'm not a very good actor and Finley is a stranger. Although faking an attraction to her probably wouldn't be that hard. No doubt about—she's lovely. But I could tell she got pissed when I shut the idea of a wedding down fast. *Oh, well.* It's best if we stay away from each other.

Unless...

Out of nowhere, an idea hits me hard. Like a hand upside my stubborn head. *Holy hell.* I could get revenge on my father by pretending to go along with his plan, then out him and the O'Shea family at the wedding. Announce to everyone that the entire thing is fake and leave Finley standing there alone on the altar. It would humiliate them all.

It's fucking brilliant.

Of course, except for the part of hurting Finley. But all wars have their casualties, right? It would be unavoidable. And I'm bitter enough to do it. I've never existed in my father's world and now I have the power to destroy it.

My mind races, trying to figure out the details. First off, I have to get back in Finley's good graces. Then I can tell my father that I've changed my mind and I'm onboard. An idea starts swirling around, beginning to form, and I'm going to need some help.

I have a friend named Ewan who can be a bit of an asshole. He'll be perfect to help me pull off this little stunt. We're not that close, but he owes me a favor for helping him move last year. I quickly find his number in my contacts and tap his name. It rings a few times and then he picks up.

"Luca! How are you?" he says in greeting.

"Good. I need a favor," I tell him, cutting straight to the chase.

"Sure, what's up?"

I begin to tell him about the situation and what exactly I'd need him to do. I probably tell him way more than I should, but I need to talk to somebody. To share my frustrations. He sides with me and promises to help.

"You really have the balls to leave her standing up there at the altar?" he asks, voice laced in doubt.

"It's the perfect way to give my father the middle finger," I answer. "Then I'm outta here."

"Back to Europe?"

"Probably. Or wherever. Just as long as I get out of Chicago."

"You're an evil genius, Marino. I love it. Count me the fuck in."

My mouth lifts in a smirk. It is a little evil, but it'll be worth it. And I can't wait to see the look on my father's face when I tell him to go screw and walk out of that church in front of all his friends and business associates. I feel bad that Finley is going to get caught up in the aftermath, but she'll survive. And I'll have my ultimate revenge.

Sorry, Finley.

FINLEY

After Luca's rejection, I go back to the hotel and disappear into my room. I think my mom is relieved that the fake marriage isn't going to happen. A part of me is, too. But, at the same time, I can't stop thinking about Luca and why he didn't want me.

I shouldn't be this upset. I dodged a bullet, right?

Dropping down on my bed, I lay on my back and stare up at the ceiling feeling like a complete loser. I shouldn't let the situation get to me, but I'm sensitive and how can I not take it personally? If he'd been attracted to me, I bet he would've gone through with it.

I've been spurned by a man who is a complete stranger. So pathetic. What's wrong with me? Why haven't I ever had a boyfriend? The doubts are creeping in full-force and suddenly I'm having a pity party for myself.

If I hadn't led such a sheltered life things might be different. Maybe Luca wants someone more experienced and worldly. And that definitely isn't me.

Bolting upright, I realize that it could be me. I just need to switch things up. Besides, how am I ever going to meet anyone if I just hang out with my mom all day? As much as I love her, maybe it's time I expand my horizons and become the person I never thought I was capable of being—a confident, sophisticated and experienced woman.

My mind is buzzing and I slide off the edge of the bed and decide to do something about my lack of a love life. I don't

need Luca Marino to fill that hole. Any other man will do, thank you very much.

It's just up to me to get out there and find him. And, suddenly, that's what I'm determined to do.

As a plan begins to take shape in my head, I wander over to my closet and throw the door open. After flipping through the small wardrobe I was able to pack before Desmond coldly tossed us onto the curb, I settle on a cute shirt that reveals a shoulder and a pair of slim-fitted black pants. It's sexy in a classy way and that's what I want to project because I don't want anyone getting the wrong impression. My goal is to meet a nice guy, not find a stranger to hook up with tonight.

The idea of hooking up with a particular dark-haired, molasses-eyed man has my heart thumping harder. Well, forget it. Luca Marino missed the boat and I'm moving on to other eligible bachelors. Greener pastures, here I come.

After spending some time touching up my makeup and fluffing my long, reddish brown waves, I head into the main area of the suite and see my mom sitting with Emma's dad, Harrison Shepherd. They're watching television and laughing at some shared joke. The moment they met, it's like they both became alive again. We lost my father after he was gunned down and I know my mom's been lonely. Emma, Connor's wife, lost her mother ten years ago and her father was never the same, lost in his grief. But ever since he met my mom, they seem to be so much happier.

If I was having doubts about going out before, they immediately disappear. Because if my mom has a boyfriend—even though they aren't admitting anything—then I need to get my butt in gear and do the same. It's like everyone has somebody but me and it's starting to bum me out.

"I'm meeting a friend," I say and grab my wristlet off the side table. My mom turns and arches a concerned brow.

"Who?" She frowns. "You know we're supposed to be staying inside as much as possible."

“I’m tired of being cooped up in here, Mom. I need to go out and feel like I’m in the land of the living again.”

She hesitates then nods slowly. “Promise you’ll be careful and won’t stay out late.”

“I promise.” I walk over and give her a quick kiss. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

After a quick goodbye, I take the elevator down to the lobby and walk out the front door. It’s fall and a cool, crisp breeze lifts my hair, swirling it around my face. I have such an unusual shade of red hair. It’s dark and threaded with copper. Depending on how the light hits it, sometimes it looks more red, other times more gold. Guess it’s a result of my Irish roots. But, the women in our family are the only ones who seemed to have gotten the gene for red hair. My brothers have dark, nearly black hair. We all have the same bright blue eyes, though, with Rafferty’s being the lightest and bordering on ice blue.

I know exactly where I’m going and I walk down the sidewalk, heading toward a small pub that I’ve frequented before. The drinks are good and not overpriced, and they serve some yummy bar bites. So even if I don’t end up meeting anyone, I’ll at least have some fried deliciousness to soothe myself after Luca’s rejection. It made me lose my appetite earlier, so now I’m starving.

When I reach the pub, I pull the door open and walk inside. My nerves kick up as I move over to the bar and hop up on a stool. Butterflies swirl through my stomach and suddenly I’m not as hungry as I thought I was. I don’t normally venture out on my own, but I’m proud of myself for taking a chance and being brave.

After ordering a glass of white wine, I surreptitiously glance around the room, checking out the other patrons. I spot a couple of cute guys, but they’re with women. Stifling a sigh, I turn back around, reach for my glass of wine and take a sip. It’s crisp and tart, reminding me of apples which is fitting since it’s fall right now.

In the back of my head is the awful thought that I'm never going to meet anyone special. That I'm going to die a virgin. That's thoroughly depressing and I slowly turn the glass around in a circle on the bartop, focusing on the water ring beneath it.

My mood plummets and I slowly sip my drink, wondering if it's too late to run away and join a convent. I went to a couple of schools over in Europe run by nuns and becoming one is a thought that lasts half a second. It might be an escape from my current problems, but not a life choice I could happily live with. I'm far too curious about sex and not ready to give it up before I've ever indulged myself between the sheets.

I'm reaching the end of my first drink and quickly realizing this is a bust. As I contemplate leaving, someone sits in the empty stool beside me.

"Hi," a voice says, and I look over to see a guy smiling at me. "Can I buy you another drink?"

I hesitate, not sure if I should go or stay. He's cute, I suppose, but not my normal type. A little stocky, he has thick arms and light brown hair. But his blue-gray eyes draw me in because they seem to hold a twinkle.

"Sure," I say slowly.

He orders another round for me and a beer for himself. Then he turns and gives me a roguish grin. If I didn't know better, I'd say he's up to something. For whatever reason, he's giving off a mischievous air. Like he knows something that I don't, and that puts me on edge a little.

"I'm Ewan."

"I'm—"

"Stunning," he interrupts, gaze sliding down my figure.

First of all, ew. And, second, I don't really appreciate the way he cuts me off while I'm speaking. Forcing a smile, I finish introducing myself and say, "Finley."

"It's so nice to meet you, Finley. The moment I walked in, I noticed you. Your hair, anyway."

Is that supposed to be a compliment? I wonder. It's not very clear. "Um, thank you?" It's more of a question and he grins broadly.

"It's kind of hard to miss, right? All bright red like a fire engine."

I shift in my seat, wondering how fast I can suck this drink down and get out of here when he immediately tones it down and seems to backtrack.

"What I'm trying to say is it's pretty. Sorry, sometimes I get nervous around good-looking women and I say stupid stuff."

Well, that's kind of sweet. Suddenly, I feel bad for judging him too harshly and quickly. "It's okay," I tell him, trying to play it off like it's not a big deal. He relaxes and starts asking me all sorts of questions about myself. It's nice that a man is showing interest in me, especially after what happened with Luca. At the same time, the more time I spend with Ewan, the more I realize how much I wish it were Luca sitting here with me.

Damn. What is wrong with me?

Something happened this morning with Luca that's never happened to me before. He made me sit up and take notice. He made me feel things I've never felt and we only spoke for what? Not even an hour? How in the world did he manage to snag my attention so thoroughly? How did he get me thinking crazy things like marrying him?

I'm going to blame it on the insane chemistry between us. The wild, hot, out of control lust that I've never felt before in my life. And that I'm certainly not feeling right now with Ewan. I know I could try a little harder, and maybe I would if I'd never met Luca. But that would be forcing it and after the crazy way my ovaries were dancing this morning, now they're barely twitching.

The difference is night and day. And it's a little disheartening. Does this mean every guy I meet from this point forward, I'm going to be comparing him to Luca? Ugh. That's not good. Because Luca raised the bar far too high for other mere mortal men to reach.

Yeah, I'm going to spend the rest of my life alone. No doubt about it.

While Ewan talks about his job—something about stocks and bonds—I find my mind wandering back to this morning and remembering the way Luca made my entire body warm up. How certain particular regions began to tingle like they never had before.

The memory of tempting brown eyes, so deep and sexy, hit me and I cross my legs, nodding absently as Ewan rambles on about work. Without a doubt, I know that kissing Luca would be the highlight of my life. So far, anyway. The idea of taking it a step further with him...feeling his hands on me...touching and caressing me...makes me squeeze my thighs together tighter.

What would it be like to sleep with him? To feel him moving deep inside me? Would he be a considerate lover—generous and attentive? Or would he be hard, fast and demanding? I have a feeling he'd do it all and send me spinning into the stratosphere.

I've only ever had an orgasm by my own hand and it was okay. Getting myself off isn't something I do a lot, especially now that I'm living in such close proximity with my mother. But Luca is stirring up an urge inside of me that I've kept tamped down for far too long. I think part of the problem is no one has made me want to rip their clothes off before.

But Luca Marino has me entertaining all sorts of wicked thoughts. And the truth is I'm damn curious to see what he looks like in far less clothing. This morning, he was wearing a Henley, jeans and boots and from what I could tell, he's got a good body. There was no missing his muscled arms or the way the denim hugged his thighs when he sat down beside me.

God. I swallow down the rest of my wine, hoping it'll cool me off, and shift in my seat. My freaking panties are damp. I'm lusting over a man who doesn't want me and it sucks big-time.

“Would you like another?” Ewan asks, nodding to my empty glass.

I want Luca, I think.

“Oh, no, thank you. Two is plenty for me.” The truth is I don’t want to stay here any longer and lead Ewan on. He’s not the man for me and it wouldn’t be fair to make him think I’m interested. Pushing off the stool, I say, “I should get going.”

He reaches out and wraps his fingers around my upper arm. “I think you should stay. Have another drink on me. What’s it going to hurt?”

“I have to get up early,” I lie, tugging out of his too-tight grasp.

“C’mon, Finley, live a little.”

My eyes narrow. Who does he think he is? He doesn’t know me at all. “Thanks for the drinks,” I mutter, trying to remain polite. I turn and make a beeline for the exit. Shoving through the door, I’m about to breathe a sigh of relief when I realize he’s right on my heels, following me outside.

Seriously? What’s wrong with this guy? Clearly, he doesn’t like being told no.

I’m about to hurry away, but then decide it might be safer to stay right where I am. Just in case this turns ugly and I need to make sure people are around me. The last thing I want is for him to drag me down a dark alley or something equally as scary.

Crossing my arms, I turn back around to find him already in my face.

“Look, Finley, I don’t usually go out of my way to buy a woman a drink, much less two. So it’s pretty shitty of you to ditch out when all I want to do is get to know you better.”

“Excuse me?” I can’t believe the nerve of this guy. Clearly, I’m not interested. Why is he having trouble understanding that?

“Let’s face it. You owe me. You could’ve at least stayed and had another drink.”

An anger like I’ve never experienced before sparks to life, flowing through my veins like burning hot magma. “I owe

you?” I echo in disbelief.

“I pegged you as a cool chick. Apparently, I was wrong. You think you’re too good for me and I have no idea why. Hell, I was doing you a favor.”

“A favor?” All I can do is repeat his words and I’m unable to get anything else out because I’m so taken aback by how rude he’s suddenly turned.

I can’t seem to wrap my head around his insults. More than anything, I’m pissed off because I don’t even like this guy. I was only trying to be nice.

What a jerk.

I do my best to treat others kindly but when they push me beyond a reasonable limit, the fiery redhead in me comes out in all her glorious rage. Stepping forward, hands going to my hips, I snap, “You are the rudest jerk I’ve ever had the misfortune of meeting.”

His mouth edges up, not deterred in the least. In fact, he seems more interested in me than before when the spitfire in me comes out. Leaning closer, he grabs my arm. “Is that so?”

Before I can answer, he hauls me up against him and my eyes go wide in shock.

“I like a woman with some sass. You like it spicy, sweetheart? Hard and rough? Because I can give you that.”

“Leave me alone!” I try to jerk away, but he’s holding me in an iron grip and the first wave of panic flits through me.

The next thing I know, Ewan’s face dips and just before he can kiss me, I squeal and twist, trying to break free. My feet get tangled up in his and I fall, my knees scraping the cement. At the same time, Ewan is yanked away, hauled right off his feet, and dragged backwards. To my absolute shock, I see Luca standing there, face darker than a thundercloud.

He pulls Ewan further away from me and tosses him. Hard. Ewan spins, arms flapping, and drops to the sidewalk like a sack of potatoes. In a low voice, Luca growls, “She belongs to me.”

Ewan glares at Luca then at me. He seems to be on the verge of saying something more, but then wisely changes his mind and slinks away when we both notice Luca's hands curling into fists. Ready to fight.

Breathing hard, heart racing, I look up at Luca and his dark gaze meets mine. "I belong to you?" I ask.

LUCA

I nstead of answering her question, I reach out and help Finley up off the cold ground. “Are you okay?” I ask. My gaze moves over her body, searching for hurts, and pauses on her knees where I see her jeans are ripped and her knee is visible.

“I’m okay,” she murmurs, dusting her backside off.

Looking over my shoulder for Ewan, I’m glad to see he disappeared because I’m on the verge of kicking his ass. I know we had a deal, but I didn’t expect for him to rough her up or manhandle her like this. Me “saving” Finley was the plan, of course, but that asshole took things a step too far and now I’m grinding my jaw furiously.

I never wanted her to get hurt.

Finley looks up at me with the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen—the exact shade of the Caribbean Sea—and guilt washes through me. I feel bad for tricking her, but I don’t think she would’ve been very happy to see me otherwise. If I hadn’t come racing to her rescue like some kind of Knight in Shining Armor.

Little does she know, my armor is tarnished and I’ve never rescued anyone before in my life.

The entire situation wasn’t completely fake, though, because right now I’m having some very real feelings. I’m pissed off at Ewan and, despite not wanting to marry Finley, she’s bringing out a protector side that I never knew I had. I try to convince

myself that I would've felt the same way about any woman, but that's not entirely true.

Something about Finley draws me to her and that's unusual for me. Plus, seeing her with another man, even though I set the whole thing up, makes me extremely jealous. Hell. I rake a hand through my hair and give her a small, lopsided grin. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks."

"Though you shouldn't be out by yourself at night," I can't help but chastise.

"Okay, Dad," she replies without missing a beat.

Feisty shit. I know her father is gone and I wonder who looks out for her. Knowing she left the hotel and ventured out all on her own answers my question. No one. Maybe Finley and I have more in common than I realize.

"We should clean up your hands and knees."

"I'm fine. Thank you for stepping in and scaring that creep off." She turns away, on the verge of walking off, and I reach out and grab her arm.

"No way," I tell her. "I'm going with you."

"What?"

My fingers tingle where I'm touching her and a jolt shoots straight up my arm. "You heard me. If you think I'm letting you walk anywhere alone after what just happened, you're wrong."

"I don't need an escort."

"Well, you're getting one."

For a moment, we stare off, but then she relents and I reluctantly release her arm, instantly missing that strange connection. Who is this woman? How does she have the power to make me feel all these foreign things that I'm not used to feeling?

Pushing those questions from my head, I need to move forward with my plan and not screw this up. I need to get on

her good side. “Before I walk you home, can we talk?”

She hesitates. “Talk about what?”

“Earlier when we met, I may have been too hasty in my decision.”

Shock fills her pretty blue eyes. “What’re you saying?”

“I’m saying maybe we should reconsider the marriage.”

“Why the sudden one-eighty?” she asks, voice full of suspicion. A hand goes on her hip and she narrows her eyes at me.

I can’t blame her. Clearly, she’s a smart thing and I need to put her mind at ease. I also need to turn up my charm. “After you left, I gave it some further consideration and maybe I was wrong.”

“Maybe?”

“Okay, yes, I was wrong and didn’t think things all the way through.”

“And that’s all?”

I tilt my head, studying her closely, and it hits me why she’s mad. I hurt her feelings. She must’ve taken my rejection personally and how can I blame her. Which means one thing. She was ready to say yes when I shut it down.

Shit. Great job, idiot.

“Finley, I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. I should’ve been more willing to take a chance and I wasn’t. Maybe we should get to know each other a little better and then make our decision. Together. If you’re still open to it?”

Finley doesn’t say anything for a long moment and right when I think she’s about to tell me to go to hell and walk away, she says, “Then we have a lot to discuss.”

A vengeful hope flares within me and I nod. “Do you like gelato?” I ask out of the blue and she chuckles.

“Suuure.”

I can tell she's still wary and a little taken back by my change in attitude. But we're headed in the right direction again, so I'm about to blast her with my charming self. I don't always turn it on, but when I do, I've never had a problem getting what I want.

But I have a feeling Finley O'Shea is different and I may have to work a little harder to gain her trust. The sassy Irish redhead inside her might give me a run for my money. But, the truth is, when I set out to seduce a woman, I don't fail. I haven't yet, anyway.

My gaze moves over her dark red hair which looks fiery and untouchable in the streetlights and, without thinking, I reach out and caress a lock between my fingers. Finley stiffens and my gaze meets hers.

"I've never seen hair this color before," I say in a low voice. "It's beautiful."

I can't help but notice the way her chest begins to rise and fall faster. I think mine is doing the same thing. "Thank you. Guess it's an Irish thing," she finally forces out.

Very reluctantly, I release the fiery strand, unable to help myself from wondering if the hair between her thighs is just as lovely. Clearing my throat, I straighten up and realize that's something I don't have to worry about. *Stay focused, Luca.*

There's no real future between us and I don't have any intention of fucking Finley. Although I wouldn't mind stealing another kiss or two. That last kiss we had shocked the hell out of me.

Pushing those distracting thoughts aside, I turn and motion for Finley to start walking with me. "Let's get that gelato and talk."

Finley and I begin strolling up the street and I move closer, letting my shoulder brush against hers. She doesn't move away and I take that as a good sign.

"So what did you think when your brothers asked you to marry the enemy?" I can't help but ask.

"I thought they were insane," she immediately answers.

She's so artless and honest, and it's damn refreshing. The women I meet love playing games and telling me what they think I want to hear. And it gets on my nerves fast. But Finley isn't like the others. Even though I barely know her, I can tell she's unique.

I know she must be surprised by my change in attitude, but she has an open mind and is willing to listen and give it another shot. A wave of guilt washes over me, but I quickly shove it aside. I can't let my conscience rise up now and dictate my revenge against my father.

When we reach the little cafe, I open the door for her and she breezes past me with an enchanting smile. I know I need to be careful because I have a feeling that Finley O'Shea has the power to cast a spell over me. And that wouldn't be good. It's important I keep a clear head and my eyes on the prize.

Or, in this case, on humiliating my father in front of everyone he always considered more important than me. And I'm just bitter enough to do it, too.

I walk over to the counter and Finley bends over to check out all of the flavors. My gaze zeroes in on her pert, little ass which I find much more interesting than the gelato. My cock twitches behind my zipper and I force myself to drag my eyes away from the tempting sight. Moving up beside her, I release a low breath and pretend to look at the gelato.

"Ooh, these all look so good," she gushes.

Her exuberance is contagious and I have the sudden urge to pull her into my arms and feel her luscious curves mold around my body. How would she feel pressed against me? Soft and luscious. No doubt about it. Finley is a temptress and I need to reel it in and focus on the situation.

I lean a hand on the glass countertop and watch her continue to ooh and ahh over the flavors. She's too damn cute. "What do you want?" I finally ask.

An employee waits patiently for our orders, but Finley remains undecided.

"Do you want to try any?" the employee asks.

“Oh, can I?” She’s still leaning forward and gives her ass a wiggle.

I mentally groan and that earlier twitch turns into the beginning of a full-blown hard-on. *Fuck*. Turning slightly, I try not to watch as Finley points out a couple of flavors she’s debating between then takes the two little spoons the employee offers. And, to my utter torture, she proceeds to slowly lick them clean.

God help me, I can’t look away and that small pink tongue of hers has me imagining all sorts of dirty things. I keep picturing it flicking over the tip of my cock. Then she opens her mouth and sucks me deep.

“Luca?”

“Huh?” Snapping out of my lust-filled thoughts, I see she’s staring up at me with a questioning look.

“I asked what flavor you’re getting.”

“My usual.” I point to the coffee mocha.

“Crap. I didn’t see that one. How is it?”

I meet her blue, blue eyes and say, “Fucking delicious.” *Just like you, baby girl.*

A spark flashes through the blue depths and I’m one second away from dragging her into my arms and kissing her senseless. Clearing my throat, I break the hypnotizing connection and tap the glass with my index finger. “That one.”

“Um, I think I’ll get the praline pecan,” Finley tells the employee. Then she gazes back up at me. “But I want to try yours.”

Of course, she does. And if she wants what I have in her mouth, I’m more than happy to oblige.

The employee hands the small bowls of gelato over and I pay him. “Want to go sit out by the lake?” I ask and she nods.

We step back outside and a cool breeze blows in from Lake Erie. Even though I’m from Chicago, I never spend a lot of time here. I’ve taken it for granted and it really is a pretty cool

city. Maybe I should visit home more than I do. Or maybe a certain redhead has me thinking crazy thoughts.

Nodding toward a bench that faces the water, we go sit down and eat our gelato. “How’s the praline pecan?” I ask her.

“Good. How’s yours?”

In response, I scoop some onto the little spoon and offer it to her. Her eyes lock onto mine as she opens her mouth and wraps her lips around it.

“Yum,” she declares, licking her full lips.

That’s the understatement of the year. Shifting on the bench, I try to ignore the heaviness in my pants but, damn, it’s not an easy thing to do. Finley is getting under my skin and making me want things that absolutely cannot happen.

“I’m getting that flavor next time,” she announces.

Next time. I wonder if the next time will be with me? A fierce possessiveness steals over me and I want it to be with me. I want everything she does to be with me. And I know that makes no damn sense. She’s practically a stranger.

“So,” I begin, trying to bring us back to the main issue at hand. “What should we do about this whole fake marriage thing?”

“I don’t know,” she says carefully. “I mean, I was open to discussing it earlier and then you sort of shot that all down.”

“I guess my head wasn’t in the right place. My dad—” I immediately stop talking. Shit, I almost said how much he had pissed me off. And Finley can’t know that.

“Your dad what?”

“My dad sort of threw all this at me and it took me a minute to sort through it all,” I say, back tracking.

“My brothers did the same thing to me.”

“I guess what it comes down to is we’d be helping our families. Uniting them together to take down Desmond.” She nods. “So, after you left, I took a step back and really thought about it. And, the more I did, I realized I don’t want to let my family down.”

“It’s a lot to ask of us.”

“It is. But, at the same time, it’s only a temporary situation.”

“We’d be living together,” she reminds me.

“And spending a lot of time with each other.”

“I might end up driving you crazy,” she tells me with a smile.

Doubtful, I think. “Or, I might drive you crazy,” I counter.

“Probably,” she agrees teasingly, and we both chuckle.

Damn, this woman is refreshing. I find myself leaning closer, listening to every word, every comma, and the more she says, the more I like her. We end up chatting for the next forty-five minutes and I’m discovering a lot about her. But, mostly, Finley has a kind and open heart. She’s such a change from the other women I’ve dated and she’s drawing me into her world. Whether I like it or not.

The truth is I like it. More than I should.

And the chemistry between us is electric and undeniable. My thigh presses against hers and I can feel her heated skin burning a mark against mine. Turning slightly, I reach out and grasp her chin, tilting it up. I’m immediately lost in her aqua eyes.

“Your eyes are stunning,” I murmur.

“I thought you liked my hair,” she whispers.

“I like everything about you, Finley. From the top of your fiery head down to your toes.”

She gulps, staring up at me with such an open innocence that it makes my chest constrict. I’m an absolute bastard for what I’m about to do to this woman. Even so, I lean forward and capture her lips in a kiss.

What starts as slow and gentle quickly heats up and I lick the seam of her lips, coaxing her mouth open then plunging my tongue into her sweet depths. She moans slightly and the sound sends a shot of pure need straight to my dick. Her arms wrap around my neck, drawing me closer, and I drop my hands and slide them over her ass, dragging her onto my lap.

Probably a dangerous move, but I don't care. Let her know how much I want her. Because when it comes to wanting to take things further with this woman, I'm not playing games. My want is turning into a blazing need and the thought of sinking into her hot body is making me a little crazy.

Finley kisses me back with abandon. I love that she doesn't hold back and she's not worried about technique or putting on some kind of seductive show. She's dragging her fingers through my hair, wriggling on my lap and moaning into my mouth.

Fuck.

Maybe we shouldn't be doing this, but our chemistry just went from really good to out of this fucking world. Absolute insane fireworks. Before I fuck her on this bench, I pull back, putting a stop to something that's moving way too fast.

"I should probably walk you home," I tell her, feathering a hand over her face. She's breathing hard, eyes full of sensuous wonder.

"Probably," she murmurs and slides off my lap.

I stand up, suppressing a groan, and turn to discreetly adjust myself in pants that are suddenly way too tight. Then I turn back around and see the uncertainty all over her beautiful face. I reach out and take her hand in mine then guide her back up to the sidewalk which will take us back up onto the street.

Neither of us says much on the walk back to the hotel where she tells me she's staying. I think we're still a little speechless from that amazing kiss. Once we're outside the main doors of the lobby, I turn her to face me and draw her closer. I can't fucking help it. I kiss her again. And this time it's slow and sensuous. A promise of what could be.

Finley pulls back first this time and releases a shaky breath. "I should go."

"What did you decide?" I ask, searching her gaze.

"I'm not sure yet," she admits.

I caress a hand along her jaw. "Think about it."

She gives me a slight nod then turns and hurries into the hotel. I love the way her hips sway and after she disappears inside, I let out a low curse. This is getting dangerous. I just need to keep reminding myself that she's a means to an end. I'm only using her as revenge on my father. And it sucks but, unfortunately, Finley will wind up as collateral.

Shoving my hands deep into my pockets, I try not to think too hard about that part.

FINLEY

“O h, my God,” I whisper, touching a finger to my tingling lips as I walk into the hotel. Luca Marino has now kissed me twice and now I’m dying for a third kiss. Each one was more thrilling than the last and right now there’s a freaking party going on in my panties. Sucking in a deep breath, I know that I really need to chill out.

I step into the elevator, hit my floor and then sag against the wall. Good lord, that man knows how to kiss. My entire world just tilted on its axis and it’s a good thing I walked away or else I’m scared we would’ve slipped into the nearby alley and done some very naughty things together.

Luca seems just as into me and I’m not sure whether I believe his story or not. He was so much cooler this morning toward me and now he’s running hot and full-steam ahead. I can’t help but be suspicious and question his intentions. But what would be the point of being dishonest and not upfront? What in the world would he have to gain by pretending? We both want to help our families and defeat Desmond.

Right?

I can’t help the little, nagging voice full of questions in the back of my head. But I don’t want to hear those doubts right now. All I want to do is savor the chocolatey-coffee taste still on my lips. Yeah, next time I’m definitely getting that gelato flavor. *Delicious.*

Gah. I can’t stop thinking about the way his mouth moved over mine. How he dragged me onto his lap down by the lake

and took complete control of the kiss and, if I'm being honest, my body. He had me right where he wanted me and he let me know it.

And, yeah, he definitely wanted me. There was no mistaking the hard arousal pressing into my side. A shiver of anticipation runs through me and I start imagining what it would be like to have sex with Luca. If I'm going off our kisses, it would be freaking electric. Like set-the-bed-on-fire fantastic.

Luca Marino is unlike anyone or anything I've ever experienced before. Sure, my experience is laughable and non-existent, but Luca makes me want to change that. To throw my clothes off and fall back onto his bed, spread eagle, with nothing more than a smile on my face.

I've never had such wicked thoughts before and if I close my eyes, I can feel Luca moving between my legs, entering me and dominating me like I yearn for. *Damn*. I think I'm sweating.

The elevator doors glide open and I step out, a little wobbly on my feet. My world is spinning and I have a feeling I'm going to be dreaming of Luca all night. And I'm very, very right.

My dreams are full of his dark molasses eyes, heated kisses and sensual touches. To the point where I wake up and have to soothe the ache between my legs. I drag my hand down my stomach and let it drift lower, fingers brushing between my thighs. Pushing my panties aside, I touch myself. God, I'm soaked. I have no idea what kind of spell he's cast over me, but I'm craving him on a primal level. And that's something I've never experienced before.

Biting my lip, forcing myself to keep quiet, I circle my clit then slide a finger inside my wet heat. Picturing Luca, hearing his deep voice in my ear, I stroke and caress myself until I reach orgasm. I wish he were inside me, thrusting deep into my slick pussy, but all I have is myself to take care of this unbearable throb.

I release a shuddering sigh and sink back into my pillows, wondering how much better Luca could've taken care of me. I bet he's big and thick, and I'm also willing to bet he has had

quite a few lovers. He would know exactly how to make me come. Come hard.

“Luca,” I whisper in a broken voice. Eventually, I fall back asleep, but I’m hardly sated. Not even close. If Luca were in bed with me, I would jump him again. I would let him take me over and over. Then I’d crawl on top of him and sink down on his straining cock, letting it fill me, and ride him hard. Until we were both screaming.

Shit. Jolting up in bed, I swipe a hand across my forehead and realize I’m sweating and needy. I’ve been caught in a carnal storm all night and I don’t think anything can help. Well, except Luca between my thighs.

Giving my head a hard shake, I slip out of bed, wander into the bathroom and splash some cold water on my face. It’s like I’ve turned into some kind of wanton hussy and sweet, innocent Finley no longer exists. Maybe I’m having a long overdue sexual awakening. It just took a sexy beast like Luca Marino to get my juices flowing.

Luca definitely succeeded in getting my dormant engine running. There’s no doubt about that, I think, as I change my panties. To be honest, it’s a little embarrassing. I’ve never felt this shameless, and desire is coursing through me. To the point where I’m not exactly sure how to handle it.

It’s still dark out, way too early to get up, so I force myself to go lie down again. My hot sheets feel suffocating and I kick them off. After tossing and turning for what feels like forever, I finally fall back asleep again. But it’s restless and my dreams are different this time. Instead of being sensual, they possess a desperate edge and I’m chasing after a man who I know is Luca, but I can’t see his face clearly. He stays in the shadows and, right when I think I’ve reached him, he disappears like a cloud of smoke and I’m left alone again.

When morning finally comes, I drag myself out of bed and pick up my phone. There’s a text from a number I don’t recognize and I open it up. My heart catches in my throat when I realize it’s from Luca.

“Finley, sorry for the early text. I hope you’re having sweet dreams. I know I did. Have you made a decision?”

I pull in a sharp breath. Did he have the same kind of dreams I did last night? Do I make him as hot and bothered as he makes me? The idea that he did makes my stomach clench with desire. I can hardly believe I’m about to do this, but I type back a response.

“Good morning. I had some very nice dreams, thank you. And my decision is...yes.”

My finger hovers over the send button for half a second, then I hit it before I can psych myself out with doubts. *Holy shit*. I just told Luca Marino I’d marry him. Am I completely insane?

No. I’m completely in lust.

It’s all temporary, Fin, I remind myself. This is not real. I need to remember that and—

My phone rings. Oh, God, it’s him.

Not wanting to look too desperate, I let it ring two more times before answering. “Hello?”

“Hello, gorgeous. I have to say your text made my entire morning.”

Luca’s voice is warm and deep, and a shiver skates through my body making me all tingly. “Did it?”

“Definitely. But there’s one problem.”

My heart drops. “What?”

“This is supposed to be fake and it doesn’t feel that way.”

Pressing my lips together so I don’t squeal, I can’t help the huge smile that crosses my face. “We’ve barely spent any time together,” I say carefully, my voice barely above a whisper.

“That’s the crazy part.”

For a moment, neither of us speaks.

“I guess we have to get the formalities out of the way, huh?” he says. “The sooner, the better. Can you meet this afternoon and sign the contract?”

Contract. Right. “Sure, no problem.” I don’t want to sound desperate and I try to keep my tone business-like.

“Great. We can all meet at your hotel, on neutral territory. How’s two o’clock?”

“That’s fine.”

“I’ll see you then, Finley.”

“Okay. Bye.” We disconnect and I drop back on my bed, feeling completely overwhelmed. “Get a grip, Fin.”

But that’s easier said than done. I organize my thoughts and call Liam, telling him that both Luca and I are ready to sign on the dotted line. He’s happy, but asks me several times if I’m sure. He says he doesn’t want me to feel forced into doing something I don’t want to do, and I really appreciate that.

After assuring him that I will be fine, I tell him about the plan to meet here at two o’clock. After hanging up, I hop out of bed, shower and start getting ready. The urge to look better than usual has me carefully applying my makeup and styling my hair. I spend an inordinate amount of time choosing an outfit to wear and then kiss my mom goodbye.

As I’m walking to the door, my mom stops me in my tracks when she says, “Finley. Don’t do this because everyone else wants you to. Don’t let them pressure you.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assure her. “And it’s only for a short amount of time, right?”

She studies me closely. “A lot can happen in a few months, sweetheart.”

I nod. “But, in this case, it’s all fake.”

“Until it isn’t,” she comments. “Guard your heart, okay?”

“I will,” I assure her. My mom is wise and I know she’s worried about me, but I think it’s time for me to spread my wings and live a little. I’m tired of being shut up and feeling like I’m missing out on life. I’m ready to take a leap of faith and have some fun.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go down, too?”

“Positive. This will only take a few minutes.” She nods, reluctantly watching me leave. But it’s something I need to do on my own.

I know I should take the enforcer standing outside of our door, but I skirt around him and pretend like I’m only going to go down and grab my morning coffee like usual. “Good morning, Sully,” I say, and he gives me a friendly smile.

“Morning, Miss. Do you need me to accompany you anywhere?”

“Nope, I’m fine. Thanks, though.” I’m feeling a little rebellious and I’m tired of being escorted to every place I go. With a quick wave, I hop in the elevator and take it down. Granted, I’m not actually leaving the hotel, just going to the conference room, but I like walking by myself and not having someone breathing down my neck.

The moment I enter the conference room, my pulse speeds up. Luca is already there, along with his father and all three of my brothers. Luca walks straight over to me and reaches for my elbow. “How’re you doing? You’re still okay with this?”

His concern catches me right in the heart and I smile. “I’m good. How about you?”

“Spending the next few months with you will hardly be a hardship, Finley.” His low voice in my ear makes my heart thud harder. Then he guides me over to the table and I see a set of documents spread across the table.

“Have a seat,” Matteo Marino says, instantly all business, “and we’ll go over the details.”

Nodding, I glance over at my brothers and sit down beside Luca.

“Before we get started,” Conor says, studying me closely, “we need to make sure you’re one-hundred percent okay with this, Fin.”

My overprotective brothers make my heart happy. “I’m fine, thank you.” I keep reassuring everyone that I’m okay and I hope it’s the truth. There’s no denying that I’m nervous because as Liam hands me a pen, this is all suddenly very real.

Am I completely insane?

“You can change your mind,” Liam says. “And no one will be upset.”

“I will be,” Luca says.

My head snaps over and he sends me a slow, sexy smile. My brothers frown, not liking that one bit, but I think it’s sweet. “Let’s do this,” I say and tilt my chin up.

Matteo instantly takes charge and starts explaining the timeline and what is expected of us. It all quickly becomes overwhelming and I start twisting the pen in my hands, pulling the cap on and off.

“The wedding will take place as soon as possible. A huge affair with no expense spared,” Matteo tells us. “Ideally, it will be in two weeks and we’ll announce your engagement tomorrow in the society column.”

“Two weeks?” I echo. That’s fast.

“Yes, and during the time leading up to the ceremony, I want you to be seen all over town and to put on a big show of falling in love.”

My mind is spinning hard. Am I a good enough actress to pull this off? Worry starts making me doubt myself, and Luca reaches over and threads his fingers through mine.

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” he murmurs.

I squeeze his hand. He’s right. If he continues to be like this, all charming and attractive and supportive, then the fear is I will really fall for him. There won’t be anything fake about it. And since the contract stipulates three months together, what’s going to happen when we go our separate ways? There’s the very real and scary possibility that I’ll be left standing all alone with a broken heart.

And I can’t allow that to happen.

LUCA

I watch Finley sign her name on the dotted line and a wave of triumph passes through me. My gaze instantly shifts to my father and a small smile curves his mouth. He thinks he's in control and that he's gotten his way, but he has no idea that I'm about to get the ultimate revenge on him. After this, he's going to be a laughingstock in this town and his precious empire is going to crumble down all around him.

And I don't give a shit. In fact, I'm looking forward to raising my glass and toasting his ruin.

After scrawling my name across from hers, I invite Finley to go for a walk with me. I can tell she's less than comfortable with what's happening and I need to keep her believing in me and in a positive state of mind. The last thing I want is for her to start questioning me or our relationship. My goal is to make her as comfortable as possible and get her up on that altar, because if she bails early on me that won't happen.

Reaching for her hand, I guide her outside, pulling her away from her brothers and my father. I need to be alone with her and reassure her that everything is going to be fine. That it's just the two of us and she can trust me implicitly.

Basically, I need her to trust me so later I can make her look like a fool in front of our families and a thousand guests. I know it sounds rotten, but right now I'm more invested in bringing my father down than Finley's feelings. Maybe that makes me the world's biggest asshole, but the sweet victory I'm going to savor will be worth it. So very worth it.

As we stroll down the street, I hold her hand in a comforting grip. “I think we should get you a ring,” I tell her. She pauses and looks up at me. “There’s a great little jewelry shop up here and I know the owner. What do you say? Ready to announce to the world that we’re engaged?”

“No, but let’s do it.”

I laugh and pull her down the sidewalk a little further. At least Finley is entertaining. The next few months definitely won’t be boring and I’m hoping for some more kisses. I’m not a complete dick, so I have no intention of taking her to bed... despite how very tempting it’s going to be.

No doubt about it. Finley O’Shea is going to be hard to resist.

But I’m not going to slip up and fall for the woman I’m using. To be honest, I’ve never fallen in love with anyone before, so why the hell would I start now? Keeping my emotional distance is a no-brainer and it’s never been hard for me to do before.

We reach the jewelry store and I pull the door open. As we step inside, I lay my hand on Finley’s lower back and guide her over to the case full of engagement rings. “Take a look,” I say. “Choose whatever you want.”

Yeah, maybe that’s not a very romantic thing to say, but we’re not getting married because we’re in love like a normal couple. We’re putting on a show and nothing more.

Luckily, I have enough money that it doesn’t matter what bauble she picks. I’ve invested my money wisely. Yes, it’s money that originated from my father, but I figure he owes me something for treating me like the invisible son all of these years. So fuck him.

Leaving Finley to study the rings, I saunter over to an employee and ask if Louis, the owner, is there. Normally, the old man spends most of his time back in his office. We met at a charity event forever ago and he sort of became the father figure I never had.

After a minute, Louis Montello appears and walks over, clapping me on the back. “How’re you, Luca, my boy? I’m so

glad you're back in town."

I haven't seen Louis in a couple of years and he's sporting more silver in his hair, but his dark eyes are still as jovial as I remember. "I'm good, Louis. How's business?"

"Eh, could be better, but it's not horrible. I'm lucky my little shop is still here, right? So many other friends have been forced out of business by the bigger stores and those online giants."

I notice his gaze move over to Finley and I can't help but smile. "Well, I brought you some business."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" he asks, a twinkle in his eyes.

"More like a fiancée," I tell him, my mouth edging up higher.

"No kidding!" He pulls me into a big bear hug. "Well, what are you waiting for? Introduce me to your better half!"

With a chuckle, we walk over and Finley straightens up and turns. "Finley, this is Louis Montello, a good friend. He owns this store. Louis, this is my fiancée, Finley O'Shea."

His eyes widen when he hears her last name, but he doesn't comment. Everyone knows the history and how our families don't get along.

"It's so nice to meet you. Mr. Montello. You have so many beautiful things."

Louis waves off the formality. "Call me, Louis. Thank you and congratulations. I couldn't be happier for you both. Luca here is one of the best men I know and he will treat you right."

Swallowing hard, I look away, trying to ignore the sudden onslaught of guilt that hits me hard. Louis would be so disappointed if he knew what I was planning. Releasing a breath, I turn and force a smile. "So, what strikes your fancy?" I ask Finley.

"Um, they're all stunning," she says, then takes my hand and drags me to the opposite end of the case where the smaller diamonds are on display. I frown when she points to a plain, round, extremely small diamond ring in the corner. "How about that one?"

“Are you serious?”

Finley starts chewing on her bottom lip. “I tried to find the smallest one.”

“Why would you do that?” I’m completely baffled. Don’t women like big, sparkling diamonds?

“Because,” she murmurs. “You shouldn’t have to pay a lot of money and—”

“Finley,” I interrupt, my voice low in her ear, “we’re putting on a big show, remember? Let’s make it a good one.” Then I take her hand and guide her back down to the larger diamonds. “One of these.”

Maybe it’s my imagination, but she seems to deflate a little when I remind her it’s merely a show. But, in the end, I convince her to choose a big, bright white diamond that sparkles so much it rivals her blue eyes.

After talking a little more to Louis, I pay for the ring, thank him and guide Finley outside. Leaning in, I ask, “What’s your middle name?”

“Amelia. Why?”

Time to make a scene, I think, and drop down on one knee. Finley’s eyes go wide and I give her my most dashing smile.

“Finley Amelia O’Shea, I know this is going to take people by surprise, but I don’t care what our last names are. All I know is the moment I met you, something changed. My entire world flipped upside down and inside out. I know it all happened so fast, but now I can’t imagine living even a day without you. I refuse to. Finley, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be my wife?”

The entire time, I’m holding her hand, looking into her bright blue eyes and hoping I come off as genuine. People begin to stop and watch, and soon a crowd surrounds us. From the corner of my eye, I see someone recording my proposal with their camera.

I feel like a lying sonofabitch. A heel of the absolute lowest. But she knows this is as fake as a three dollar bill. We agreed

it wasn't real, so it's not like I'm tricking her. We're both on the exact same page.

For the most part, anyway.

She just doesn't know that I intend to end our relationship a little earlier than planned. I'm not going to actually go through with the wedding ceremony, but who cares? What's the difference if we end it at the altar or end it in three months? In all actuality, it's better if we stop the charade early. There's less chance of us actually falling for the other person. Well, of her falling for me because I'm not the kind of man who falls in love easily. Or ever.

"Yes," she whispers, eyes glowing.

I stand up, pull her into my arms and kiss her. All around us, people cheer and whistle, and I make sure to keep the kiss appropriate. Even though I'd like to deepen it, to slide my tongue into her sweet mouth again, I keep my control firmly in place and step back after a few, drawn-out seconds.

Our gazes lock and there's no mistaking the heat that flares to life in those gorgeous blue eyes of hers. Swallowing hard, I reach for her left hand, lift it up and show it to the bystanders.

"My fiancée, everyone!"

More clapping fills the air and several people offer their congratulations. When everyone begins to disperse, I lace my fingers through Finley's and we start walking back to the hotel.

"I think we should go out tonight and celebrate our engagement. What do you think?" I ask her.

She nods. "Sure. Where are we going?"

"How about Donato's?" The fancy Italian restaurant is known for its famous chef and excellent food and atmosphere. "Ever been?"

"Never," she breathes.

"I'll pick you up at seven. That work?"

"Sounds good."

Finley is staring down at the ring on her finger and I can't help but feel bad. But it's not like I'm leading her on. She's completely aware of the situation and how it needs to be played out. We need to convince the world we're in love.

And that's exactly what we're going to do. No regrets.

FINLEY

Everything is happening so fast and I can't believe I have a ring on my finger. I know it isn't real, but it feels... nice. Of course, I never imagined this is how my engagement would go. I just assumed I'd meet a man one day, we'd fall in love and, basically, that things would happen in a normal way.

And this is so not normal.

After Luca drops me off at the hotel, I hurry upstairs and my mom asks me how everything went. "Oh, fine," I say vaguely, desperately wishing I had someone to talk to, other than my mother.

Her gaze drops to the diamond on my finger which sparkles like it's lit from within. God, I can't stop looking at it.

"You have a ring already?"

I extend my hand. "Luca's friend owns a jewelry store and we walked over after signing the contract."

Her face clouds over. "Finley, this whole situation worries me."

"I'll be fine," I assure her.

"I'm just scared you're going to get hurt."

"I know it's not real and I'm completely ready to walk away after three months. I'm doing this to help us and to get rid of Desmond. That's the goal, right?"

“Yes, but Luca Marino seems worldly and far too charming. I just want you to be careful and remember that you only need to put on a show for the outside world. When you’re alone with him, there’s no need to act like you’re married.”

“I know, Mom.” *Ugh.* I do not want to be having this conversation with her. “I have to go get ready. Luca is taking me to Donato’s to, ah, celebrate our engagement.”

My mom releases a sigh. “Guard your heart, Finley.”

“I will. I’m not stupid enough to actually fall for him.” She doesn’t look like she believes me and I turn, heading to my room. Yes, I may be naive when it comes to men and relationships, but I’m going into this with my eyes wide open.

And all I have to do is pretend to be in love with Luca Marino for the next few months. It’s not that hard. The difficult part is making sure I don’t really succumb to his dark eyes and heated kisses. I know sleeping with Luca isn’t part of the plan, but I can’t help but wonder what it would be like.

And the truth is I’m giving it some serious consideration. I mean, technically, we will be husband and wife. And other than us, no one needs to know what we do behind closed doors. Losing my virginity is going to happen one day and since I’ve waited this long, I may as well give it to a man that has me hot and panting for him. Just because we have sex doesn’t mean I’m going to fall in love with him and get my heart broken.

Even so, I know it’s a sticky situation and I need to tread carefully.

I wander into the attached bathroom and start touching up my makeup, all the while admiring the large diamond on my finger. It feels strange to be wearing a ring on that finger because I never have before. I always had this weird little rule that I’d only wear an engagement ring there.

And here we are. It’s bizarre but, again, not real. I need to keep reminding myself of that fact and not act like a delusional virgin who thinks her fake fiancé actually loves her.

Once again, I'm wishing that I had somebody I could talk to about the situation. I certainly can't talk to my brothers and I don't think Luca's sisters would understand. Since Luca is their brother, I don't think they would be able to keep an open mind and not factor him into the situation. The situation is too close to them. I don't think I've ever felt so alone. Any girlfriends I made were in school and they don't live anywhere near me, so I'm sad to say, we've lost contact over the last few years.

Maybe my loneliness is one of the reasons I'm jumping into this engagement. Deep down, I'm yearning to be close to someone. So why not Luca?

Time seems to drag by even though it's only a few hours until Luca picks me up. By the time he gets here, I am chomping at the bit to go. After a quick kiss on my mom's cheek, I fly out the door, down the elevator and spot Luca standing in the lobby looking ridiculously handsome in a black suit and silver-gray tie. As I approach, his gaze skims down me and a shiver runs through my body.

Luca steps forward, holding his hands out and I grasp them. He pulls me closer and drops a quick kiss on my lips. "You look lovely," he murmurs.

"Thank you. You look very handsome yourself."

He slides his fingers through mine and leads me out the front door. There's a luxurious-looking Mercedes waiting at the curb and he opens the door for me. After I slide in, he closes it and walks around the car to get into the driver's seat. After checking his mirrors, he slides the sedan into traffic.

I'm sitting ramrod straight and it hits me that I'm really nervous. Breathing through my nose, I force myself to relax and sit back against the soft leather seat, my hand sliding over its coolness.

"So you've never eaten at Donato's?" he asks.

"No, but I hear the food is excellent."

"You're in for a real treat because it's a step above excellent."

It doesn't take long to get to the restaurant and I find myself growing more and more quiet on the way over there. By the time we get there, I've said barely twenty words and anxiety is making me sweat despite the cool fall evening.

Luca pulls up to the valet and my door is immediately opened by an attendant. As Luca circles around the sedan, I smooth my slick palms down my dress and draw in a breath of cool, refreshing air.

You can do this, Fin, my inner cheerleader chants. It's just dinner and nothing more than a business arrangement. There's no need to put pressure on myself because this isn't even a real date. All we're doing is putting on a show for everyone else.

The moment we enter, the hostess perks up, her eyes grazing appreciatively over Luca. "Right this way, Mr. Marino. Your usual table is all ready for you."

"Thank you, Bettina," Luca says and places a hand on my back, guiding me through the dining room.

As we pass by other tables, several people nod or greet Luca. He's a man of importance and, like me, it has everything to do with his last name. He may be the youngest Marino, but people respect and fear Matteo.

Once we reach the corner table, Luca pulls my chair out and I sit. I'm tense and I know I need to relax, but my nerves are bouncing all over the place. Unfolding my cloth napkin, needing something to do, I lay it across my lap and start fidgeting with the silverware. Luca reaches over and lays his hand over mine, stopping its movements.

"What's wrong, Finley?" he asks in a low voice.

Am I that easy to read? Not sure what to admit, I watch as he turns my hand over and begins to circle his index finger on my palm.

"Talk to me," he says and I look up to meet his dark eyes. Eyes that could suck me right in and swallow me whole.

Forcing a smile, I say, "Sorry. I'm just a little nervous. Everyone is watching us."

“Because you’re beautiful and we make a good-looking couple. Don’t you think?”

He’s right. We passed a large mirror on our way to the table and we complement each other well. He’s so tall and dark, and I’m smaller, a fiery redhead on his arm. I need to dig deep and find that inner fierceness.

“Yes,” I murmur.

“Just focus on me. We’re on a date and celebrating our engagement. You’re going to be my wife in two weeks and nothing makes me happier.”

My breath catches in my throat as Luca lifts my hand and presses a kiss to my knuckles. Then he slowly turns my hand over and kisses my palm. But this time his mouth is open and I feel the soft, warm touch of his tongue.

Holy hell.

Luca is very convincing and all I can do is play along. As the evening rolls on, it gets easier and easier falling into this make believe world and looking at Luca as though he’s really my fiancé. Like he tells me, I let the rest of the world fall away and only focus on him. And my nerves and anxiety begin to slip away and then disappear completely.

By the end of the evening, I’ve had three glasses of champagne and the most delicious dinner. We’re finishing up, currently sharing a dessert, and Luca has me laughing at another story. His charm really ought to be registered as a lethal weapon. Same with his dark, good looks.

I swallow down a final bite of tartufo. It’s absolutely divine—an ice cream bombe with multiple layers including a molten chocolate sauce core wrapped in hazelnut gelato and liberally dusted in bitter cocoa powder. Setting my fork down, I moan in appreciation. “That is hands-down the best dessert I’ve ever had in my life,” I declare. Something darkens in Luca’s gaze and then he reaches over and swipes a finger across the corner of my mouth.

There’s chocolate on his finger and he stares at me as he licks it off. I swear, I may have just had an orgasm.

“Before we go...” He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls a key out. “Would you like to see where we’ll be living?”

My heart feels suspended in my chest as I nod. After he pays, Luca and I get up and start winding our way back through the dining room. Halfway out, someone calls out his name in greeting and Luca pauses. The men begin talking and Luca turns to me, sliding an arm around my waist, and says, “John, I’d like you to meet Finley O’Shea, my fiancée.”

The man’s eyes widen. “Congratulations! I had no idea you’d gotten engaged.”

“It just happened today and we couldn’t be more thrilled.”

I smile and lean into Luca’s side. There’s no need to pretend because I like how safe and seen he makes me feel. I like being on his arm and the way he’s such a gentleman. There’s too much I like about Luca.

They chat a moment more and then we leave. Luca drives us over to an apartment building near the water and once we’re parked, I get out and look up at the place where we’ll be living. Together.

Temporarily, I remind myself.

Luca and I walk up the steps and he opens the door. It’s on the second floor so we take the stairs. I’m curious to see the place and Luca told me Matteo is providing it for us. So, truthfully, I’m surprised to see when we walk in that it’s cozy. The fully-furnished apartment isn’t too big or too small, and I instantly love it. Something about it feels like home. And I know that’s weird to say, but I feel comfortable right away.

As we wander from room to room, I start imagining what it’s going to be like living here. Finally, we reach the bedroom and I pause. There’s only one bedroom. Which means we’re going to have to sleep together because I certainly can’t expect Luca to camp out on the couch for the next three months. That would hardly be fair.

“I know we’re going to be married in name only,” he says softly, placing his hands on my hips and slowly turning me around, “but I think you’re beyond beautiful and so refreshing.

Unlike any woman I've ever met. You're the only woman I'd do this with, Finley."

My heart begins to pound harder and faster as he leans down, brushing his lips against the shell of my ear. My arms lift and I lay my hands on his firm chest, sliding them beneath his jacket.

"I find you fascinating," he murmurs, dragging his lips along my jaw and then capturing my mouth in a kiss.

Leaning back, opening my mouth in welcome, I moan softly as Luca's tongue plunges between my lips. Our mouths and hands begin exploring each other and I push against him, needing...wanting...more. So much more.

Luca's hand slides through my hair and around to cup the back of my neck as he takes control of the kiss. It's demanding and I try to keep up, but his passion is strong and an excitement begins building inside me. His hips push against me and I can feel his hardness which makes me instantly wet.

As Luca steps forward, I step back and bump into the bed. We go down and he scoops and slides me backwards so he's able to stretch out on top of me. The kiss deepens even more and he moves between my legs, pushing up against me, slowly circling his hips against my core.

But there are too many clothes in the way and he slides my skirt up, exposing my satin panties. I tense slightly when his fingers curl into the elastic band and he freezes, pulling back.

I'm breathing hard, desperate for him to touch me. "Why did you stop?" I ask, trying to pull him back down.

"Because you tensed."

"Sorry. I just...I've never done this before."

He pulls in a breath and his hand slides down, covering my mound. "Are you a virgin, Finley?" he asks, voice gritty with need.

I give him a barely perceptible nod and he curses under his breath.

"But it doesn't matter," I insist. "I don't want to stop."

“Sweet Finley,” he rasps, brushing my hair back. “There won’t be any stopping because I’m not that good of a man. But, we’re not sleeping together. Not tonight, anyway.”

He grasps the edges of my panties and begins to slide them downward, and a needy sigh flutters from my lips.

“But I will make you feel good. If you want.”

“God, yes. I want, I want...Oh, I want...” I think I say that all aloud, but I’m not even sure. I’m so desperate for this man, I can’t focus, can’t see straight. I’m just completely overcome by the hot sensation of need and desire.

My mouth drops open as his head dips and I feel that first contact. *Holy shit*. His warm lips and even hotter tongue begin to consume my wet pussy and I cry out. He laps and licks and when he sucks my throbbing clit into his mouth, I swear, I almost lose consciousness.

Twisting, my hips buck against his face, and my hands dig into the comforter.

If this is a taste of what marriage with Luca Marino is going to be like, I won’t ever want an annulment.

LUCA

Finley's pelvis starts a slow, sexy grind against my face and I lift her hips right up off the mattress and devour her. Licking up her sweet slit and sucking on her clit until she's crying out and desperate.

I know I shouldn't be touching her much less having my face between her legs, but I couldn't resist. Knowing she's never been with a man before makes me want to be the first. A fierce need drives me forward and I'm determined to give her an orgasm right now.

Finley is writhing and panting, so close, but not quite there, so I slide a finger into her slick pussy, slowly pumping it in and out and working her swollen clit with my mouth. Sucking her into oblivion.

"Get there, baby girl," I urge her and lightly scrape my teeth over her small, throbbing clit. With a husky cry, Finley tenses and I feel her inner muscles tighten around my finger. Damn, she's tight.

The release rolls through her and I sit back on my heels, watching as ecstasy crosses her face. Her eyes are closed and her gorgeous face is flushed. Watching as her chest rises and falls hard, I reach down and grab my aching dick, forcing myself to remain in control and not blow.

I want this woman like I've never wanted anyone before and seeing the pleasure wash over her and the way her body responds to my touch is enough to push me over the edge.

Somehow, I manage to hang onto the slim thread of control I have left.

Did I take this charade too far? Definitely. Do I regret it? Not one fucking bit.

Finley is too delicious and I can't help it. The truth is I want more and there's no way I'm going to be able to keep my hands off her. I have to hold myself in check because I'm one step away from ripping my pants off and fucking her hard. Looking down at her slick core, I realize I'm breathing just as hard as she is, and I need to rein it in and keep in mind what she just told me. She's a virgin and that means whatever we do from this point on, I'm going to take my time and make sure she gets every ounce of pleasure I can give her.

Because Finley is first. Always.

Hell, it's the least I can do before I walk away and leave her. Make sure she gets some hot orgasms first.

Leaning forward, I lay down over her body, careful to keep my weight off her, and kiss her deeply. Letting her taste how damn sweet she is. Getting lost in Finley is far too easy and before I spiral out of control, I slide back, tugging her skirt back down. Finley looks up at me, stars in her blue eyes, her expression a little dazed. But very, very satisfied.

I can't help but smirk and I run a hand down her flat stomach, then lower, skimming over her thigh. "You taste too good, Finley. I could eat your pussy all night and still want more."

My dirty words make her flush and she pushes up on her elbows, staring intently at me.

"No one's ever done that to me before," she admits.

"Did you like it?" Her porcelain cheeks turn a bright red and I squeeze her leg. "If you say yes then I'll make sure to do it again."

"Yes," she whispers in a breathy voice.

"Yes, what, baby girl?" Finley swallows hard. "Tell me with words. Don't hold back."

"I like when you lick it."

“Lick what?” I rasp, pressing her, forcing her to say the word.

“Lick my pussy.” Her voice is husky, thick with desire, and now I’m the one swallowing hard. “I think I’d like your tongue no matter where it licked.”

Fuck me. With a groan, I slide off the bed, knowing it’s time to end this little game before I do exactly that—lick her delectable body from head to toe. “Another night,” I tell her and adjust my aching dick. I swear, it’s a miracle it didn’t tear through my damn zipper.

A soft buzzing sound fills the air and I realize it’s my cell phone. Walking over to where I dropped my jacket, I reach into the pocket and pull it out.

“Fuck,” I hiss and Finley looks over, an eyebrow raising. She’s sliding to the end of the bed, about to reach for her panties, when I walk back over in two long strides and swipe them up.

“Hey,” she says and holds out her hand.

“Uh-uh.” I give her a smirk and tuck them into my back pocket. “They’re mine.”

“I have a feeling you’re going to be a very bad influence,” she murmurs.

“Oh, you have no idea, baby.” Then I swipe the bar on my phone over, putting the call on speaker so Finley can hear, too. “Hello, Dad.”

Matteo Marino is the last person I want to talk to right now, but he must have something of importance to tell me since he rarely calls. Hell, I’m surprised he even has my phone number.

“Luca, I have your schedule of appearances and they begin immediately.”

Rolling my eyes, I look down at Finley. Damn, the woman looks utterly edible and my mouth begins to water for another taste of her. That long, wild mane of red hair is in disarray from thrashing around on the bed. The perfect bedhead and she looks beyond sexy.

“Okay.”

“You will both be required to show up at various places on the specified dates. I’ve emailed you the exact schedule, but it’s the usual type of things one would expect. Certain restaurants, the ballet, the opera, a musical, several charity events and parties. You’ll need to rub elbows with all the right people and I’ve already sent you their dossiers. So make sure you are able to put faces and names together. These are important people, Luca.”

I hate when he talks to me like I’m still a child. And the only person these hoity-toity snobs are important to is him. I could care less.

“I gather that,” I say, sounding bored. Because I am.

“Your evenings are entirely booked, so make sure Finley has the appropriate wardrobe for every function.”

“Of course.” Nice of him to act like she’s some kind of riff-raff I just picked up off the street. *Asshole*.

“All of this will lead up to the wedding which will be in exactly two weeks.”

Two weeks. Damn, that’s fast. My gaze meets Finley’s and I can see a flicker of something fill her blue eyes. Fear? Anxiety? Nervousness? I’m not sure, but I can’t blame her. Suddenly, I feel like we’ve been thrown into the middle of a whirlwind publicity blitz. And the only thing keeping us afloat is each other.

That’s exactly what happens, too.

For the next couple of weeks, we’re seen everywhere and spend every moment with each other. Once the society column announces our engagement, all bets are off. Invitations come out of the woodwork and everyone who’s anyone wants to meet me and Finley—the one coupling with the O’Shea family that my father approves of.

And the man practically shouts it from the damn mountaintop. He’s telling everyone how perfect we are together and how he judged Rory and Sofia’s choice of partners far too quickly and harshly. It’s hard to believe when he announces to the world that the rivalry between the Marino and O’Shea family is

officially over and he fully supports his children and their significant others. And that it was my unwavering love for Finley that made him see how wrong he was.

Cue the massive eye roll.

My father is full of shit. And, as the days pass and we get closer and closer to the wedding day, I realize I am, too. I'm discovering that Finley O'Shea is a rare and amazing creature. An absolute jewel who should be treasured. *Un tesoro*. She's more than just beautiful—though she has good looks galore—and her beauty runs deeper. There's an inner glow that not everyone possesses and it shines brightly every time I see Finley smile or hear her say a kind word or see her always so quick to offer help to someone else, whether she knows them or not.

I know I can't deviate from my plan and I'm still looking forward to bringing my father to his knees and crushing him in front of everyone. But I'm starting to feel like the world's biggest asshole because there's no way around it—Finley is going to wind up getting hurt, too.

I keep telling myself that she'll get over it. The sting of humiliation from being left at the altar will eventually fade and she'll meet a guy who will treat her like a princess. Exactly how she deserves.

But, the idea of another man's hands on her, touching her, making her writhe and come makes me growl in the back of my throat.

"What's wrong?" Finley asks, looking up at me. "You don't like Calla Lilies?"

We're at the flower shop, picking out flowers for the wedding and reception, and I could care less. I'm too focused on Finley and I wrap an arm around her waist, draw her back against me and whisper, "I don't give a shit about flowers when I'm imagining my mouth on your pussy, *tesoro*."

"Luca!" she hisses, cheeks turning pink. But she doesn't pull away from me, and I brush her flaming hair to the side and start kissing the side of her neck. The woman helping us clears

her throat and mumbles an excuse about finding a couple of other options for us to look at.

Spinning Finley around, I yank her up onto her toes, right against my rising hard-on, and kiss her thoroughly. As though my very life depended on it. Ever since our encounter in the apartment we're going to be sharing after the wedding—well, the one we would be sharing—I can't stop thinking about her and all of the wicked things I want to do to her.

But that wouldn't be fair. I'm going to leave her standing alone in front of a church full of people. If I stole her virginity, too, I don't think I'd be able to justify that. I may be able to be a vile prick and do the unspeakable when it comes to getting revenge on my father, but not Finley. After all of the time we've spent together this past week, I've come to the realization that she's far too good for me. For everyone.

With a long-suffering sigh, I reluctantly lower her feet back down to the floor and then press my forehead against hers. For a long moment, I remain like that, savoring the connection between us that has seemed to blossom out of nowhere and at the speed of light. There's no explaining it and it sucks because it's complicating the hell out of what I'm going to do next week.

It's making me rethink things and question if maybe there's another way to make my father pay. A way that wouldn't involve Finley getting hurt.

Shit. If there is another way, I haven't figured it out yet. But there's still time.

"Seven days," I murmur.

"Can you believe it?" she asks softly.

I lift my head and force a smile. Even though we're speaking of two entirely different things, I drop a quick kiss on the end of her nose. "Any regrets yet?" I ask.

"No. You?"

"Not one," I assure her.

However, the big question is will I have any regrets after I walk out of that church in seven days and leave Finley? Forever. Because once that decision is made, there's no turning back. She'll never forgive me. And I wouldn't expect her to.

But you'll have revenge on your father, a little voice reminds me.

Right. Revenge. I'm beginning to wonder if sacrificing a potential future with Finley is worth it. Honestly, at this point, I don't know. The truth is she's becoming someone I look forward to seeing and talking to each day. The time we spend together...

Hell, it means something to me. And I never expected this to happen.

Fuck. I'm in a hell of a situation and I guess whatever I end up doing will be a last-minute decision. Because right now I'm wavering. My brain is saying screw everyone and get my revenge. But my heart...well, the ice is slowly melting off it and making me question everything, from my motives to the end results of a decision made in spite.

Plus, I'm going to have to deal with the fallout. Because even if I run off and disappear, I won't be able to outrun the guilt. And I don't think I'll be able to ever erase the look of betrayal that will cross Finley's face.

I told myself that the last thing I can afford to do is develop a crush on my fiancée. Well, been there, done that. I'm crushing on *mio tesoro* like crazy. Now I'm in a dangerous spot and I truly have no idea how this is going to play out.

I guess there are only two options—with me fucking Finley on our wedding night or Finley hating me for the rest of her life because I leave her.

So which one do I choose?

FINLEY

The last two weeks have been an absolute blur. I'm standing in front of a full-length mirror in my wedding dress while Rory buttons the row of tiny pearls up the back.

"You look so beautiful!" Sofia exclaims after she finishes fussing with the light pink roses scattered throughout my upswept hair.

I'm not sure who the young woman in the mirror gazing back at me is—surely not me. She's far too regal-looking in a diamond tiara and white satin dress that hugs every curve.

"Thank you," I murmur. It truly feels like I'm looking at a stranger. Maybe it's better that way since this whole thing is a charade. It's best if I distance myself from the scenario about to take place.

Despite knowing today is nothing more than a big show, I can't help but wish it were real. That Luca would truly be mine and I would become his from this day forward.

"All done," Rory declares and moves up on my opposite side. "Wow, you look amazing."

"It's not real," I remind them softly.

"Hmm, I'm not so sure about that," Rory states.

"What do you mean?" I tilt my head, studying her intently.

"Have you seen the way my brother looks at you? Because I have." She fans her face.

“Me, too!” Sofia smirks knowingly.

“He’s just...pretending.”

“If you say so.” Rory doesn’t look convinced, but I’m not so sure she’s right. Luca might just be a good actor.

“Do you think it’s strange that Desmond has been keeping such a low profile?” I ask the sisters.

“Probably because we’re all so heavily-guarded and his men can’t get near us,” Sofia says.

“Maybe.” But a part of me feels like he’s up to something. That he’s lying in wait like some kind of predator and when the moment is right, he’s going to strike. And that terrifies me.

“Don’t think about him, Finley,” Rory says. “There’s nothing to worry about. The church is secure and then you and then after the reception, you and Luca are off on your honeymoon and will be far away from here.”

I nod, but I still can’t help but feel a little bit of worry and doubt creeping in. I don’t trust Desmond and wouldn’t put it past him to launch some kind of attack today in an attempt to ruin the wedding.

“It’s almost time,” Rory says and I swallow hard, suddenly feeling a wave of nervousness.

I feel like I’m forgetting something and then realize I left my bouquet in the room next door where I had my makeup and hair done. “I forgot my bouquet in the other room,” I announce.

“I’ll get it,” Sofia offers, but I shake my head and start toward the door.

“It’s okay, I got it. Be right back.” Sweeping my long skirt behind me, I open the closed door and step into the back hallway. My bouquet of white roses and greens is too beautiful and I’m so glad I didn’t walk up the aisle without it. I swipe it out of the vase on the side table and walk back out into the hall. At the same moment, Luca turns the corner and our gazes collide.

Luca looks absolutely catch-your-breath-handsome in a dark, tailored tuxedo that fits him to perfection. He wears a silk bow tie and matching handkerchief in his front jacket pocket and for a moment, neither of us moves.

“Oh, no!” I exclaim. “You’re not supposed to see me. It’s bad luck...though maybe that doesn’t apply in our case.”

I give him a lopsided smile and he has a funny look on his face. One that makes me nervous though I’m not sure why. Something seems off and I search his dark eyes.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, growing concerned. Maybe he’s not feeling well. Or, maybe he’s having second thoughts.

Luca snaps out of whatever trance he’s in and his dark gaze takes in everything from my head to my toes. “You look beautiful,” he finally utters.

“Thank you. You look amazing.” I frown, clutching my bouquet a little tighter. “Aren’t you supposed to be up on the altar already?”

“Uh, yeah. Heading there right now.” He takes a step closer and opens his mouth then immediately shuts it. After swallowing hard, he gives a sharp nod. “See you out there.”

“See you out there,” I echo. As I watch him do an about-face and walk away, I wonder if he suddenly got cold feet. He definitely seemed a little on edge and not his usual confident self. Well, it’s too late for that. The church is packed with nearly one-thousand guests and I’m one minute away from walking down the aisle. If Luca backed out now...

Well, that would be the most humiliating experience of my life.

He wouldn’t do that to you, I tell myself. If he had changed his mind, he would’ve told you in private. Luca isn’t the type of man to bail at the very last second in front of everyone unless he had a good reason. And if he did, he would’ve told me right now. Plus, we both know this will all be over soon enough and the marriage will be annulled in three months. Then we’re free to go our separate ways.

I can't think about that right now, though. One step at a time. And right now, it's time to marry Luca Marino in front of a huge crowd of Chicago's most wealthy and important people. Thank goodness our family and a few close friends will be up in front there with us because my nerves are kicking in hard. I'm going to need some familiar faces to get me through this next part.

"Finley!" I turn and see Rory and Sofia, motioning to me. "C'mon, it's time."

Heart in my throat, we walk over to the back of the cathedral and I peek out into the main area and get my first look at all of the guests. *Oh, my God.* "There are so many people," I whisper. My fluttering nerves turn into a full-blown panic and I grip my bouquet so hard my knuckles ache.

"If you don't want to go through with this, you don't have to, Fin. There's still time to back out," a deep voice says.

I look over and see Rafferty and he's looking all big-brotherly and concerned. "I'll be okay," I assure him.

Raff studies me for a long moment then gives a sharp nod. Moving over to him, I link an arm through his and smile up at him. "I know this isn't real, but thank you for walking me down the aisle," I say and his handsome face softens.

"Anything for you, sis."

From somewhere, the strains of music suddenly fill the air and Rory and Sofia hurry to the doorway. "It's go-time. Are you ready?"

Pulling in a deep breath, I nod. *Ready as I'll ever be.*

I watch Rory walk out, leading the procession, closely followed by Sofia. Then, it's time for me and Rafferty. The music changes and Raff gives my arm a squeeze before guiding me through the doors and then we start down the aisle.

Everything is a blur as I walk forward, over the rose petals Rory and Sofia just sprinkled, and then straight up to the altar where Luca waits with Giovanni at his side. I'd like to say seeing my future husband calms and centers me, but the sight

of Luca in his tux makes my heart speed up faster and my palms start sweating.

I can't believe I'm going to marry this man. Luca Marino and I have known each other for two weeks, nothing about this is real and I feel like the world's biggest charlatan. I think I might pass out.

Rafferty leans in and whispers, "You okay?"

Forcing a nod...forcing myself to breathe...I feel every pair of eyes in the church on me. Rafferty extends my hand, offering it to Luca, and I realize it's shaking.

"Fin," Raff growls. "You sure?"

I know he's offering me an out, ready to sweep me out of here the moment I incline my head, but I can't do that to Luca. Despite my fears, I place my hand in his and step forward.

Let's do this.

Once we're in front of the priest, I look over at Luca and something seems off. He's avoiding eye contact and seems...I don't know. On edge. Maybe he's just as nervous as I am. Wanting him to know that it's okay and that we're both in this thing together, I squeeze his hand, prompting him to look at me.

And the blank look in his dark eyes makes my stomach plummet. Oh, God. He's having second thoughts. I can see it all over his face. "We got this," I whisper and give his hand another reassuring squeeze.

Luca slowly looks away and shifts his body from me the slightest bit. No one else may notice, but I do. Swallowing hard, feeling like Luca isn't going to go through with the marriage, I start sweating buckets.

I think I'm on the verge of a panic attack. Or, I'm about to faint. This dress is too damn tight and it feels like I'm going to suffocate.

Before I know it, we're at the vows section of the ceremony and I'm ready to freak out because I have no idea what's going on in Luca's head. He's been avoiding eye contact and his grip

on my hand is so slack that it's making me feel unwanted, very concerned and absolutely awful.

Then the priest focuses on Luca and it's time for him to recite his vows.

"Please, repeat after me," the priest says. "I, Luca Marino, take you, Finley O'Shea..."

I feel Luca's hand loosening on mine, as though he's about to let go, and the silence is so profound, you could hear a feather float to the floor.

Oh, God, oh, God, oh God.

My cheeks begin to burn in humiliation and when he finally meets my gaze, I instantly recognize that look—he's about to bolt. To leave me standing here all by myself. Tears prick my eyes and everything grows blurry.

I need to find the nearest exit and get as far away from here as possible. My hand goes limp in his and my heart is thundering in my ears. Why did I ever agree to this?

"I, Luca Marino, take you, Finley O'Shea..."

Luca's deep voice echoes through the church and my head snaps back over to him. His hold on my hand tightens and he gives a slight nod. Relief like I've never known before pours through me and a sigh whispers from between my lips as my shoulders droop slightly in relief.

The priest continues, "...for my lawful wife, to have and to hold..."

"...for my lawful wife, to have and to hold..." Luca's voice sounds firmer, more strong, and I almost sag against him.

"...from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer..."

Luca repeats after the priest and I can breathe easier. The tension that had filled me is loosening its chokehold.

"...in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

Luca finishes, "...in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

“I will love and honor you all the days of my life.”

Almost there. Only one more phrase and then it's my turn.

Luca smiles at me. “I will love and honor you all the days of my life.”

Oh, thank God. Then he's sliding the wedding band onto my finger and I think I'm finally breathing again. The priest turns to me and I repeat the same vows, promising Luca forever. Well, technically, promising him three months.

After putting the platinum band on his ring finger, I'm ready to curl up into a little ball of relief and weep tears of joy on the altar. But, instead, I forgot about the next part. The priest declares us man and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Luca Marino, and then Luca is pulling me into his arms and kissing me.

I'd like to say he's kissing all of my worries away but, so far, this day has been really stressful and I feel a little wobbly on my feet. His lips aren't on mine long and he clearly doesn't want to give everyone a show. So, after a fairly sweet, not quite chaste kiss, he pulls me against his side and we start down the aisle amidst a cacophony of cheers, whistles and clapping. It's deafening.

Once we're in the back of the SUV and on our way to the reception, I can finally breathe a little easier. A part of me can't believe we did it. We actually went through with marrying each other and it's bizarre to think I'm a married woman.

There isn't much time to talk and I think we need a quiet moment to absorb what we just did. We arrive at the luxurious hotel where the reception is taking place in the ballroom. It's a little scary when I see the endless armed guards everywhere, but they're just making sure the day isn't ruined by Desmond.

The rest of the evening passes fast and is such a blur, and I find myself holding onto Luca's hand all night. To his credit, he doesn't let go and I wonder if he needs to be holding my hand, too. If he needs to know I'm right there beside him through all the craziness. It's like we're supporting each other and it's nice to have someone to lean on.

Matteo Marino wasn't exaggerating when he said he wanted to make our wedding the biggest event of the year. There are more than two-thousand guests in the ballroom and every time we turn around, a well-wisher is there. I don't know any of these people and I don't think Luca does either. Thank goodness our mothers, brothers and sisters are here.

Everyone is not only celebrating our nuptials, but also the official end to the Marino/O'Shea feud. Expensive champagne flows and the entire wall is lined with at least twenty tables loaded with decadent foods and desserts. The wedding cake is made up of ten different tiers and we have to step up onto a ladder decorated with flowers and silver ribbons in order to make the first cut.

As the evening wears on, I'm still too nervous to eat much, but I'm guzzling champagne like it's going out of style. Every time my glass is half empty, someone is there to hand me a fresh flute of bubbly. After all of the stress and anxiety of the day, I relish the buzz that's settling over me.

And that buzzy, loosey feeling is making my inhibitions fall to the wayside. It's also making my new husband look more and more attractive with each passing minute. When it's time for our first dance, Luca leads me out onto the polished hardwood floor and spins me around to some song that Matteo chose.

But I don't even care because I'm in Luca's arms, breathing in his yummy cologne, and when he dips me, I burst into giggles. Pulling me back up, he nuzzles his face against my neck and places a soft kiss there. It should be a sexy and romantic moment—and it is—until I hiccup.

With a chuckle, Luca pulls back and gazes into my eyes for a long moment. "You're one in a million, *tesoro*."

"You were having second thoughts earlier, weren't you?" I've lost all of my inhibitions by this point and there's no holding me back from asking the question that's been plaguing me all day.

"My nerves may have nearly gotten the best of me," he slowly admits.

“Me, too. Oh, Luca, I almost fainted right on the altar. The whole time I was one step away from either hurling or peeing my pants.”

Luca bursts out laughing and pulls me closer. “But we did it.”

I nod and bury my face against his chest. “God, you smell good,” I mumble. That amber scent of his will be my undoing. I think I accidentally get lipstick on his pristine white shirt, but I don’t think he’ll mind. In fact, he’s tightening his arms around me, and I close my eyes and wish this dance would last forever.

Which means it ends sooner than I’d like and then Luca is pulling me off the dance floor and waving to people as he drags me toward the exit. The guests laugh, assuming he’s ready to start the honeymoon, but I know that’s not exactly the case. We’re not supposed to sleep together tonight.

At least, I don’t think we planned on it. But now I’m starting to really have second thoughts. I’m feeling so good, so free, and I may just jump my husband tonight. After all, we’re married and I’m a woman with wants and needs.

And right now I’m wanting this delicious, sexy man. I’m wanting him badly.

After what feels like a million toasts and well wishes, our family comes over and hugs us both.

“Have a good honeymoon,” Rory says and winks at me. I can’t help but giggle.

“Not too good,” Liam growls in my ear and I look over to see his bright blue eyes flashing a warning. “Fin...”

“Fin, how much did you have to drink?” Conor asks.

“Enough,” I answer in a chippy voice and everyone but my brothers chuckle.

“Remember, you don’t have to sl—”

But I cut Rafferty off by pressing my hand over his mouth. “Raff, I’m going on my honeymoon and certain things are expected.”

All three of my brothers push closer, surrounding us, and level their gazes on Luca in what can only be described as a death glare.

“This sham gets annulled in three months,” Liam reminds him in a low, hostile voice.

“Annulled,” Con grits out.

“Not a divorce,” Raff adds meaningfully.

“Oh, my God,” I cry and push right through them, dragging Luca with me. “Give it a rest, big brothers. I can take care of myself.”

As we walk away, I glance back over my shoulder and grin. “See you next week!”

They all say goodbye and wave, my brothers looking grim, and I can’t help but laugh. “Sometimes, they can be a little overprotective.”

“Just a little,” Luca says, straightening his shirtfront where Conor jabbed a finger against his chest.

“Luca!”

We both turn and see Matteo Marino marching toward us. And he doesn’t look too thrilled.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he demands, his face a dark mask of annoyance.

“On our honeymoon,” Luca answers, pulling me into the crook of his arm.

“You’re leaving too early. You should stay at least another hour.”

“Sorry. We have a long flight and we’re ready. Aren’t we, Finley?”

I nod and it’s clear Matteo isn’t used to people standing up to him. With a low curse, he starts to say more when Anna walks up.

“Have a wonderful honeymoon,” she says and gives first her son then me a big hug.

“They need to stay,” Matteo grumbles.

“They can go,” Anna says. “They’ve done enough for today... and for you.”

Anna sends us both a warm smile and I decide I really like Luca’s mother. Luca gives his father a triumphant look then turns on his heel, pulling me with him as I give a little wave.

Whelp, Anna Marino is right. Luca and I did everything we said we’d do. We spent the last two weeks being paraded all over Chicago and making the world believe we not only love each other, but also that the rivalry between our families is over.

We kept our promise and upheld our end of the bargain, did our jobs and now I’m ready to have some fun over in Italy. And maybe I might even sleep with my husband.

Unfortunately, that never happens and the honeymoon is cut short almost immediately.

LUCA

My father has more damn nerve than anyone I know. We've followed his plan to the letter and now we're ready to leave. So that's what we're damn well going to do. I've had enough of all those fake guests and rich society assholes. They only came because it was the wedding of the year and an invitation was a coveted thing.

Too bad they didn't know it was all fake. *Idiots.*

I help a tipsy Finley into the back of the SUV and gather her dress up, tucking it in before carefully shutting the door. The truth is, I couldn't go through with my plan. As much as I wanted to give my father the middle finger and walk out of that church in front of all of his friends and business associates, I couldn't do it.

Or, rather, I couldn't do it to Finley.

I'm not going to lie—I came damn close. But then Finley took my hand and whispered, "We got this."

I didn't respond right away and I was on the verge of walking away. But then I saw her eyes fill with tears and my heart sank. She looked so beautiful and I couldn't let myself be the cause of her pain and humiliation. So I followed through with the wedding and I'm still trying to sort out my feelings about the situation.

I'm not sure I have regrets about going through with the marriage, but I hate that I let the opportunity to make my father look like a fool pass me by. I try to tell myself that there will be other opportunities in the future. But who knows.

For now, though, I look over at my bride who seems to be giggling at everything. “What’s so funny?” I ask, unable to keep from smiling. She’s so damn adorable.

“I think I may have had too much champagne.” She hiccups and slaps a hand over her mouth. “I’m feeling a little…”

“Tipsy?”

She giggles and then crawls across the seat. My gut tightens as she climbs right into my lap and gives me a seductive smile. “Thank you for marrying me, Mr. Marino.”

“I couldn’t resist, Mrs. Marino,” I tease back. When she slides a hand through my hair, raking her fingers around and to the back of my neck, I wait to see what she’s planning. Finley tugs me down and starts kissing me. For a few seconds, I let her lead, but my desire for her starts to build, heating up fast, and I take control. My tongue delves between her lips and meets hers, tasting and twisting. She tastes sweet, like the bubbly she’s been imbibing all evening, and I’m glad she’s relaxed.

Especially since I’m going to fuck my virgin bride tonight.

My hands get lost in all the crinoline and satin of her voluminous skirt, but I keep searching for skin, diving beneath the layers and trying to find her warm flesh. It’s like a maze, though, and every time I think I’ve found her soft thigh, it’s a deadend of more fabric.

My mouth is latched onto hers and I’m drinking deeply, savoring her sweet inhibition. And it’s absolute heaven. I’m about to flip her onto her back when the SUV suddenly lurches sideways.

What the fuck? My head snaps up, breaking our heated kiss, and I look out the window to see an SUV with dark-tinted windows pulling up behind us, way too close, and they try to clip the back bumper again.

“Who is that?” I bark, sitting up straight and sliding Finley off my lap. She spins around, trying to see what’s going on, and our driver hits the gas.

“I’m not sure, Mr. Marino,” the driver says.

“Don’t let them get close,” I warn. “They’re trying to spin us out.”

The driver nods and floors it, but our pursuers stay close, right on our ass. We’re still driving through the city and when I look out the front windshield, there’s a red light in the next intersection.

“Blow through it,” I order the driver and he instantly complies, trying to carefully drive us through without incident. But everyone starts honking and cars start swerving around us, attempting to avoid a collision.

“Oh, my God,” Finley murmurs, clutching onto the seat in front of her.

“Hang on,” I warn her, doing the same thing myself.

We make it through the intersection, but it’s a harrowing experience. Glancing over my shoulder, I see the black SUV is still chasing us. Blowing out a frustrated sigh, I point to a sharp turn up ahead. “Go that way! Off the main street,” I direct the driver.

Our SUV squeals down the side street leaving a trail of black marks in its wake across the pavement. Up ahead, a garbage truck turns the corner and the driver immediately slams on the brakes, spinning the wheel sideways. Finley and I go flying across the back seat and I catch her, but end up slamming my head against the glass window of the door. Ouch.

For a dazed moment, I blink, my arms wrapped tightly around her waist, and I realize we’ve come to an abrupt stop. The damn garbage truck is taking up the entire street and it’s impossible to get around it.

Suddenly, a loud cacophony of POPs fill the air and glass shatters as bullets pepper the inside of our SUV.

Holy fuck! They’re shooting at us, I realize, and immediately yank Finley down to the floor, covering her with my body. My adrenaline kicks in and I slam a fist against the back seat. “GO! Reverse us out of here! Now!”

Luckily, our driver is thinking the exact same thing and he shoves the gears into reverse and slams the gas. We speed

backwards, past our pursuers, and then the SUV does a screeching 180, leaving smoke in its tracks.

“Forget the airport,” I say. “Let’s lose these guys.”

While the other car is trying to turn around, we peel away and do a few quick turns. After about five minutes, I’m feeling pretty confident that we’ve finally lost them. Finley is handling the entire situation like a champ, and I look over and study her. I hate how dangerous things just got and knowing she could’ve been shot causes a fury like I’ve never known before to seep through my entire body.

I’m going to keep her safe, I vow. No one is going to get close enough to shoot at her again. I refuse to let one hair on her precious head be harmed.

“We need to go somewhere safe,” I murmur, yanking my bow tie off, and she nods. Pulling my phone out, I call Gio and quickly tell him what happened. He’s just as angry as I am.

“I don’t think we should go to Italy tonight,” I tell him. “They might be waiting at the airport right now.”

“Agreed. It makes sense that you two should lay low for a little while.”

“I have a place. It’s off the grid,” I assure him. “I’ll have the driver take us back to my place, we’ll grab my car and head up there.”

“I didn’t know about this place,” Gio comments. “Is it up North?”

“Yeah. I’ll call you when we’re situated.”

“Stay safe,” Gio says and then we disconnect.

I direct the driver to return to my place and then Finley and I quickly move our suitcases into the trunk of my Mercedes. We can change when we get to the cabin because I don’t want to waste any more time here than we have to. The chances of some of Desmond’s enforcers showing up at my place is too high to risk lingering for longer than a couple of minutes. So the sooner we get out of here, the better.

I have to help stuff poor Finley and her voluminous wedding gown into the front seat then I quickly circle around the car and slide into the front seat.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“I have a cabin up in Wisconsin. It’s really quiet, secluded and on a lake. No one else knows about it, so we’ll be safe there.”

“I can’t believe Desmond sent enforcers after us.” Finley shivers and I reach over and take her hand in mine. “This is never going to end, is it?”

“It will. We’re going to defeat Desmond and once word gets out about what he did, people are going to side with us and he’s going to start feeling the heat.”

“I hope so.”

The drive up to my cabin is a little over an hour and Finley and I are quiet most of the ride. She calls her family and talks to them for a while. Of course, they’re livid after they hear what happened. It takes her a good thirty minutes to talk her brothers out of storming the family compound and murdering Desmond. But once they’ve calmed down, they tell us to hang out up here for a bit and that it’s a good thing we avoided the airport.

By the time we arrive at the lakefront cabin, it’s after eleven. I think my girl has sobered up after our little death-defying adventure and I can’t wait to drag her into my arms. But, if she’s too overwhelmed by what happened, I’m not going to press her. When she and I have sex, it’s going to be because she’s begging for it and aching for me. Not because she feels pressured by me or anything else.

I park the car then help Finley climb out. “We need to get you out of that dress,” I tell her and her gaze immediately darkens. I don’t intend for it to sound seductive at all; she just looks extremely uncomfortable and over it. But a spark lights her blue eyes and I’m starting to wonder if maybe tonight will get heated between us, after all.

I grab our suitcases and wheel them up the gravel path, then I open the front door and motion for Finley to go inside.

Following her in, I immediately turn and lock the door. It's chilly so I walk straight over to the fireplace and get started on building a fire.

"Sorry it's so cold in here. And sorry that our honeymoon plans got shot to hell."

Finley moves up beside me, watching as I stack wood and crumple up some newspaper. "It's not your fault. Desmond is my uncle, so I'll take the blame."

I pause and look up. "It's definitely not your fault," I tell her. Then I stand, grab the box of matches and light the kindling. Flames erupt and it doesn't take long before a fire is roaring, pouring off heat, chasing the chill in the air away. Shrugging my jacket off, I toss it over a nearby chair.

"Oh, that feels so good," Finley murmurs, leaning forward and rubbing her hands in front of the flames.

My gaze moves over her back and the long line of tiny pearl buttons. She's going to need help getting out of her dress and I run my tongue over my teeth in anticipation. Once she warms up, Finley stands up straight and looks over at me. I know I'm eyeing her hungrily, but I can't help it. The firelight is flickering, casting her in a soft glow, and I clench my fists, desperate to touch her, but reluctant to push her. She's been through so much today.

And, I'm not supposed to touch her. Technically.

"Will you help me with my dress?" she asks in a low voice.

I release a breath and nod. Finley turns around, offering her back, and I reach out and very carefully begin to undo each tiny button. I don't know why, but my hands are a little shaky and I struggle, trying hard to focus on the job. It seems to take me forever, but once they're all undone, I drop my hands.

"All set." My voice comes out husky and Finley turns back around. Our gazes lock, full of heat and questions. "Finley, I know you're tired and—"

"I'm not tired," she interrupts. Then she lets her dress fall forward and slide down her body.

My mouth turns dry as the gown pools around her feet and she's left standing there in front of me in a lacy strapless bra and matching white panties. My eyes soak in every detail and she's damn near perfect. So fucking beautiful.

"Are you sure?" I manage to ask hoarsely.

"I've never been more sure of anything—or anyone—in my life. I want you, Luca."

"Then you're going to get me," I tell her and pull her against my body, head dipping and mouth crashing against hers. Finley's body molds against mine and I kiss her with a needy desperation that isn't normally my style. There's no technique involved and we're devouring each other. Passion is the only thing guiding me at this point.

Breaking the kiss because I need to come up for air, I start licking down the side of her throat, taking time to explore the slender curve where her neck and shoulder meet. I've never been with someone so damn lovely and I scrape my teeth along the round plumpness of her breasts above the lacy bra. Finley's head falls back and she leans forward, offering herself to me.

As sexy as her lacy underthings are, I need them gone because they're in my way. I'm desperate to see and feel Finley naked and writhing beneath me. Now.

Reaching around, I unsnap the bra and it drops to the floor. My hands come back and curve around the soft globes, and I'm not surprised they fit my palms perfectly. Her hand slides through my hair and I dip my head and latch my mouth around a pink nipple, sucking and lapping it into a hard peak. Then I move to the other one, worshiping it.

Finley is making a soft humming sound in the back of her throat and it's sexy as hell, making my dick ache. Releasing her breast, I step back and start unbuttoning my shirt. The firelight makes her flushed skin shimmer and I tear my shirt off and grab my belt buckle, fingers fumbling to get it off.

Finley chuckles. "Are you in a hurry?"

“I’m going to devour you,” I growl in warning, tossing the belt and tugging my zipper down. “From head to toe.”

“And everywhere in between?” she teases.

“You fucking know it.”

I watch as she slides her panties down and kicks them aside. “I can’t wait,” she murmurs.

I’m so hard it’s painful and I pause, stopping to appreciate her naked glory. She’s a fiery red head everywhere and there’s no doubt about it—this woman is going to be my undoing. Snapping back to attention, I shove my pants and boxer briefs down in one smooth move then grab her and kiss the ever-living shit out of her.

I’d probably feel guilty as hell for almost leaving her at the altar if I wasn’t lost in such a fog of hazy desire right now. But I’m going to make it up to her. I’m going to pull out all the stops to make sure Finley knows what it feels like to be fucked thoroughly.

FINLEY

My first glimpse of Luca's naked body leaves me a little breathless and slightly nervous. I have no idea how he's going to fit because he's sporting quite an impressive package. When he pulls me up against him, I whimper, forgetting all about my worries.

Trailing my fingers up and around his neck, I can't believe our naked bodies are molded against one another, and nothing has ever felt so good. He's so masculine—hard and firm in all the right places.

Luca is kissing me with a hunger that I'm matching and our tongues tangle as I press further into him, wanting to melt. To become one with him.

"Luca," I gasp, needing, wanting more. My hand drops and I dare to reach between our bodies and touch him. His cock leaps at my touch, twitching with need, and I gently stroke him.

"Fuck," he hisses and pulls back. His hand snakes around mine and lifts it up, kissing my knuckles.

"Don't you want me to touch you?"

"I don't think I can hold out if you're touching me like that for long, baby girl. It feels too good." He slides his hands through my hair. "So fiery. I love your hair."

My face flushes from his complement and the roaring heat of the fire.

“I want your gorgeous hair dragging over my chest while you ride me.”

“I’ll try,” I tell him nervously.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, gaze searching my face.

“It’s just that you’re, um, really well-endowed.” I chew on my lower lip, gaze on his straining cock and he chuckles wickedly.

“Oh, have no doubts, *tesoro*. We will fit together perfectly. Your sweet pussy is going to love my cock.”

I suck in a breath. “You’re so naughty.”

“You have no idea.” His hand drops between my legs, covering me, and my breath catches in my throat. Those long fingers start sliding up and down my wet slit, teasing and probing, and my legs wobble, a raspy cry escaping from between my lips.

Luca presses a kiss to my forehead. “Hold that thought.”

I sag forward as he steps away, watching him grab the blanket off the back of the couch and lay it over the rug. Then he walks over to his duffel bag, bends over and I bite my lip at the yummy view of his tight, bare ass. When he straightens back up and turns around, I look up to see a condom between his teeth.

“See something you like?” he asks around the foil packet.

“I sure do.”

He grins, drops the packet onto the blanket and grabs me. I squeal, not expecting him to move so fast, and he spins me around. Grasping my hips, he rubs his hard length against me and groans. “Fuck, Finley. I’m dying to be inside you.”

“What’s stopping you?” I ask boldly.

“Nothing,” he whispers. “I’m going to need you to bend over, *tesoro*. Can you do that for me?”

Bend over? “Umm...” His large hand flattens on my spine, guiding me forward until my ass is sticking up in the air and I can touch my toes. “What exactly am I supposed to do down

here?” I ask, looking at him from between my legs and upside down.

Behind me, Luca drops to his knees. “Spread your legs,” he orders, gripping my ass and dragging me against his mouth.

“Oh, God.” His tongue licks then plunges between my folds while one hand holds my hip and the other circles around, and his wicked fingers begin toying with my clit. Circling, stroking, teasing me to the brink.

I reach out and brace my hands on the coffee table, feeling my legs growing weak as he tortures me mercilessly.

“Luca!” My hips start moving on their own, rotating, and he slides a finger inside my core, working me until I’m one step away from combusting. “Shit!”

The orgasm blindsides me and my knees turn to jelly. As pulsating pleasure rocks through me, Luca sweeps me up and lays me out on the blanket. Looking up, in awe of the way he commands my body, I watch him roll the protection on and my legs drop open as he settles between them.

Luca drags the thick head of his cock up and down my soaked seam, teasing me for a moment. Then he kisses me hard and begins pushing into my body. I know it’s going to sting but, holy hell, it’s like he’s ripping me in two. With a sharp cry, I arch up and he withdraws.

But then he’s sinking inside again, this time deeper, and I drop my head back and take him. The initial pain is gone and I feel my body expanding to accommodate him. To welcome him fully.

“Okay?” he rasps.

“Yes,” I murmur.

Then he starts moving, long, slow drags at first. His fingers find my swollen clit, working it until I’m whimpering again. I wrap my legs around him, dig my heels into his ass and buck up, trying to pull him deeper.

With a groan, Luca tilts my hips and increases his pace. I have no idea how he knows where my sweet spot is, but bull’s eye.

He's found it and hits it again and again. Until I can't take any more and I scream, my entire body rising up and shaking hard as my release races through me.

Above me, Luca thrusts once, twice, three more times then stiffens and explodes with a long, low groan. I haven't caught my breath yet and for a long moment, our bodies stay connected. Then he presses a kiss on my forehead and pulls out, rolling away and presumably taking care of the condom.

"Oh, my God," I whisper, looking up at the ceiling, at a complete and utter loss. The fire crackles and it takes me a minute to come down from the full body orgasm that just pummeled through me. I've never experienced this kind of chemistry and attraction before—and a very scary thought hits me.

I could very easily fall for my husband. Something that I'm not supposed to be doing when we're only pretending to be married for a few months. But I can't help it. Is this what a life with Luca would be like? Endless orgasms and feeling like I've finally found my person?

It's so tempting to let my heart overrule my mind. But in the interest of self-preservation, I know that I need to tread carefully. Even so, it's going to be a huge challenge to not fall head over heels for this man.

When Luca returns, he helps me up and presses a soft, lingering kiss on my lips. "It's late," he murmurs, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear. "Do you want to sleep out here or in the bedroom?"

It's so toasty out here, but I'm not sure how comfortable the couch will be. "Will you be okay on the couch?" I ask and look down at Luca's long legs.

"It's pulls out," he tells me. "It is awfully cozy out here."

I nod. "Let's stay in here."

With a grin, Luca tells me where to find the clean sheets while he pulls the cushions and pillows off and opens the couch up. I quickly find the linen closet and grab some sheets and a couple of blankets. Back in the living room, I set them on a chair and

quickly pull a t-shirt and panties out of my suitcase. I'm not used to walking around naked. Or, sleeping in the buff.

"I'll be right back," I tell Luca and wander down to the bathroom. I need to wash my makeup off, brush my teeth and use the bathroom. Shutting the door behind me, I pull my clothes on then stare at my reflection in the mirror for a long moment.

I'm no longer the same girl as before. Luca just taught me what it's like to be a woman and now there's no going back. That also includes cleaning up my nether regions because I'm sore and a little sticky.

After freshening up, it hits me how very tired I am. The last two weeks have been an insane whirlwind and today really took its emotional toll. Especially when I thought Luca was going to ditch me.

But, deep down, I knew he would never do that to me. I'm not sure what made me so worried. Now that we're married and have been intimate, the fear that he almost left me seems a little paranoid. Maybe I misjudged the entire situation and he was fine all along, and I was the one who was off because I was so nervous.

Whatever. I'm not going to worry about it because we're fine. Everything went according to plan and now we have three months together. Three months for us to spend every day together, get to know each other better and for me not to fall in love with my husband.

Fingers crossed, anyway.

After finishing in the bathroom, Luca goes in and does his thing. I curl up on the pullout couch and listen to the crackling and popping of the fire. Luca is pretty fast and he returns, adds another log to the fire then crawls into bed with me. I've never spent the night in a man's arms and I have no idea if Luca is a cuddler or needs his own space.

But the moment he's under the covers, he reaches out and drags me into his arms. "C'mere," he whispers, pulling my back against his front. He's wearing pajama bottoms, but

nothing else, and I love the feel of his warm body curled around mine. It doesn't take long for me to fall asleep and it's the most restful sleep I've had in a very long time.

I've never felt so content, so satisfied. And so curious about what the next twelve weeks will bring.

I don't think I move all night. Staying wrapped up in Luca's warm embrace, listening to his soft, steady breathing and feeling the rise and fall of his firm chest is my new favorite thing. At some point during the night, he releases me and tends to the fire. By the time morning comes, it has completely burned out and nothing remains but cold embers. There's a chill in the air and I snuggle up to Luca's warm body, wrapping around him to stay warm. A low chuckle rustles my hair and I look up to see him smiling at me.

"Are you using me for my body heat?" he asks, voice rough with sleep.

"Yes," I mumble and wiggle closer.

"At least you're honest about it." He wraps his arms and legs around me, drawing me tighter to him. "Better?"

"So much."

"Do you want me to start the fire again?"

"I want you to stay right where you are, holding me." With a soft sigh, I curl up against his chest, my cheek pressed to his firm pecs, and listen to his strong, steady heartbeat. It lulls me back to sleep and the next time I wake up, Luca is gone.

Rolling over, I sit up and look around, the tantalizing smell of freshly-brewed coffee filling my nose. He's in the kitchen which connects right to the living room in an open concept design. The whole cabin is gorgeous with dark wood walls, high cathedral ceilings made up of large beams and the back wall is mostly all floor to ceiling windows that lead out to what looks like a deck. Of course, the best part is the beautiful view of the blue lake.

"Want some coffee?" Luca asks from the kitchen where he's pouring some into a mug.

“Yes, please. That sounds wonderful.” Dragging myself out of bed, I hurry off to the bathroom. After I do what I need to, I walk back into the living room and head straight to the kitchen where Luca sits at the bar, sipping his black coffee.

“Cream or sugar?” he asks, eyeing me over the rim.

“No, thank you.” I pick up the mug of steaming caffeine, blow on it and take a sip. “Mmm.”

“How are you feeling this morning?”

I’m not exactly sure what he’s asking and whether or not he’s referring to our being married or—

“Are you sore?”

I press my lower lips together and feel my cheeks heat up. “A little,” I admit. Something flares in his dark eyes and I squeeze my thighs together, feeling a twinge. If I had to guess, he looks pleased with himself. “You don’t seem at all sorry about that.”

“I’m not,” he tells me, reaching over and laying a large, warm hand on my thigh. “Should I be?”

“I guess not,” I murmur, enjoying the way his fingertips are making little circles against my skin.

“Good because there’s so much still for you to learn and for us to experience together. But I won’t touch you tonight if—”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine by tonight,” I tell him with a naughty smirk. “And ready to be touched.”

Luca lets out a low, rough grunt then takes a long sip of his coffee, eyeing me. “You’re dangerous.”

So are you, I think. To my heart. But I don’t say anything. Just smile as he massages my knee and think about what delicious things he’s going to show me later.

LUCA

Going through with the wedding and not leaving Finley is the best decision I may have ever made. She's so much more than I even imagined. And the honest to God truth is I can't keep my damn hands off her. For whatever reason, I always have to be touching her. Whether holding her hand, rubbing her leg or tucking her fiery hair behind her ear, I have the constant urge to have my hands on her. This has never happened to me before and being so touchy-feely with a woman is an entirely new experience for me.

But, dammit, I like it. I love my hands on Finley. Maybe it's a protective or possessive thing. I don't know. Hell, I'm trying not to give it too much thought or I might get freaked out.

I told her I wouldn't touch her, as in fuck her, until tonight, but I'm not sure if I can hold out. Everything about her tempts me, calls out to me. Right now, we're walking outside by the lake and I can't seem to drag my eyes off her. Finley is truly the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And now that I know how sweet she tastes and how divine it is to be deep inside her, there's no turning back.

Fuck me. I'm falling for my wife.

But, again, not something I want to think too hard about. Instead, I'd rather just enjoy our time here together. It's quiet and so peaceful being away from the city and our families. Right now, it's just me and her, and I can honestly say I've never enjoyed spending so much time with anyone like I do with her.

Getting to know Finley is a complete joy and I love how she keeps me on my toes. She's sassy, sweet and intriguing. We have great conversations and always seem to be on the same page. And, after last night, I know the sex is out of this world.

I can't get enough of her.

I've learned so much about her over the past couple of weeks and she can take me by surprise because she has an unpredictable nature that I normally wouldn't like. But with Finley, I enjoy that she challenges me and doesn't just tell me whatever she thinks I want to hear. My woman has a mind and opinion all her own and it's damn refreshing.

A strong breeze picks up out of nowhere and I spot some whitecaps on the lake. The weather, especially during this time of year, can turn nasty in the blink of an eye. Glancing up, I didn't realize how many storm clouds had appeared. I'd been too caught up in Finley's story about how she'd outsmarted her brothers during a game of poker and won all of their money.

"How much?" I ask, doing a double take.

"Three thousand dollars," she announces with a proud grin. "They had no idea who exactly they were up against."

"So you're that good at poker?"

Finley shrugs a shoulder and gives me a mischievous look.

"What's that supposed to mean?" When she doesn't answer, I grab her around the waist and haul her up against me. "Did you cheat?"

"Is counting cards considered cheating?"

A loud, deep laugh rumbles up from my chest. "Clever girl." My lips drop and I start kissing the side of her face. *Fuck*. I can't get enough of her and my need is spiraling out of control.

Suddenly, raindrops begin falling and Finley laughs, spinning out of my arms. She grabs my hand and gives me a playful smile. "Dance with me."

"It's raining," I say, stating the obvious and trying to tug her back toward the cabin.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to dance in the rain, Luca Marino?”

I arch a quizzical brow. “No, not really.”

“Humor me? Please?”

At that moment, I realize I would do anything for Finley. As the rain starts to fall harder, soaking through our clothes, I pull her into my arms and we start moving. “Is it everything you imagined it would be?” I ask teasingly, briefly lifting a hand and slicking my wet hair back and out of my eyes.

“Even better,” she answers, looking up at me through spiky lashes.

“We’re probably going to catch a cold,” I grumble.

“Then we’ll eat chicken soup and rub Vick’s Vapor all over each other.”

“Hmm, maybe this dancing in the rain has its perks.” I would have absolutely no problem rubbing anything all over Finley’s delectable body.

Finley chuckles and I spin her out, reel her back in and dip her.

“You’re a pretty good dancer,” she tells me.

“I can manage, but I’m no Fred Astaire.” I tilt my head and look down, seeing so much joy on her pretty face. “You’re acting like you hear music right now.”

“I hear everything.” She leans back and looks up at me. “I hear the song they played last night during our first dance, I hear the melody of the raindrops, I hear a rhythm in the wind. Listen closely, Luca, and you’ll hear it, too.”

I’m not exactly sure what she’s talking about, but I find myself listening, and all I hear is the lap of the waves on the lake and the wind picking up. But no music. My girl is a dreamer. No doubt about it.

I’m glad she’s enjoying this, but the moment I hear a low boom of thunder, I dance her straight into the treeline and back toward the cabin. As nice as this has been, the last thing I want is for us to get stuck out here in a lightning storm. And I have a feeling that a pretty bad storm is on its way.

With my arm securely wrapped around Finley's shoulders, we hustle back to the warm security of my cabin. We're absolutely drenched and I lead her down to the bathroom. "Get those wet clothes off."

I start peeling mine off, dropping them on the floor, and she follows suit. Once we're naked, I can't help but pause and admire her before flipping on the shower.

"Get in here with me, *tesoro*," I murmur, reaching for her small hand and tugging her into the large shower stall. I remodeled the bathroom, adding this new shower complete with multiple nozzles and a big adjustable showerhead capable of any type of spray.

We immediately warm up beneath the hot water and I pull Finley against my body and kiss her hard. She makes me insatiable and I drink deeply, taking my fill of her, but it never seems to be enough. I know I told her I wouldn't take her until tonight and that I'd give her time because she's sore, but, dammit, it's so hard to resist her sweetness.

Consumed by desire, I slide my hands under her ass, scoop her up and turn, pressing her back against the tile wall. Finley wraps her legs around my waist and rotates her core, pressing down on my dick, trying to pull me into her tight warmth.

With a groan, I slap a hand against the wet wall and grind up, my tip pushing into her ever so slightly. I'm walking a dangerous tightrope here and I know I need to be careful. I've never had sex without protection, but now I'm considering it. Hell, who am I kidding? I'm craving to sink into Finley with nothing between us.

But I can't. It wouldn't be right and what if she got—

"Luca," Finley cries. "Please...I need you inside me. Now."

I hesitate. The devil is whispering in my ear to do it. One thrust and I'll be inside her, wrapped up in all that sweet honey warmth. But my logical side is picturing the pack of condoms in my suitcase.

Fuck it. I'm clean.

Finley sinks down at the same time I thrust up and we both groan long and hard as we come together. Connecting with her, becoming one physically and emotionally, is an experience that's hard to capture in words. But everything about it feels so damn right.

Pushing up onto the balls of my feet, one hand splayed beside her head on the wall, my other drops between our bodies and begins circling her clit. My body has lost any semblance of control and I pound into her wet heat. In and out. Harder than I should, but I can't stop myself. I need to mark her as mine. A wave of possessiveness washes over me and I grunt with each thrust, making her take me deeper, burying myself to the hilt.

I'm about to come and I work her clit, needing her to get there because the pressure is building and I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out.

"Let go, *tesoro*. Come for me," I whisper, sucking on her neck.

With a cry, Finley drops her head against the wall and rides her release out.

"Good girl..." A shudder wracks through me and I blow, overcome by the most intense orgasm I've ever experienced. Christ, my entire body shakes as I empty my seed into her and aftershocks rock through me so hard, my knees threaten to give out.

Dropping my face into the curve of her neck and shoulder, both of our bodies tremble. Very carefully, I lift Finley, sliding out of her, and set her down on her feet. There's a dazed look on her face and I feel the exact same way. Grabbing a washcloth, I soap it up and begin to wash her, taking special care between her thighs.

Finley returns the favor, running the bar of soap over my chest, and grinning up at me. "That was intense," she says.

I nod, still not trusting myself to form a coherent sentence.

"So that's what it feels like," she murmurs.

"What?"

"Getting the shit fucked out of you."

I burst out laughing, drop the washcloth and pull her in for a long, passionate kiss. Yep, this woman definitely keeps me on my toes. And I love it.

The rest of the week passes by in a blur of getting to know each other in every way possible, walks along the lake, conversations in front of the fire and endless orgasms. We've found our own little slice of heaven here and I don't ever want to leave.

There's nothing better than tuning out the rest of the world and getting lost in Finley's blue, blue eyes.

Right now, I focus all of my attention on my new bride. Yeah, this is all supposed to be fake, but nothing has ever felt so real. I've developed very protective feelings over Finley and the idea that Desmond wants to hurt her, to kill her, infuriates me. He needs to be taken care of because I'm not letting Finley out of my sight until her devious uncle is no longer a threat.

Pushing those thoughts back, I try not to think too hard about what happens after we leave the safety of the cabin. We're living in a perfect place right now and no one is going to find us or hurt her. I'm starting to wonder if we should extend our stay for as long as possible. It's a very tempting thought.

After a week of bliss, I ask Finley if she wants to stay another week or possibly even longer, and she jumps into my arms and slams her mouth against mine.

Smothering a laugh, I kiss the hell out of her. "I'll take that as a yes," I murmur between kisses.

"Yes..." She starts kissing along my jaw, "yes..." and licking my neck, "yes..." then reaching down and palming my already hard cock.

"You're going to kill me," I groan, thrusting into her hand.

"No, I'm going to bring you to life, Luca. And make your world shine brighter."

She's right. My world was always in shades of gray before I met Finley. Sort of cloudy and gloomy like the sky right before a storm rolls in. And now? Hell, now it's like I've stepped into a vivid technicolor film.

I know once our contract is up, we'll be free to go our separate ways. But maybe we don't have to. Maybe, just maybe, I've found the one thing that will make my life a happier, more beautiful place. One where I don't care about revenge against my father. A world where my main goal is to love this amazing woman in my arms.

The crazy truth is I'm falling hard for my fake wife and it's the best feeling in the whole damn world.

FINLEY

Spending an extra week at the cabin, just the two of us, has been wonderful. Every day, I get to know Luca better and he's such a good man. A great conversationalist, a considerate gentleman and an excellent lover. He's shown me a side of himself that I didn't know existed and I love it.

The truth is, I'm falling in love with him and it makes me nervous. It's been a fast, rollercoaster ride, but I know what I'm feeling is all too real. I don't know how I'm supposed to walk away from him in a few months and I'm hoping he's on the same page as me and we won't have to.

But, of course, all good things must come to an end, right? After two weeks of pure bliss, our families tell us it's time to come home. Rumor is Desmond is furious because we've united and are going up against him. He's lost important clients, contacts and his businesses are floundering. Our marriage and truce have been a success in gaining allies and support.

Luca and I have accomplished what we set out to do.

On our last day together, we sit on the deck, looking out at the lake. Neither of us has said too much because we know we're about to leave this idyllic place behind and go back down to the chaotic city.

"I wish we could stay here forever." I don't even mean to say it out loud, but I do. The moment the words are out of my mouth, Luca reaches for my hand and pulls me onto his lap.

“Me, too, *tesoro*.” He begins nuzzling the sensitive spot behind my ear and I lean sideways and sigh, enjoying his soft licks and nibbles.

All around us, I hear the birds singing and the soft rustling of tree branches. It’s so peaceful and I know I’ll cherish the memories we made here in my heart forever. I want to make sure Luca has plenty of good memories, too, and I pull away from his roaming mouth and slip down between his legs, my knees hitting the deck.

Reaching out, I massage him through his sweatpants and it doesn’t take long until he’s hard and straining upward. Peeling his waistband down, I watch as his erection springs free and I wrap my fingers around his hard length. I never thought I would’ve ever found a cock to be beautiful. But Luca’s is magnificent and I love everything about it.

Leaning forward, eyes meeting his, I flick my tongue out and lick his engorged tip.

“Fuck,” he groans, hips bucking.

Giving Luca pleasure is something I’ve grown to enjoy doing and I pay careful attention to his reactions as I suck him into my mouth. Holding him firmly around the base, I twist my hands, tightening them until he’s breathing hard and gripping the arms of the chair in a death-like hold.

Pulling him deeper, using my tongue to caress his underside, Luca’s head falls back as his hand wraps around my head, fingers lacing through my hair. His hips begin to pump and I let him thrust deeper than I’m prepared to handle. Somehow, my inevitable gagging has him more excited than I’ve seen.

“You can take me, *tesoro*. Suck it deep.” His dark gaze turns dominant, latching onto mine.

My eyes water, but I’m not a quitter.

“Fuck, yeah. Just...like...that.”

I don’t think I’ve ever had anything this big or deep in my mouth, hitting the back of my throat, but I’d do anything for Luca. Sucking hard, my cheeks indent, and Luca’s nostrils

flare, his eyes momentarily losing focus then snapping shut as his pulsing cock erupts.

“Christ,” he hisses.

His hot release slides down my throat and I slowly pull back, giving him a final squeeze and lick. When his eyes open again, I’m not sure exactly what I see in their dark molasses depths. He looks almost...scared. Which makes no sense.

“C’mere,” he rasps, pulling me back up and onto his lap. He gathers me against his chest, arms wrapping tightly around me, and then presses his lips to my neck. His chest rises and falls hard as he drops light kisses along my neck, jaw and then finally captures my lips in a long, heated kiss.

When we finally come up for air, he’s holding me so hard I can barely breathe. “Luca,” I gasp. “You’re crushing me.”

He instantly loosens his grip. “I’m sorry. I just...”

“Just what?” I look into dark, unreadable eyes, trying to figure out what’s going on in that head of his.

“I just don’t want this to end.”

I’m not sure if he’s referring to our time here at the cabin or our relationship. Whichever it is, I know I’m on the exact same page.

“Me neither,” I say and wrap my arms around his neck.

I’m not sure how long we sit wrapped up in each other’s embrace, but eventually the air turns colder. With a long sigh, Luca presses another kiss to my face and reluctantly says, “We should probably get going.”

It doesn’t take long to pack up and change and, before I know it, we’re in Luca’s Mercedes and on our way back to the city. I’m dying to speak up and tell him this doesn’t mean the honeymoon is over. That we’re still going to be living together and have every day to spend in each other’s arms.

It’s clear we both feel the pressure of the ticking clock, but it occurs to me that we can make our own rules. We don’t have to follow some silly contract drawn up by Matteo Marino.

“Luca,” I say softly.

“Yes?” He glances over at me.

“I’m going to hazard a guess here and say you enjoyed our time at the lake together as much as I did.” My pulse is pounding in my throat and I hope I’m not a delusional fool and this has been all one-sided.

“Of course, I did.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t. Just tightens his fingers around the steering wheel. *Uh-oh*. My heart sinks. That’s not exactly the reaction or response I was hoping for. Oh, God. Did I imagine our time together being better than it actually was? I mean, I had an amazing time with him, but did he not feel the same way?

Doubts begin creeping in, but then he reaches over and laces his fingers through mine. “Don’t ever doubt how amazing it was.”

Relief pours through me. Okay, that’s better. “I, ah, guess I was just thinking and…” My voice trails off and he squeezes my hand.

“Thinking what?”

“Well, just that we can make our own rules.”

“Okay. And what rules do you want to make?”

“Um, not really make them. More like bend them however we like.” He waits for me to continue and I start gnawing on my lower lip, doubts creeping in. “Like how we stayed two weeks up at the cabin instead of only one.”

“Okay.”

Dammit. Why is he being so dense? “So, like if maybe we wanted to be married for four months instead of three then that’s our prerogative, right? Our decision only. And screw whatever your father expects.”

Luca’s mouth edges up and he lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to its back. “What if we wanted to make it six months? Or a year? Or longer?” he asks, dark eyes twinkling.

I smile. “Then I’d say that’s our business and no one else’s. Wouldn’t you?”

“Hell yeah, I would.”

His entire body seems to relax and he lowers our entwined hands onto his thigh. For the entire rest of the ride home, he keeps my hand there, on his leg, occasionally lifting it to his lips to kiss it softly.

Gah, how can I not fall for this man? Seriously? It’s impossible. He’s sucked me into his universe like some kind of tall, dark and handsome black hole, and now I’m never going to be able to escape.

Not that I want to. I’m extremely happy and content right where I am.

We arrive back at our apartment a little over an hour later and settle right in together. It’s almost like we never left the lake. After sharing the spaghetti dinner we make in our little kitchen, Luca and I fall onto the couch and start kissing. I know exactly where this is leading and I’m all for it.

But then his phone rings, disrupting us. With an annoyed sigh, he reaches for it. “Sorry, *tesoro*. It might be important.”

Pulling away, I curl up against the pile of pillows and listen while he talks to Gio for a few minutes. After hanging up, he turns to me. “I have to go to a meeting.”

“Now?”

He nods. “I guess my father has an update on what’s happening with Desmond. Your brothers will be there, too.”

“It sounds important.”

“I’d rather stay here with you, but I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He leans forward and kisses me softly. Then he gets up, grabs his keys and heads out.

For a long time, I sit curled up on the couch, thinking over everything that happened the past couple of weeks. And about what’s happening right now. I feel like Luca and I are stepping into new territory and neither of us seems worried about the contract we signed.

Maybe ten minutes later, there's a knock on the door and I hop off the couch, wondering who it could be. Maybe Rory and Sofia? Or my mom? No one has visited us here yet, but they all knew we were returning today.

Throwing open the door, I frown, trying to remember why the man in front of me looks familiar. Then it all comes back. It's the creep who hit on me at the pub and started harassing me after I'd left. Ewan, the man Luca saved me from. When I try to immediately shut the door, he shoves a foot out to block it.

"Hi, Finley. We need to talk."

"What're you doing here? How did you know—"

"I'm friends with Luca. Your husband," he adds, tone snarky.

"No, that's not possible." My mind reverts back to that night outside the bar when Luca stepped in and stopped Ewan from bothering me. They didn't know each other.

"We met at University over in Europe and hit it off right away."

What? My heart sinks. What the hell is going on?

"Why're you here?" I ask softly. Dread begins to fill me and I have a feeling I'm not going to like his answer.

"Because there are some things you need to know. First and foremost, your husband is a liar."

I shake my head, not understanding, but curiosity makes me stand there and keep listening. But I'm not letting him in. I don't trust him. "Go ahead. Say what you came here to tell me. But you're not coming in."

His eyes narrow slightly, but he doesn't comment. "I don't need to come in. That night at the pub, Luca paid me to hit on you."

My stomach curls. "What?"

"He called me up and told me all about how his father wanted him to marry the youngest O'Shea sister and he said he'd never do it. I believe he told you that, too. Didn't he?"

I don't respond. But after our first meeting, he did say that. While I'd been sitting there and considering marrying him, he'd said he wasn't interested.

"But that doesn't mean I'm about to marry a stranger."

"Of course not."

"My father's plan is absurd and I'd never do it, of course."

"Of course."

His words reverberate through my mind. He had made his stance clear—he wasn't interested. So what changed his mind so suddenly? It's something that I've always wondered about, that has bothered me.

And why had he conveniently been outside that bar when Ewan began harassing me?

Dread fills me. Unless they'd set it up. What better way to get back into my good graces after coolly rejecting me? By rescuing me, of course. Oh, God.

"Don't you think it was strange that he did a complete 180 and changed his mind so suddenly?" Ewan asks.

"So you set it all up," I murmur.

"Luca paid me to play the dick and then he came in and saved the day."

"But why?" I ask, not understanding any of it.

"Because he hates his father, of course. It was the best revenge plan."

Revenge? What am I missing? "But it's exactly what his father wanted—for us to get married. How is that getting revenge?"

"Oh, Finley, sweets." I hate the passive-aggressive tone in his voice. He's talking to me like I'm some kind of idiot. A complete fool. "Luca wanted to humiliate his father at the wedding but, for whatever reason, at the last moment, he didn't follow through."

My stomach sinks and I know exactly what Ewan is about to reveal before he even says it.

“He planned to leave you standing at the altar in front of everyone like a damn fool. A perfect fuck you to his dad, right? It would’ve been the sweetest revenge, too. I’m not sure what changed his mind, but—”

“Why’re you telling me this now?”

“I just think you deserve to know. Your fake husband is a liar and if you were smart, you’d end your charade of a marriage before he hurts you.”

Too late. I pull my lower lip into my mouth and swallow hard.

“You poor, foolish thing. You’ve already fallen for him, haven’t you?” He makes a *tsk tsk* sound and I narrow my eyes.

As much as I don’t like Ewan, I’m glad he came here and told me the truth. “I have to go,” I mumble and start to close the door. I can’t miss Ewan’s smirk, but that’s not the problem. Locking the door, I turn and sag against it.

Everything I believed was a lie.

And Luca is the consummate actor.

Rubbing a hand over my heart, I feel hot tears threaten.

How could he do this to me? Fool me so thoroughly that I believed I was falling in love with him? My knees give out and I sink down to the floor as the tears fall.

I am such an idiot.

LUCA

I much rather would've taken Finley to bed in our new place than see my father and, of course, her brothers. After the wicked things I've done with their little sister...*Shit*. I'll be lucky if a bolt of lightning doesn't strike me down for lying to them and pretending we haven't been intimate.

Because the truth is, I'm beginning to know Finley's body better than my own. I know exactly what she likes, how she likes it and the sounds she makes when she comes. I know how sweet she tastes and the way her hips buck when I'm down between her thighs, worshiping her.

I just hope they can't tell or suspect that we've been fucking each other like rabbits. Despite that stupid agreement, she is my wife and we have every right to do whatever we want. Besides, she wants it just as much as I do.

Truthfully, I don't think I'll ever get enough of her. And that's why when we were driving back to the city, I was so happy she mentioned bending the rules. Forget bending. I'm about to break them entirely and never let Finley go. At this rate, I'm ready to stay with her forever and make this a true marriage.

I didn't think I'd ever fall for a woman so hard, but Finley came into my life and flipped everything onto its side. Before meeting her, I'd felt lost and without a purpose. I was searching for something, but I had no idea what. Now I know exactly what I was missing.

I was missing her. Having Finley by my side every day gives me a sense of calm, purpose and worthiness that I've never

known before. It's incredible. I just hope I'm worthy of her love.

The fact that I came so close to walking away from her boggles my brain. With hindsight, I know leaving her would've been a huge mistake. One I would have unknowingly regretted for the rest of my life. I may have gotten vengeance on my father, but having Finley in my life is so much better than that.

We're meeting at my family's brownstone and I drag my feet as I walk up the steps and open the front door with my key. I'm not looking forward to seeing any of them. Well, except for my mom. She's waiting in the living room and rushes over to hug me the moment I enter.

"Hi, sweetheart. It's so good to see you."

I hug her back and smile. "You, too, Mom."

"I'm so sorry your honeymoon was ruined but, thank God, you're both alright. Desmond really has gone too far and needs to be stopped."

"He does, but nothing was ruined. We had an amazing time up North."

My mom hikes an eyebrow and gives me a mischievous grin. "Amazing, hmm?"

Be cool, I remind myself. "Finley is sweet and easy to talk to. So, yeah, very good company."

She's eyeing me closely, reading into my words probably, but I find myself not caring.

"I'm glad to hear that, Luca. You need some happiness in your life and if Finley makes you happy, hold onto her."

"I will, Mom."

"Your brother, father and the O'Shea's are waiting for you down in your father's office."

I nod then turn toward the hall. The moment I walk into the room, all eyes land on me, and I push my shoulders back and try not to squirm under their probing stares.

“Welcome back,” Gio says and I nod.

“How’s Finley?” Rafferty immediately asks me.

“She’s good,” I state, meeting his concerned, ice-blue gaze. Doing my best not to fidget or look guilty, I sit down in an empty chair, lean back and cross an ankle over my opposite knee.

“Is she here?” Liam and Conor both ask at the same time.

Twins. What do you expect? I shake my head. “No, she stayed home.” *Home.* It’s so strange, yet comforting, to know we have a home together.

“We’re here to discuss Desmond,” my father reminds us and I struggle not to sigh or roll my eyes. Nothing like getting straight down to business and cutting out the small talk. But that’s good ol’ dad. I’m hardly surprised.

“What’s your news?” Liam asks, leaning forward slightly.

“One of my enforcers caught the rat himself, Sean Flannigan.”

Interesting. I sit up straighter.

“What?” Conor growls. “Where is he?”

“He’s here, down in the basement cell and awaiting interrogation,” my father informs us.

“Shocker,” Rafferty says in a low voice. “Isn’t that where you like to put all your enemies?”

The two share a mutual look of disdain, and I know that’s where my father had locked Rafferty up after he caught him. I’m also aware of the beatings, so I can understand why Rafferty would be holding some ill will against dear old dad.

“It’s secure and I figured you three would want to go down and ask him a few questions.” My father looks over at me. “In the meantime, I’d like to speak to my son. Alone.”

As the O’Shea brothers stand up, I wonder what the hell my father wants to talk to me about.

“We’ll get some answers out of him,” Conor states and cracks his knuckles. The big man is a boxer and possesses a

ridiculous amount of muscles. I have no doubt that they will intimidate Sean into spilling some of Desmond's secrets.

I hope so, anyway.

The O'Shea's follow my father's guard out and presumably down to the basement. Meanwhile, I look over at my dad with indifference.

"We're going to break Flannigan," he tells me arrogantly. "I don't expect it will take long. Then we'll use whatever insider information we can to bring Desmond to his knees. He's already losing money, clients, associates. Your marriage was icing on the cake."

"That's what you wanted to tell me?" I arch a bored brow and brush a piece of lint off my shirt.

"If all goes according to plan, you'll be able to end your marriage sooner than expected."

His words hit me like bullets and my stomach sinks. "What?" I croak out. This isn't what I was expecting to hear.

"You heard me. I was expecting a different reaction." He narrows his dark eyes, trying to read me. "Have you two grown close? Did you sleep with her, Luca?"

I shove up from the chair and glare at him. "That's none of your goddamn business," I hiss.

"You did," he states. He tilts his head and I hate the way he's looking at me. How he's trying to look into my heart and soul so he can then judge me.

"Yeah, so what?" Lashing out, I turn rebellious and defiant like always. "I fucked her so many times I lost count. Big deal."

But, it is and was a big deal. Huge. And that's what I don't want my father to realize. He's so damn good at reading people, though, so he probably has already guessed that Finley has grown to mean something to me.

Before he can get any deeper into my head, I turn on my heel and stalk to the door. I'm not ready to let Finley go. Not now, not ever.

“I’m leaving,” I grumble.

“Luca.”

“What?” I snap and glance back over my shoulder.

“It’s time to quietly break things off with Finley.”

Instead of answering, I grit my teeth and walk out. Matteo Marino can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do. I refuse to give him that power over me.

And, most importantly, I’m falling hard for my wife. Leaving her isn’t an option.

FINLEY

Even though I don't trust Ewan, what he says makes perfect sense. Especially when I think about how strangely Luca was acting the day of the wedding. He looked like he was about to bolt at a moment's notice.

Something stopped him at the last minute, though, and I can't help but wonder why he didn't go through with his plan to leave me and forsake his father.

The more I think about it, the more my heart aches. Is this whole thing just a big game to him? Has he been leading me on while he comes up with a new plan? And, until then, he's biding his time and fucking me?

I've never felt like such a fool and I should've stuck to my guns after our very first meeting. After he told me he wouldn't ever marry a stranger. But I didn't. Like a besotted, silly girl, I fell for the man who swept in and rescued me.

Apparently, he "rescued" me from his friend.

Shaking my head, I hug my arms around myself and think back over everything that has happened between us. It all seemed so real. My feelings were genuine and I opened myself up to a man who has only been using me.

I want to cry, but I'm too angry. I'm also preparing my speech for when Luca returns. Luckily, I didn't unpack my suitcase yet because after I confront Luca, I'm leaving. I guess I'll go back to the hotel where my mom is staying.

With a heavy heart, I sink down onto the couch, pull my legs up and press my forehead to my knees. I'll give him credit—

Luca is a consummate actor. I believed every word that came out of his mouth. Every lie.

The sad part is I fell for it all. Hook, line and sinker. Maybe I am the naive girl I pretended not to be. I may no longer be a virgin, but if we hadn't slept together, things would be so much easier right now. But we were intimate and that opens up a whole new level of heartbreak. After trusting Luca with my body and giving him my virginity, he's going to repay me with lies and deceit?

God, I've never felt so used. So heartbroken.

My eyes slide shut and the moment I hear his key in the lock, my pulse kicks up. Does he have any idea how much he's hurt me?

Guess we're about to find out.

"Hi," Luca says, walking in and tossing me a charming smile. He instantly pauses and frowns. "What's wrong?"

I'm not very good at hiding my true feelings, so he immediately sees I'm upset.

Luca closes the door, locks it and walks over, sitting down next to me. When he reaches out to touch me, I slide away.

"Finley? What's going on?"

Forcing myself to meet his brown eyes, I say, "Your friend stopped by while you were gone."

His face goes blank. "What friend?"

"Your good buddy Ewan," I clarify. When Luca doesn't say anything, I continue, "And he had a lot to tell me. Starting with how you told him to harass me outside that bar so you could swoop in and play hero. So I'd give you another chance when you decided you wanted a shot, after all."

"I know how bad this sounds—"

"Do you?" I interrupt. "Do you really have any idea how much you hurt me?"

Luca shakes his head. "Finley, please listen to me. I didn't mean to hurt you. But I saw an opportunity to get revenge on

my father and I decided to do it. At first. But you changed my mind.”

“Me? Please, don’t blame me for any of this.”

“I’m not blaming you. Just the opposite. I’m thanking you.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about and I wave a hand through the air. “Just answer me this—did you plan on leaving me at the altar? Did you want to humiliate me in front of all those people and just...walk away?”

My throat closes and I can’t help it as hot tears fill my eyes. I know we didn’t know each other that well after two weeks, but how could he put me in that position?

“I want to be clear about one thing. This was never about you. It was always about my father.”

“But that’s not true, Luca. I was always part of the equation and you were willing to sacrifice me to achieve your petty revenge. And revenge for what? Why do you even hate him so much?”

“I hate him because he’s ignored me my entire life!” Luca yells. “The only thing he’s ever cared about is his businesses and Gio. Then he has the nerve to ask me to marry some stranger. A woman I’ve never met and, on top of that, my family’s enemy? There’s no way I was going to bend to his will.”

“Is that what I am? A stranger? Your enemy?”

“No, not anymore. But, yeah, you were.”

Even though it’s the truth, his words sting. “And what am I now, Luca?”

So much depends on his answer.

His mouth opens then quickly closes. “You’re...”

I arch a brow, waiting for him to continue even though I already know I’m not going to like his answer.

He swallows hard. “You’re someone who’s mad at me and I don’t want you to be.”

Of all the lame possible answers, I think he may have just given me the absolute lamest. “That’s all? I’m a random woman who is mad at you.”

“No, you’re more than that.” He rakes a hand through his hair and releases a frustrated breath. “You’re my wife. We’re married and I hate that Ewan came here and screwed everything up.”

“Really?” Now I’m seething. How dare he blame Ewan for this. “So you never planned on telling me the truth? I was just supposed to live in blissful ignorance. Like a damn fool?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Luca, were you going to tell me the truth any time soon? About your little scheme with Ewan and how you planned to walk out on me? Or were you just going to keep fucking me?”

He hesitates and I know that’s my answer. Defeat and the horrible truth of our joke of a marriage settles over me. Pushing up off the couch, an anger like I’ve never known before fills me. Red hot and furious.

“I would’ve told you,” Luca says, jumping up and following me.

Yeah, right.

“It’s too late! I don’t want to hear your excuses!” My suitcase is still in the bedroom because a part of me was hoping that Luca could explain the whole situation away. Instead, I feel my world crumbling and the man who I believed I was falling in love with is a liar and a fraud. All he wanted to do was use me and leave me.

“Finley!”

But I ignore him, march into the bedroom we won’t be sharing and grab my suitcase, then turn and see Luca blocking the doorway. I try to wheel it around him, but he doesn’t let me pass. “Move!” I snap.

“No!” He grabs my arms, stopping me. “Finley, look at me.”

I turn my head, refusing to make eye contact.

“Tesoro, please.”

That one word almost brings me to my knees. Somehow, I manage to keep it together and shove his hands off. “Get out of my way, Luca,” I force out between gritted teeth. “Or I’m going to call my brothers and they will not be happy.”

For a long moment, he doesn’t listen and I glance up into his pleading brown eyes. But I don’t care. I need to get out of here and put some distance between us so I can think things through. Right now, I’m working off emotion and that’s not good.

I need some fucking fresh air and distance from this man.

He must know he’s fighting a losing battle and the threat to call my brothers is no threat. I’ll do it and Luca knows they’ll kick his ass first and ask questions later.

With a weary sigh of defeat, Luca lets me go. Skirting around his tall frame, I hustle down the hallway, grab my purse and throw the front door open. My feet barely touch the sidewalk before the tears start falling.

I’m not sure how far I walk, blinded by tears, before I stop and drop down on a bench. Taking a moment, I collect myself and pull a tissue out of my handbag. After wiping my eyes and blowing my nose, I grab my purse.

Who should I call? One of my brothers? Rory? Sofia? I suppose my choices are pretty limited. This is when it would be nice to have a girlfriend I could depend on, but that really isn’t the case.

With a shaky hand, I end up opening the Uber app on my phone. It doesn’t take the driver long to arrive and I know this was the right decision. I’m not ready to talk to anyone about what happened between Luca and I yet. And my Uber guy is quiet and leaves me alone for the duration of the trip to the hotel where my mom is staying.

Once we get to the hotel, I quietly thank him, get out and lug my suitcase out of the trunk. Tilting my head back, I look up at the tall hotel and miss our family compound. Living out of a

suitcase is the worst and I thought I'd finally be settling in somewhere more permanent with Luca.

A bitter laugh bubbles up the back of my throat and the sting of tears threatens. Pulling in a deep breath, I force them back, take a deep breath and walk into the hotel. I take the elevator up, pull out my keycard and open the door.

My mom is sitting on the couch with Emma's father and they're watching TV and laughing. My heart constricts painfully. As happy as I am that she's found someone new after my dad died, it makes me sad, too. Because, inevitably, I think of Luca. Of what could've been.

"Finley?" My mom turns and raises a brow. "Honey, what're you doing here?"

"I don't really want to talk about it right now. I just—" My voice breaks and my cheeks flame in embarrassment. The last thing I want to do is pour my heart out in front of Emma's father. God.

When my mom stands up and starts walking toward me, I hold up a hand.

"Don't let me interrupt. I just need to be alone."

Then I spin around and hurry into the room that I haven't stepped foot in for over two weeks. And it's just as lonely and depressing as it was before. I close the door behind me, roll my suitcase up against the wall and then drop down onto the bed.

A sadness like I've never experienced before washes over me and the stupid tears begin to fall again. Chewing my lower lip, I squeeze my eyes shut tight, trying to stop my crying, but the blasted tears just leak through my lids and slip down my cheeks.

There's a soft knock on the door and I stifle an annoyed sound.

"Finley? If you want to talk—"

"I don't!"

"Are you sure?" my mom asks softly.

“Yes,” I manage to say.

“Okay. If you want me to order room service or—”

“I’m fine.”

There’s a long pause then, “I’m here if you need me, sweetheart.”

Instead of responding, I start crying even harder. Flipping over, I bury my face in the pillow and realize that I just lost the best thing that ever happened to me.

Or, maybe the sad truth is Luca was never mine. I was silly enough to believe he was and that we had something special. But the very sad and real truth is Luca Marino had his own agenda when we signed that goddamn agreement.

And I really had nothing to do with it at all. I was merely a means to an end.

LUCA

Watching Finley walk away is the worst thing I've ever experienced. The way she refused to talk to me, the cold shoulder she gave me, and the frozen look in her glacial blue eyes felt like a slap to the face.

Did I deserve it? Yeah, probably. But do I want my wife back? Yes, definitely.

The only problem is I think she might be done with me and our farce of a marriage. And that hurts because I'm not ready to let go yet.

Falling for Finley is something that just happened. I didn't expect it, and I certainly didn't want it, but it's been a beautiful ride. I know without a doubt that I'm in love with her. And now being the idiot that I am, I've lost her.

But, hopefully, it's only a temporary loss.

The question is how do I get her to forgive me and move on? Or, better yet, move back in here with me? I'm wracking my brain, trying to figure out the best way to deal with the situation and move forward.

The truth is, I feel awful. But I had to come clean and tell Finley the truth. Lying to her would've just dug me into a deeper hole. I am pissed that Ewan opened his big mouth, though. I'm not sure why he decided to go behind my back now and tell Finley everything. Is he mad at me? Hell, I haven't even seen him since we pulled off our little stunt.

Running a hand through my hair, a small part of me wonders if Finley finding out the truth was for the best. I wanted to come

clean to her, but I didn't know how. On the one hand, I'm glad it's all out in the open now. But the bad thing is she's gone.

And now I need to figure out how to get her back.

"Fuck." It's not going to be easy and I have a feeling I'm going to need to do some serious groveling. I need advice, though. This is new territory and I'm clueless. But who can I call? Giovanni is going to be just as baffled and ignorant on how to win a woman back as me.

Although, at one point there was a girl he really liked. They'd met years ago and I vaguely remember him talking about her. I'm not sure whatever happened, but he's stayed far away from serious relationships ever since.

Hmmm. Maybe my older brother might have some advice.

Grabbing my phone, I call Gio and he answers on the second ring.

"What's up, Luca?"

"I need company and a stiff drink," I say without preamble.

"You sound miserable."

"I am miserable. I fucked up, Gio. Finley left."

"Shit. Okay, meet you over at the corner bar?"

"I'll be there in ten minutes," I say and disconnect the call. I have no idea if Gio will have anything useful or wise to offer me when it comes to how I'm going to win Finley back, but right now I need some company. And some whiskey.

It takes me less than ten minutes to walk up the street and I see my brother already up at the bar, chatting with the bartender. I slide onto the stool beside him and see there's already a drink waiting for me.

"Thanks," I murmur and take a long sip.

"What happened?" Gio asks.

"I'm a dick and Finley found out."

"What did you do?"

I let out a heavy sigh, take another drink and look over at my brother. “Here’s the thing—and I know you probably won’t understand—but I need someone to talk to, so it looks like you’re the lucky winner.”

“It’s a part of my job as your older brother. Don’t forget, I am wiser and more experienced.”

I let out a snort. “Yeah, sure.”

“Well? Are you going to tell me what you did or make me guess?”

Leaning forward, I lower my voice so no one else can hear. “This whole marriage between us was supposed to be fake, right?” Gio nods. “I mean, we all knew it and Finley and I signed a contract in front of everyone.”

“Still not sure how you got her to agree.” Gio nudges me in the ribs with his elbow. Even though he’s only joking, he’s hit on the source of the problem.

“I tricked her,” I admit, feeling like an absolute heel. “And she found out.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“So, after our initial meeting, I flat out told Finley that I’d never marry a stranger. I was dead set against the entire thing and refused to do anything to help Dad out. She seemed a little miffed, but quickly agreed. And that was that.”

“Yeah, I wondered what changed your mind?”

“Revenge,” I say simply.

Gio narrows his dark eyes, frowning. “How so?”

“After Finley left, I really started thinking about it and it occurred to me that I could play along, pretending to agree to go along with what Dad wanted, and then back out at the last second.”

“Not marry her?”

“Exactly. So let me back up.” I take another sip of whiskey then launch into my terrible plan. “I knew in order to get

Finley to agree, I had to find a way back into her good graces. So I called Ewan—”

“I hate that guy.”

“Yeah, me, too,” I say darkly. “Anyway, I told him I needed him to be the bad guy and I’d swoop in and save the day. So we followed Finley down to a bar and he went in and started hitting on her. She didn’t want anything to do with him and left. He followed her out and...well, he got a little aggressive. More so than I wanted.”

The memory of Ewan roughly grabbing her arm and trying to kiss her pisses me off on an epic level. I don’t know why I ever trusted that bastard.

“And you came to her rescue.”

“That’s right. Or, at least, that’s what she believed. I turned up the charm, took her out for gelato and told her I’d changed my mind.”

“And she believed you?”

I shrug a shoulder. “I guess so because she married me, right?” I lift my hand and wave the band on my finger.

“But you didn’t get your revenge. You went through with the marriage.”

“Yeah. I had every intention of leaving her on the altar and walking down that aisle and giving Dad the finger. I yearned to do it with every fiber of my being. You have no idea. But Finley felt something was off with me. And when it came time, I couldn’t do it to her. Even if it meant getting my revenge on Dad for ignoring me all those years, one look at Finley’s face and...I just couldn’t.”

Gio pulls in a breath and takes a sip of his drink. “Luca, I think you fell in love with your wife.”

“Yeah. And that wasn’t in the damn plans.”

“Why would Ewan show up out of the blue and tell her everything?”

“I don’t know,” I respond, thoughtfully turning my empty glass. The bartender walks over and refills both of our glasses.

“How was everything going between the two of you?”

“Me and Finley?” He nods. “Fucking perfect. To us, our marriage was real. Nothing ever felt fake, Gio.”

“Clearly, you slept with her on the honeymoon.”

“There wasn’t a lot of sleeping going on but, yeah, we’ve been intimate. And being with Finley is...” My voice trails off when I think about how it feels being deep inside her body and how much I love kissing her and watching her come. It’s mesmerizing. “There aren’t any words to describe how amazing she is or how she makes me feel. And it’s weird because she makes me forget about Dad and everything he did that always used to make me so upset.”

“Is it more than just physical?”

“So much more,” I admit. “Before Finley, I had this hole that I could never seem to fill. But when I’m with her...”

“There’s no hole.”

Gio doesn’t ask. It’s a statement and I look over at him. There’s a sadness in his dark brown eyes. Almost like he knows exactly what I’m talking about. But how could he? He avoids serious relationships like the plague. Even more so than I ever did.

But, it’s a conversation for another time.

“Exactly. She’s everything I always needed, but never realized.” I run my finger over an indentation on the bar. “And now I’ve lost her.”

“So get her back,” Gio announces easily. “I have full faith in you, Luca.”

“How?”

“She fell for your charm once, so turn it up and apologize. But be sincere. It’s clear you care about this woman, that you love her. So let her know.”

Shit. The thought hits me so hard when I hear Gio say it out loud. I do love Finley. I fell so hard, so fast, and now I'm ass over heels in love with her. And there's no going back to a life without her light and beauty in it.

I nod my head, but then the worst thought imaginable hits me. "What if she doesn't want me back? Fuck. What if I messed things up too badly and she won't forgive me?" I murmur.

"I mean this isn't my area of expertise, but here's what I see. A guy who was so hellbent on revenge that he almost missed the amazing woman standing right in front of him. Keyword—*almost*. You didn't leave her. Even if that was the original plan, when it came time to follow through and do the actual deed, you stayed by her side and said your vows. Am I right?"

"Yeah. I just...couldn't do it to her. To us." That last part is a revelation because, yeah, this whole situation is about me and her. We're so amazing together and she has to see it, too.

"So tell her, Luca. Do you know where she is?"

"No, but I'm thinking she probably went back to the hotel where she was staying with her mom."

"Sounds like it's worth checking out." Gio pulls his phone out. "We should check with Rory and Sofia, too. Finley may have gone with them."

"Yeah, good idea." Suddenly, my heart feels just a little lighter and the smallest bit of hope begins to fill it. I can do this. I can get Finley back.

After a quick and very vague call to our sisters, Gio discovers that Finley isn't with either of them. "So chances are pretty good she went back to the hotel. I mean, where else would she go? Any close friends that you know of?"

I shake my head. No, Finley is a lot like me. We both have acquaintances and our families, but no super close friends. It hits me damn hard that Finley sort of became my best friend during this past month.

And now I need to go find her and apologize. It's time to face my true feelings and share them with Finley. Because, no

matter what my original intentions were, I've fallen in love with Finley.

And she needs to know. Hopefully, she will give me another chance. Otherwise, I don't know what the hell I'm going to do. Actually, yeah, I do know.

I'm going to fight like hell and pull out all the stops to win her back. Because she's my wife and I need her in my life. Today, tomorrow and always.

FINLEY

After crying for an hour, I have the sudden urge to leave. My small room feels claustrophobic, like it's closing in on me, and I need some fresh air. Dragging myself up, I glance over at the clock on the nightstand. It's not even nine o'clock yet.

With a heavy sigh and an even heavier heart, I get up, grab a sweatshirt and slip it over my head. The night is chilly, but not exactly cold, and I need to go for a walk and try to clear my head. After splashing some water on my face and puffy eyes, I open the door and peer out into the living room. A wave of relief washes over me when I see that Harrison Shepherd, Emma's dad, is gone and my mom has retired to her room. Glancing over, I see her door is open a crack, and I hear the soft sound of canned laughter from some sitcom on the television echoing out.

Stepping into the main room of the suite, I quickly make my way to the door, quietly open it and pull it shut behind me, all without making a sound. The last thing I want to do is alert my mom. I need to be alone and sort out my feelings. I need to come to terms with what happened and how I'm going to move forward.

The elevator whisks me down to the lobby and I walk across the shiny floor and out the main revolving door. The night air is so crisp and cool, and it feels good to breathe it in deeply. I don't have a particular destination in mind, so the moment my feet hit the sidewalk, I just start walking aimlessly.

My thoughts are in an absolute turmoil. I've never felt so used and betrayed. Or, so entirely alone. Luca tricked me into trusting him and as angry as I am, I know he isn't entirely to blame. I agreed to the temporary marriage and signed on the dotted line. It was clear that nothing would be real. Yet, somewhere along the way, it turned incredibly real. Luca swept me up into his world and I fell hard and fast for him.

And now here I am, aimlessly wandering the city streets at night. All alone and without purpose.

When I think back over our conversation before I left, it occurs to me that Luca never apologized. He admitted he was hellbent on getting revenge on his father and he blamed Ewan. But Luca didn't really take any responsibility or show much regret for his decision.

Although in his eyes, he thinks he did the right thing by not leaving me at the altar. But the truly right thing would've been to not trick me and he should've come clean sooner. But it's like he just wanted to sweep it all under the rug and forget about it. Pretend that he never planned to abandon and humiliate me.

If Ewan hadn't come over and told me, I still wouldn't know the truth. And I'm big on honesty. I don't like liars or pretenders. And, unfortunately, Luca just revealed himself to be both.

It also hurts my feelings and I can't stop questioning everything that's happened between us. Has any of it been real? When did Luca's plans change and why? He didn't explain anything and I'm not sure what to believe. Confusion fills me, taunts me.

Lost in my thoughts, I'm not paying much attention to my surroundings and two men walk up on either side of me. They each grab an arm and I open my mouth to shout for help. But they're too fast and shove me into the open door of an SUV waiting at the curb. The rear door slams shut behind me and the locks click.

Dammit. Why wasn't I paying more attention? My gaze moves to the front seat, trying to see who just grabbed me. Maybe I

should be more scared than I am but, truthfully, I'm more angry than anything. This whole night has been one disaster after another and now I was careless enough to get myself kidnapped.

And only one person would kidnap me. Desmond.

Wonderful, I think, and sink down against the leather seat. Desmond had been laying low for a while and now he's back, wreaking havoc in his usual style. He sent enforcers to attack us after the wedding and enroute to the airport, and now he's striking again.

I only wish I'd been paying attention and had been quick enough to react. At least I have my—

Shit. I didn't bring my purse which means I don't have my phone. With a heavy sigh, I turn to look out the window and mentally prepare myself to face Desmond. I'm honestly not as scared as I should be, but I'm his niece. He wouldn't really hurt me, would he?

I know he's dangerous and he did set our hotel on fire. Conor and Emma barely escaped with their lives and that was a really scary night.

Don't underestimate him, Fin, a little voice warns me.

It's no surprise when we pull up to the gate of my family compound thirty-five minutes later. It sits on a nice piece of land, far enough away from the city to be in the country. Yet, also close enough that it's a relatively quick and easy drive. We have the best of both worlds—the country and the city, and I've always loved that.

The big front gate swings open and we drive down the long gravel driveway. My brothers each had their own smaller house and I was living in the main house with my mom when Desmond arrived out of the blue, kicked us to the curb and claimed ownership.

I don't know my uncle very well. Hell, barely at all. But there are a lot of stories about why he left Chicago and went to Ireland. Most of the stories root back to him and my father having a falling out. They couldn't see eye to eye on

something—I'm not even sure what—and Desmond left, presumably to take care of the family businesses and interests overseas.

After my father was gunned down, Liam stepped in to take care of everything and he made the decision to focus on our legitimate enterprises and close down all illegal operations. One of the first things he did was fire Sean Flannigan. And then that rat went over to Ireland and informed Desmond who came storming back. He put all the enforcers back on the payroll, stormed the compound and took it over. Although we have lawyers disputing his claim, the law takes forever to get anything accomplished and it's been a frustrating process.

I haven't stepped foot here in months and it hits me how much I've missed it. This is the only place I've ever called home and I grew up here. My brothers and I used to play in the woods behind the house and there was a barn where I used to hang out in the loft for hours, either lost in my imaginary world or reading a book in a pile of hay.

It's not right that my uncle returned and cruelly kicked us out. Especially when there are four houses on the property. He didn't even try to work with us; he just snuck in and took over. And that led to a war between him and us.

Maybe he's more ruthless than I'm giving him credit. Still, my plan is to go in there and confront him with an open mind and agenda. I'm hoping he will have a rational conversation with me and we can come to an agreement that's mutually beneficial to everyone.

Little do I know that the man I'm about to see is more ruthless than I ever could've guessed. An absolute monster who doesn't just want to take over the family business. He wants to kill the rest of his relatives. Wipe us all out so he can maintain complete and utter control.

The two enforcers open the car door and I slide out and look up at my home which I've missed so much. I need to get us back here. Desmond may not be willing to negotiate with my brothers, but maybe he'll talk to me.

We enter the house and instead of smelling the aroma of the candles my mom used to burn, it smells like nothing special or cozy. It's cold, dark and feels un-lived in. Like all the warmth has seeped out. When we reach the office which used to belong to my father then to Liam, I now see Desmond seated at the desk. A fire burns in the fireplace and I'm immediately transported back to the night Luca and I made love in front of the roaring fire at his cabin. Or, maybe love had nothing to do with it. Maybe it was just lust and sex.

With a heavy heart, I look from the crackling fire to my Uncle Desmond. He's nothing like the man I remember from my childhood, but I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. To try and work something out between him and the rest of our family.

I don't see why he wouldn't listen to reason. But, I quickly realize that I'm the only reasonable one present and my uncle has lost his damn mind.

"Welcome back, Finley," Desmond says with a twist of his lips.

I'm not sure whether to thank him or sneer, so I remain silent, reminding myself to keep it together and be open-minded and ready to broker a deal.

"I have to say your brothers haven't made my transition back to Chicago very easy. They've been a pain in my ass since day one."

My eyes narrow and the cool facade I told myself to maintain doesn't last. "If I recall correctly, you're the one who barged in and stole everything away. None of this is yours. Not truly."

"Your father left it to me," he snaps. "And I have his signature to prove it."

That's what he keeps claiming. I haven't seen the proof, but Liam and Conor have and that's what our lawyers are fighting. There's the very real possibility that Desmond either forged my father's signature or snuck in while he was on his deathbed and coerced him into signing when he wasn't in his right

mind. Either way, if we can prove either then Desmond will get the boot and we can move back home.

Instead of fighting him over the issue, I merely cross my arms over my chest. “Why am I here?” I ask.

“Because I’m done playing games, dear Finley.”

“Meaning?”

“Your brothers and Matteo have someone I want back.”

“Sean?” I ask and he nods.

“I want to do a trade.”

“Trade?” I echo.

“You for Sean.”

I laugh, not realizing that he’s deadly serious. But the dark look in his eyes makes me squirm. “Why does there need to be a trade?” I ask, not quite catching on to his nefarious intentions. “Why can’t we just all sit down like reasonable adults and figure out a solution?”

Now it’s Desmond’s turn to laugh and the cold sound makes my skin crawl. “So clueless,” he murmurs, eyeing me like a snake on the verge of striking. “No wonder Liam is the one in charge.”

Okay, so he just insulted me now, too. What a dick. My hackles are up and I’m about to comment when he continues.

“Here’s the situation, Finley. I’m not fucking around anymore. We’re going to place a little call to your brothers and they’re going to either come here with Sean and we can do an exchange or you’re going to die.”

For a moment, I’m not sure I hear him right. He says it so matter of factly and with such cold precision.

“What?”

“You heard me. If they aren’t willing to trade then I’m sorry to say your time will be up.”

“But they don’t even have Sean,” I tell him. “Matteo does and there’s no way he’s just going to let him walk away.”

“If that’s the case then things won’t be ending well for you, dear.”

Frowning, I can’t believe these horrible words are coming out of his mouth. “But, I’m your niece,” I choke out. “How could you hurt your brother’s daughter? Your own blood?”

“I don’t plan on hurting you, Finley. I plan on snuffing you out to teach your stubborn brothers a lesson. If they don’t do what I want then they will be punished. I’m sorry that means having to kill you, but I can try to make it swift.”

Backing away, shaking my head, I start moving toward the door. “You’re twisted.”

“I’m a man out for vengeance. You ask how I could hurt my brother’s daughter? Well, how could he hurt me?” His voice rises a notch and I frown. What is he talking about?

“My dad never did anything to you.” Even though I say the words, I have no idea if they’re true or not. At this point, I’m stalling for time and fishing for information. I have a feeling there’s so much I don’t know about what truly happened between Desmond and my father.

“You have no idea what he did,” Desmond growls, surging to his feet. Anger makes the vein in his forehead pop as he stalks closer. “Your father took the one thing I always wanted. Something that should’ve been mine and I will never forgive him for that.”

I have no idea what Desmond is talking about and his face is bright red. He looks on the verge of blowing a gasket. Or, having a heart attack. Before he can get any closer, I spin around on my heel and bolt. But he’s faster than I anticipate and he is able to grab my arm, yanking me to a halt.

“This was never the plan, Finley. Matteo and your brothers shouldn’t have taken Sean. I need his expertise,” he adds quickly.

Almost too quickly and it makes me suspicious. I have a feeling my uncle is hiding some secrets, but I have no idea what. All I know is he’s become a very dangerous, unhinged man and I need to get out of here fast.

“Let me go,” I hiss, trying to tug my arm out of his grasp.

But, instead, he drags me out of the office, pulling me down the hallway. “Lessons have to be learned.”

He sounds deranged and my heart starts thumping harder. I need to get away from him, but how? He’s stronger and bigger. *Think, Fin.*

Desperate, I slam my heel down hard on his insole. Desmond yelps, releases my arm and I turn and run. I know this house like the back of my hand because I lived here my entire life. The problem is, I quickly realize there are too many enforcers around, waiting to catch me. Every time I turn a corner, another one steps into view.

I can only dodge them for so long before they trap me. *Shit.*

“Grab her!” Desmond yells.

Hauling ass, I abruptly spin and head toward the staircase. If I can get up to my bedroom then I can lock the door, wedge a chair under the handle and call Liam. I don’t have my cell, but there is a house line. Because if my brothers don’t know where I am, they won’t be able to rescue me.

It sounds like a decent plan until I’m caught halfway up the steps. “No!” I yell, kicking and twisting. But the big brute who has me in a tight hold is like King Kong. There’s no way I can escape.

Heart in my throat, the enforcer squeezes me so tightly that I know it will leave bruises. With a pained cry, I stop struggling.

“Bring her to me,” Desmond orders.

The enforcer drags me back down the stairs and straight over to Desmond.

“I don’t have time for your games and you’re really starting to piss me off, Finley. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll start cooperating.”

“Screw you,” I hiss, struggling to break free again.

“We could’ve done this the easy way,” Desmond says silkily. “Apparently, you prefer the hard way.”

Then he lifts his hand and strikes me so hard across the face, my head snaps to the side and stars briefly fill my vision. A velvet blackness settles over me and my legs give out.

As I slowly sink down to the floor, my very last thoughts are of one person. Luca.

LUCA

My brother is right. I need to go to Finley now, be sincere and tell her I love her.

Holy hell, I *love* her. Those are words I've never said to a woman before who wasn't my family. Technically, Finley is my family, I suppose. But the point is, I have never told a woman I've been intimate with that I love her and want to spend the rest of my life with her.

I hope I don't spontaneously combust.

But no one ever knocked me off my feet the way Finley has. I told Gio there's no going back to a life without her in it and it's the truth. In such a short amount of time, Finley has become my everything.

And now I need to convince her I'm not acting any longer. My feelings are real and there's nothing fake about them. Gio also pointed out a very important fact—when it came time to walk away, I didn't.

“You didn't leave her. Even if that was the original plan, when it came time to follow through and do the actual deed, you stayed by her side and said your vows.”

There was no way I was walking out on her after looking down and seeing how vulnerable she appeared, tears shining in her bright blue eyes. She felt something wasn't right. Even then, she knew me well enough to know I was struggling with a decision.

And, thank Christ, I made the right choice and I married her. My father says we can separate earlier than planned, but fuck

that. This was always about so much more than his plan and what he wanted. Right now, this is about what Finley and I need, what will make us happy.

And only one thing will make me happy—her.

Determined to win Finley back, I hop into my car and drive over to the hotel where she is hopefully staying with her mother. She has to be here, especially since Gio said she isn't with Rory or Sofia. So that also eliminates Liam and Rafferty, their significant others. I suppose it's possible she may have gone with Conor, but I doubt it.

I pull my car up to the curb, toss my keys to the valet attendant and jog up to the main door, spinning through the revolving glass panes. Hurrying over to the elevator, I slam my hand against the button and glance down at my watch. It's a little after ten o'clock, so Finley should still be up.

And even if she isn't, I'm going to pound that door down. I am not leaving here until we talk and I convince her to give me another chance.

Determination spurs me on and I step into the elevator and tap my foot the entire ride up. God, why is this thing moving so slowly? Impatience and frustration flood me and I drum my fingers against the railing. Let's fucking go! I want to scream.

When the door finally slides open, I hurry out and head straight to the room I remember her mentioning. She said they were in the small suite during one of our many conversations and when it comes to Finley, I remember everything. It's a good thing, too.

I walk right up to the door and start knocking hard. When no one answers, I pound my fist harder and the entire door rattles in its frame. After a few minutes, I hear someone moving through the suite and the door pulls inward.

Finley's mother, Maeve, stands there looking half asleep and fumbling with the belt on her robe. "Luca? What're you doing here?"

"I need to talk to Finley. Is she here?"

Maeve nods. "She is, but she went to bed early. She was very upset," Maeve adds, sending me a narrowed look. "I'm assuming you had something to do with that."

Instead of answering, I move inside and start walking over to the closed bedroom door. "Finley?" I ask, turning the handle and stepping into the dark room. "Can we talk? Please?"

It's strangely quiet and I reach over and flip the switch on the wall. A lamp on the end table turns on and I see the empty bed. Where the hell is she?

"Finley?" I stalk over to the attached bathroom and peer inside, but she isn't in there. A strange sense of foreboding creeps over me and the skin on the back of my neck prickles. Hurrying back out to the main area of the suite, I see Maeve standing there.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Finley isn't in there."

"What do you mean?" Maeve hurries over and looks for herself, then she turns and frowns. "She said she wanted to be alone, so I didn't bother her. She was very upset so I figured she needed time by herself to think."

"When did you see her last?"

"A couple of hours ago?"

My eyes move around the room and land on her purse. I walk over, pick it up and reach inside. "Her phone is still here," I announce and pull it out.

"Maybe she went for a walk to clear her head. Finley likes to do that."

"Maybe," I murmur, though I'm not entirely convinced. Something about the situation strikes me as off though I can't quite place my finger on it. "I'm going to go back outside and walk around. See if I can find her." I tuck her phone into my pocket.

"Okay."

"If you hear from her, call her phone right away, okay?"

Maeve nods, suddenly looking worried. “Luca,” she says, grabbing my arm. “Do you think something happened to her?”

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “But I’m going to find her, so don’t worry.”

“If I hear anything, I’ll call you.”

I give her a terse nod then walk out of the suite. Trying to remain calm and stay positive, I walk out of the hotel, take a deep, steadying breath and try to determine the best plan of action. That all goes to hell, though, the moment my phone rings and I look down and see Liam’s name flashing on the screen.

“Liam?” I answer sharply.

“We have a big fucking problem, Luca,” he growls.

“What’s wrong?”

“You tell me! How the hell did Desmond get Finley? What the fuck is going on over there and why isn’t she safely with you?”

Shit. “Desmond has Finley?” I echo.

“I am going to ask this once more then I’m going to lose my shit. Why isn’t my sister with you?”

“After our meeting, I went back to our place and we argued. She ended up leaving and coming back to the hotel to stay with her mom. That’s where I am right now. I came by to talk to her, but she wasn’t here. Somehow in the last two hours, Desmond got to her.”

Liam lets out a string of colorful curses and I squeeze my eyes shut. *Fuck.* This is all my fault.

“Desmond called me. He wants to trade Finley for Sean Flannigan, so you need to talk to your father now. Tell Matteo we’re going to set up a trade.”

“A trade, okay.” I motion for the attendant to get my car. “I’ll go over right now and talk to him.”

“Make it fucking happen, Luca. Because otherwise...” His words drift off.

“Otherwise what?” I ask.

“Otherwise, he said he would kill Finley,” Liam chokes out. “And he’s not messing around. He’s deadly serious.”

An icy chill skitters down my spine. As though someone just walked over my grave. “I’m on my way. I’ll be in touch.” We hang up and the moment the valet appears, I hurriedly slip him some cash and jump into my Mercedes.

Turning the car toward my family’s brownstone, I hit the gas and drive like a maniac over there. Time is of the essence and every moment Finley is stuck with her deranged, power hungry uncle worries me. Desmond is not in his right mind and I have a terrible feeling that he really would hurt his niece.

But would he kill her?

Yes, a voice whispers. No matter what, I can’t underestimate him.

The moment I arrive at the brownstone, I double park my car, hop out and race up the front steps. Using my key, I let myself in and storm inside, calling for my father. It takes a moment, but he finally appears in his robe and slippers.

“Is there any particular reason you’re screaming like a madman?” he asks, clearly annoyed.

“I need you to let Sean out. Now.”

“No,” he states simply.

My eyes narrow and I stalk up to him. “Yes.”

But he doesn’t budge, just looks me straight in the eye without comment.

“You have to because he took Finley.” I hate having to explain the situation. Why can’t he just be open to a discussion and listen to what I want, what I need, for once in his life?

“That’s too bad,” he says coolly. “But we can’t release Sean. He’s a key player in Desmond’s game and I refuse to give back the one thing Desmond wants.”

“What about what I want?” I demand, growing angrier by the second.

My father sighs. “C’mon, Luca. I understand that you may have grown a little attached to her, but why do you even care? She’s a fake wife who you’re on the verge of leaving, anyway.”

“I decided I’m not leaving her. If she’ll still have me, I am not going anywhere.”

My father chuckles in disbelief. “I didn’t think it was possible,” he states, eyeing me.

“What?” I snap.

“That you could care about anyone more than yourself.”

“I’m not as selfish or as cold as you, but I did learn from the best. Now, open up that goddamn cell or I will tear it down with my bare hands.”

“Sorry, but I can’t let you do that. Sean is an integral part of my plan to take down Desmond.”

A fury like I’ve never known before courses through my veins and I clench my hands into white-knuckled fists. Once again, my father’s true colors are revealing themselves—he’s a selfish, heartless bastard who only cares about himself.

I’m about to storm down into the basement when two enforcers appear and stand on either side of my father. *Shit*. How am I supposed to get around them? They’re bigger than the fucking Empire State Building and both men are wearing a mean scowl and have their hand resting on their holstered pistol.

Their message is crystal clear—one wrong move on my part and they’ll pull their guns.

“We’re almost in position to crush Desmond,” my father says.

“I’m sorry, Luca, but I can’t let you screw things up.”

“He’s going to kill her if we don’t do the trade!” I yell, but I get zero empathy from Matteo Marino.

“It’s really too bad. But, here’s the thing. You were never supposed to get overly involved with her. You knew from the beginning the two of you were entering into a temporary situation. You agreed to those terms.”

I hate him for being right. “It doesn’t matter. Things fucking change,” I growl.

“That’s on you, Luca.” He studies me for a long, uncomfortable moment, as though he were trying to see into my deepest, most private thoughts. “Finley was just a fake wife and never should’ve meant anything to you. If you were stupid enough to fall for her, I’m sorry. Because she’s doomed and there is no way I’m letting Sean Flannigan leave this house.”

His words feel like hot coals burning me, and the way he dismisses not only Finley, but also my feelings for her, is the final nail in the coffin of our relationship. My father is never going to change. He’s still the evil man he always has been, using me, Finley and the entire O’Shea family to get one step closer to his ultimate goal.

Ultimate control of this city.

“You’re vile,” I whisper.

But my words roll right off him. “And you’re weak. Just like I always knew you were, Luca. Don’t you get it? This was the plan all along—to use Finley O’Shea as bait to overthrow Desmond. I just needed Desmond to believe that she was important enough that we would want her back.”

How could I be so naive? A part of me actually believed my father was interested in working with the O’Shea family, uniting with them in a common front against Desmond, just like he’d told us. But it was all lies. And now Finley is collateral, just another pawn in Matteo’s game.

My head drops as it occurs to me that my father never changed. How could I have been so gullible? He’s still just as evil as ever and I was foolish enough to believe that he might actually have our best interests at heart. But, all this time, he’d been using both me and Finley. Which leads me to the immediate conclusion that he’s the one who sent Ewan to tell Finley the truth before I could.

Fuck. I’ve never felt like a bigger idiot and suddenly it’s all so clear.

“Did you pay Ewan to go tell Finley everything?” I ask. But I already know the answer.

“Does it matter?”

I shake my head and feel sick to my stomach. Any chance of salvaging our shaky relationship is gone. “I will never forgive you for this,” I snarl and back away, heading toward the door.

My father shrugs an indifferent shoulder. “And don’t bother trying to use the tunnels to get to Sean. After the last little stunt, I had them sealed off.”

“Fuck you,” I force out then turn and march out. It sucks knowing those will be the last words I ever speak to my father, but I don’t care. He’s a monster who I barely recognize.

Storming out, I throw the front door open and yank my phone out as I hustle down to my car. “Liam! I need you, Conor and Rafferty to help me somehow kidnap Sean and trade him for Finley.”

And that’s all I need to say because Liam quickly jumps onboard then tells me to meet them at Conor’s gym where we’ll come up with a quick plan. Turning my Mercedes, I realize how much I’ve grown to like and respect Finley’s brothers. They appreciate the saying blood is thicker than water and would die for each other. I need those kinds of people in my life.

The sad truth is we were tricked and never should’ve trusted Matteo Marino. Because from this point on, I will never be able to call him my father. But I can’t dwell on our broken relationship. Now it’s time to rescue Finley and make a trade that will save my woman’s life.

FINLEY

The last thing I remember is Desmond backhanding me and then everything went black. My eyes flutter open and I have no idea where I am or how long I've been out. With a low groan, I sit up and realize my hands are tied together.

Giving my head a shake, trying to clear the cobwebs, I pull myself up into a sitting position and squeeze my eyes shut as a wave of dizziness washes over me. Ow, my jaw is throbbing. Damn, he hit me hard. *Asshole.*

When I open my eyes again, I look around, trying to figure out where I am. It takes me a minute to get my bearings because it looks familiar but, at the same time, it doesn't. Turns out I'm in the old barn at the rear of our property. But it's not how I remember it.

Not long ago, my brothers blew up most of the barn in order to cause a distraction, so Conor could sneak into the house and rescue Emma. And now I'm in the burned-out, charred remains that were left behind from their pyrotechnic display.

My wrists are not only bound together, but also tied up to a scorched beam that's barely staying upright. Looking around, I realize the majority of the barn is gone, just a blackened, hollowed-out mess.

Why am I out here? I wonder. Looking down, I see there's soot all over my pants and I can still smell the faded smoke. With a sigh, I shift and look around.

Oh, shit.

To my absolute horror, I spot freshly-laid charges and my heart quickens. They're scattered throughout the rubble and the closest one to me is only a couple of feet away. My fate becomes clear and I want to cry. How could Desmond do this to me?

Trying to scoot closer so I can get a better look, I realize there isn't a timer ticking down. Thank God. But that means the asshole must have them linked to a detonator.

Okay. I suck in a deep breath and tell myself not to panic. With no time to spare, I start working on my ropes. Twisting, turning and pulling as hard as I can. I'm doing everything in my power to loosen them, but they're so tight and after five minutes, I realize that I'm tearing up my wrists. And it hurts.

There must be a smarter way to do this. I scan the area around me and look for anything with a jagged edge that I can use to help fray the rope. Frustration fills me when I don't spot anything useful.

Determination also fills me. There has to be something I can do. Some way I can escape.

Maybe I can use the charred beam. Going up on my knees, I start sawing my wrists back and forth, trying to unravel the rope or at least loosen them, but it's not working very well.

From the corner of my eye, I see movement at the back of the house and I look up. Desmond and a couple of his biggest thugs are marching across the lawn and heading straight for me.

This oughta be fun. I am beyond ready to give him an earful.

Maybe I should be more scared, but right now I am more mad than anything. I glare at my uncle as he approaches.

"What is the point of this?" I demand, lifting my bound wrists. Then I nod to the explosives. "Isn't this all a bit dramatic? Even for you?"

"Well, you're being awfully fearless for someone who's about to go boom soon."

My bravado immediately disappears when his words sink in. I need to get out of here as soon as possible. Desmond must see the shift on my face as the reality of the situation unfolds and my hope falters.

“Are you insane?” I whisper. “Why are you doing this? I never did anything to you. God, I’m your niece.”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I’m sorry, Finley, but like I said before—this isn’t about you. Unfortunately, you’re just a pawn in a game against your brothers and Matteo Marino. An unfortunate side effect of this war.”

I can’t believe this is happening. “You’re not even giving me a chance.” My voice is flat, yet full of accusation. “I don’t understand.”

Desmond seems to hesitate. After a moment, he motions for his burly enforcers to go. Once they’re out of earshot, Desmond focuses on me and says, “Maybe I do owe you an explanation. So you’ll better understand where my anger originates. It’s all your father and mother’s fault, you know.”

No, I don’t know. What is he talking about? Is he still angry about being sent off to Ireland? Angry enough to kill his only niece? “Because my father took control of the businesses here? So what? There were things in Ireland for you to handle. I don’t understand—”

“It’s more than just that,” he snaps, a fury brewing in the depths of his eyes. “You have no idea how competitive your father and I always were with each other. Nolan and I always wanted the same things. It didn’t matter what it was, we both would fight each other for it.”

Well, this is news to me. I never knew anything regarding their relationship, so I listen closely because, suddenly, Desmond is on a tangent and the floodgates have opened.

“We always butted heads. He thought just because he was older, he should have the first choice of everything. What businesses he wanted to run, what friends were his, which associates should work with him...what women he wanted.”

That last part snags my attention. “Sounds like you had the same tastes.”

“We did and I normally deferred to him, against my better judgment. But, since our father always sided with him, it seemed to be in my best interest to do so. It would make me so angry sometimes. But I would relent because I wanted to stay in our father’s good graces, help run the family businesses and not be cut out. Because they would’ve done it.”

“What happened?” I ask. “What finally sent you to Ireland?”

A muscle flexes in Desmond’s cheek. “We both decided that we wanted the same woman and neither of us would relent.”

I frown, wondering who he’s talking about. It couldn’t possibly be—

“Your mother.”

Oh, my God. My mouth drops open. I never knew this and I’m pretty certain my brothers aren’t aware of it, either. “What happened?”

“And so there we were, both in love with the same woman. I think Maeve loved us both at one point, but...”

“But she chose my father. Not you.”

“Clearly,” he snarls. “She would’ve chosen me if Nolan hadn’t lured and seduced her with his promise of running the entire family business one day. He promised her everything and she was a materialistic woman who chose comfort and money.”

“She loved my father,” I insist. Though, I say it more to hurt Desmond than out of truth. To be honest, all I remember is them fighting and sleeping in separate rooms. Right before he died, my parents barely spent any time together. Of course, my mom was upset when he died, but maybe it was also a little bit of relief from a man who’d controlled every aspect of her life. Maybe that’s why she’s enjoying her time so much with Harrison Shepherd. Because he seems to like spending time with her and sees her for who she truly is—a woman who only ever wanted a man to love her for herself and not to merely be a trophy on his arm.

Swallowing hard, I realize I barely know anything about my parents' relationship. Other than the fact they co-existed and had four children. Were they ever truly happy? That question leads me directly to another.

“Did she love you?” I ask softly, leaning forward. “Truly?”

What looks like pain and regret wash over his face, but then quickly disappears behind a controlled mask. “It doesn't matter. She chose Nolan, got married and started popping out babies to ensure his line would continue.”

His voice is full of bitterness and one thought occurs to me. “You went to Ireland five years ago. You and my father were running this town together and we were told things needed your attention back in Dublin. What really happened?”

“I'll tell you—your father began feeling threatened by me. I was making bigger deals than him, reeling in better contacts and getting a little too close to your mother again. He was jealous and threatened to cut me off completely if I didn't leave town. He was jealous because, suddenly, I was doing better than him.”

Even though I don't want to ask, I need to know the answer. “Did you and my mother have an affair?”

For a long moment, he doesn't say anything. “No,” he finally responds. “But it would've happened if I stayed here. We all knew it.”

Disgust fills me and I file that information away in the back of my head, not wanting to think too hard about it. The idea of my mother being with Desmond makes me ill. He's a horrible person and I can't begin to wrap my head around the idea of her wanting to be with him. Or loving him.

No wonder he wants to kill me. He hated his brother, and he blames everything bad that happened to him on my father. Maybe some of that is well-deserved and maybe it's not. Regardless, it looks like I'm about to pay for everyone else's past sins.

“Uncle Desmond, please listen to me,” I say, trying to play to his sympathy.

“No,” he interrupts, blue eyes flaring with fury. “You’re not going to change my mind because there’s only one way this can go down. Your brothers should be here...” he glances down at his watch, “well, very soon. In order for me to get my final revenge on Nolan, I’m taking out his children. All of you. Then nothing will hold Maeve back from being with me.”

“You’re insane,” I hiss. “You threw her out of her home.”

“Only until I could fix the situation. I’ll bring her back.”

“Are you so delusional to think she’d want you after murdering her children?”

“I murdered her husband, so why not her children, too? She’ll never know the truth. I’ll cover it up.”

Shock hits me hard like a bucket of ice water and all the air whooshes from my lungs. “You’re the one who killed my father?” All this time, we assumed it had been a hit put out by Matteo Marino. But, instead, it had been his own brother. His very flesh and blood.

“The moment I left on that plane five years ago, banished to Ireland, I began concocting my revenge scheme. I knew it would take time, but it’s been worth the wait. Now, I’m putting the last pieces of my plan into action. You and your brothers will be out of the picture soon and I’ll have Sean Flannigan back as my loyal, second-in-command. He’s always been on my side and he kept me informed of everything that happened while I was away.”

What a rat. My stomach twists with all of the new information I just learned. We can’t let Desmond get away with his evil plan. Somehow, I have to warn my brothers. I could always yell out a warning as they approached the burnt-out barn. Because there’s no way I’m letting Desmond take us all out. He is not winning and I will go down fighting until my very last breath.

Well, it seems like a good idea until Desmond pulls out a roll of duct tape from his jacket pocket. With a sinking stomach, I watch him unroll some and rip it free. Then he slaps it over my mouth and my eyes go wide.

I can't believe this is happening. He's going to kill us all if I can't figure out a way to escape and warn Liam, Conor and Rafferty. And what about Luca? What if he comes, too, and gets caught in the explosion?

Even though I'm upset with him, those angry feelings quickly fade away. The truth is I love Luca and I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to him. If he died because of me.

Desmond looks down at me and there's not an ounce of regret on his face. "See you in another lifetime, Finley." Then he turns on his heel and walks away, leaving me tied, gagged and in a barn full of explosives.

Fucker.

Rage and an intense love fuel me and I start struggling again with my bindings. I need to break free and escape. Nothing can happen to Luca or my brothers. Nothing.

And I'll go down fighting to make sure they remain safe. Even if it means sacrificing myself.

LUCA

I meet Finley's brothers and we hop into Conor's Jeep and take off. My head is spinning and I'm not sure how we're going to pull this off. There are too many variables and too many things working against us.

"Well?" Liam asks. "What did your father say?"

"We're going to have to get him ourselves. Matteo won't give us Flannigan," I inform them, refusing to refer to him as my father. As far as I'm concerned, the bastard is dead to me.

"Why not?" Conor growls.

"Because he doesn't give a shit about Finley or any truce we supposedly had between our families. It's all been one-sided and, as usual, he's doing what's best for him."

"The meeting with Desmond is set for midnight, so we need to get Flannigan fast."

"We could go in through the tunnels," Rafferty suggests, not looking at all surprised by Matteo's complete one-hundred and eighty degree turn. I'm going to chalk it up to the fact that Matteo ordered his enforcer to beat Rafferty to within an inch of his life.

"Matteo told me we can't get through the tunnels anymore."

"Why not? What did he do?" Rafferty asks.

Me, my brother and sisters used to play in the old tunnels beneath the brownstown when we were kids. I haven't been down there in years and they were used to smuggle liquor

during Prohibition. “He said he sealed them up,” I respond. “I guess he could’ve been lying.”

“That’s how Sofia and I escaped,” Rafferty says and we all nod. “Do you think he could’ve sealed them up permanently? Or will we be able to break through?”

“I think that’s our best chance to get to Flannigan,” Liam says. “Otherwise what’re we gonna do? Break in through the front door? The place is probably surrounded by enforcers.”

“Yeah, I doubt going through the front door will work,” Conor says in a dry voice.

“So let’s head over to the tunnels and check them out,” Liam says and we all agree because Conor is right—going in through the front door isn’t an option. More like a death wish. Plus, time is ticking and we don’t have a lot of it left.

When we reach the secret hidden entrance across from the water, my heart is in my throat. We have to get in this way or we’re going to be shit out of luck. Conor pulls up to the curb and we all jump out and march over to the well-concealed door that leads into the pitch-black underground maze. Rafferty carries a toolbox and Conor has a sledgehammer.

There’s a large padlock on the door and it looks like it’s been sealed up tight. But that’s not going to stop us. I reach for the sledgehammer and Conor hands it over. Then, I lift it high and slam it down. After a couple of attempts, the lock breaks.

Yanking it off and tossing it aside, we study the material holding the door closed like glue. Looks like they used caulk or some kind of sealant. “Now what?” I ask, dropping the sledgehammer.

“Now we have some fun,” Conor says, turning back to the car. “I may have a couple of explosives left from when we blew the barn and rescued Emma.”

While he jogs back over to the Jeep, I cross my arms. “Explosives could cause the entire tunnel to collapse. It’s unstable and over one-hundred years old.”

“I don’t think we have much of a choice,” Liam remarks.

“And we’re running out of time,” Rafferty reminds us.

Cursing under my breath, I know they’re right. Sneaking in through the tunnels will lead us straight to the basement cell where Flannigan is being held. Matteo has locked too many people up in that cell and I’d love to blow it up, too.

One thing at a time, I tell myself.

Conor comes back quickly and he shows us the small detonator strip. “I’m going to stick it to the door and blow it. It’s smaller than the explosives we used on the barn, but it’ll do the trick. And, hopefully, it’ll be more controlled and will result in less damage.”

“Let’s hope so,” Liam mutters under his breath.

“Okay, everybody get back.” Conor carefully places the strip on the door and we all get out of the blast zone. After a quick glance at us, he hits the remote trigger from his cell phone and BOOM! The door blows and pieces of rotted wood fly everywhere.

Hurrying over, waving my hand through the smoke and dust, I look inside and see nothing but pitch darkness. But the tunnel remains intact and it’s safe to enter. “C’mon!” I motion for them to follow me, lifting my phone’s flashlight up to guide us. It’s been a very long time since I’ve wandered through these dark, dank tunnels and I hope I can remember which turns to take.

Relying on my memory, knowing that time is of the essence, I make my way forward on a hope and a prayer. We have to move fast and after a few wrong turns, I start getting frustrated.

“Dammit,” I growl when my flashlight beam lights up another dead end.

“I wish I could remember better,” Rafferty says, “but Sofia led us out of here.”

Turning back around, picking up my pace, I know I need to focus and get it done. Finley’s life is in my hands and I refuse to let her down. And, at that moment, I know a life without Finley isn’t an option. I need her next to me every single day,

by my side, and I want her in every single way—as my wife, my partner, my lover and my best friend.

Gritting my teeth together, I step around a puddle and my boot slips slightly in the mud. It's so musty and wet down here, but I'm getting my bearings now and I haven't steered us wrong for the past three turns.

Picking up my pace, I let my instincts guide me and within fifteen minutes, I know we're exactly where we need to be. I stop and point ahead into the gloom. "The cell is around that corner," I tell the O'Shea brothers in a low voice.

Everyone nods, and we all lift our pistols. *It's go time.*

Sweeping around the corner, our plan foremost in my brain, we walk straight into two enforcers and immediately jump them. They aren't expecting us and we use the element of surprise to our advantage. It's four against two and, even though the guys are big, they don't expect us to come flying out of the blackness and attack like wraiths.

Conor and Rafferty quickly overpower the guard on the left while Liam and I take down the burly guy on the right. I tackle him at the knees and he drops hard while Liam slugs him with a fist to the face. We work well together and I pop up, lift my gun and slam it down against the base of the enforcer's skull. He drops like a brick and Liam gives me a nod.

Glancing over, I see Conor just finished doing the same thing.

Once the guards are taken care of, or at least momentarily out of the picture, I stalk over to the cell and see Sean Flannigan cowering in there like the weasel he is and always will be. Looking down, I see the cell door is locked.

"Key is hanging on the wall," Rafferty says, as though reading my thoughts.

I reach over, grab the key off the hook and open the barred door. When I step inside, Flannigan cringes, moving away from me and pressing into the wall as though he's trying to disappear.

"What're you doing here?" he asks, eyes wide with fear. And as much as I know we'd all like to pound him into the ground,

that isn't a possibility. At least not at this moment.

"Getting you out of here," I snap. "We're trading you for Finley. Now move it!"

"You're taking me back to Desmond?" he asks in disbelief.

Ignoring him, I grab his arm and yank him out of the cell while Liam, Conor and Rafferty drag the unconscious enforcers into the cell. Once they're inside, Liam shuts and re-locks the door.

"Okay, let's go," Liam says, and we all turn back toward the tunnels.

Lifting my phone, I light the way again and this time it's easier for me to get us through. After only one wrong turn, I guide us back to the exit and we step out into the cool night. Dammit, it's getting late and we still have to drive out to the O'Shea compound.

The midnight deadline is approaching far too fast.

"We need to hustle," I say.

After securing Flannigan in the backseat, we get in the Jeep and Conor shoves it into drive. He slams his foot against the gas pedal and we're off. So far, so good. Heart in my throat, I settle back against the seat and it occurs to me that so far everything is going off without a hitch.

And that makes me nervous as fuck.

Nothing ever works out perfectly and I'm so damn worried about Finley. I'd like to believe her own flesh and blood would never hurt her, but I don't trust Desmond at all. He's a snake in the grass and I think he's willing to do anything he can to gain ultimate power over the O'Shea kingdom. I also believe he wants to put the Marinos out of business and assume total control of this city.

Even though Desmond told us he wants to trade Flannigan for Finley, we aren't stupid enough to actually believe anything that comes out of his lying mouth. Therefore, we devised a plan earlier that will allow us to go into the situation with eyes

wide open and be prepared if he tries to turn the tables and trick us somehow.

Swiping a hand through my hair, I turn my attention out the window and watch the dark night fly by. We should have plenty of time before the midnight deadline arrives. At least that's what I keep telling myself. My thoughts drift to Finley and I can't wait to pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless. First, though, I need her to forgive me for being such a dickhead and starting our relationship together on a bed of lies.

Now, with hindsight, I know that Finley O'Shea is the best thing that ever happened to me. I just hope she feels the same way about me, too. Otherwise, this night is going to end with a broken heart. Mine.

By the time we get to the compound, I'm on the edge of my seat and ready to get this done. I want my woman back in my arms where she belongs and I'll do anything to make it happen.

Conor drives around to the rear of the property and lets me and Rafferty out. We're splitting up so we can keep an eye on things better. I slide the tiny communications unit into my ear and we test them quickly. Everything appears to be in working order and Conor gives us a salute.

"Stay in touch," Liam says.

"Roger that," Rafferty responds and I give a sharp nod.

The Jeep drives away and Liam and Conor head to the front gate. The plan is for them to meet up with Desmond while Raff and I will stay under the radar, keeping a close eye on things. If Desmond deviates from the plan or tries to be sneaky in any way, we'll be ready.

"Ready?" Rafferty asks.

"Let's do this."

We move through the woods and sneak onto the property. From here, the plan is to split up and move to opposite sides of the large rear yard.

“See you soon.”

I watch Rafferty jog forward, heading into position on the other side of the property. Once he's out of sight, crouched low and moving swiftly through the treeline, I turn and make my way closer to the iron fence. The woods grow almost right up to the fenced-in property so it'll be easy to stay out of sight.

Multiple security lights face the back lawn and it's lit up like a damn Christmas tree. I spot several enforcers patrolling the property and my gaze moves over to the burnt-out barn that the O'Shea's blew up during their rescue of Emma.

My heart freezes in my chest when I see something moving amidst the barn's rubble and I squint. But I know that slim silhouette very well and I immediately recognize Finley. What the hell is she doing out here in that pile of ashes and burned lumber?

Creeping closer, I jump up, grab hold of the fence and scale over it. Staying out of the light as much as possible, I stick to the shadows and jog over. Halfway there, I can't help but get sidetracked by an approaching guard. I don't want to shoot him and alert everyone within a mile radius of my presence, so I tuck my gun in the back of my waistband. With nowhere to hide, I launch out of the darkness and tackle him down.

With a surprised oomph, he drops and we roll across the grass, scuffling. I get a couple of good punches in and, luckily, he dropped his gun after my surprise attack. Unfortunately, we catch another guard's attention and, as he runs over, I lift my elbow and slam it into the enforcer's face. He passes out from the blow and I push off him, right in time to get sideswiped by a bullet.

Motherfucker.

I dive sideways and roll, racing back into the shadows, losing my damn gun somewhere in the grass. Dodging back and forth, trying to avoid a bullet in the back, I hear the guy yell at me to stop.

Yeah, right.

I pick up my pace, reach what's left of the barn, and grab a broken, burned log. Lifting it high and swinging, I manage to catch the guard across his middle. I'm not sure if his gun jammed up or what, but he curses and tosses it.

Thank God, I think, and swing the log hard like it's a baseball bat. *Thunk!* It hits him upside the head and he goes down hard with a grunt.

Spinning around, tossing the wood aside, my gaze collides with Finley's terrified eyes. She's shaking her head, motioning like a mad woman, but I don't understand what she means since her mouth is covered with duct tape.

Running over fallen beams and skirting around debris, I reach Finley and she's trying to talk and pointing all over the place. I reach out and rip the tape off.

"Luca!" she cries, big blue eye round with panic. "The entire place is rigged to blow!"

"What?" I look around, searching for the evidence. Of course, she's right, and I spot several semi-hidden charges tucked here and there. One is only a couple of feet away.

"Desmond has a remote and the second my brothers come out here to untie me, he's going to blow it. He wants us all dead!"

"Fuck." Dropping down to my knees, I reach for the rope and start working on untying Finley's wrists. Damn, whoever tied this made sure it was ridiculously tight and secure.

"Hurry, Luca," Finley urges me.

I'm working as fast as my fingers can, but it's cold out and I shake my hands out hard and give my fingers a quick squeeze. This isn't the time for them to stop working. "I'm going to get you untied, *tesoro*. Don't worry."

But the ropes are being damn stubborn and not coming undone as quickly as I thought they would. I wish I had a knife, but I don't.

Swearing under my breath, I give them a frustrated tug. "Who the hell tied this?" I grumble. "I need something sharp. Do you see anything?"

We glance around, but it's so dark and nothing looks like it would help cut through these thick ropes. Hitting my comms, I say, "Rafferty, I'm with Finley and she's tied up here in the barn. She's okay, but I need a knife or something to cut her free."

A low curse echoes over my comms. "On it. Gimme a sec," Rafferty responds.

Momentary relief passes through me, but we don't have a second to spare. My gaze locks onto Finley's. She looks so scared and unsure, and I fucking hate it.

"Everything is going to be okay. I promise," I tell her.

I just hope to God I'm right.

Finley gives me a brave nod then looks over my shoulder. Her face falls. "Oh, God," she cries. "They're coming."

I turn and see Liam and Conor striding across the back lawn, heading straight for us. Desmond remains near the house, watching, waiting for the right moment to strike. *Shit*. The minute her brothers reach us, Desmond will blow us all sky-high.

I have zero doubts about that.

FINLEY

“We have a big fucking problem!” Luca snaps into his comms unit. “Stay away from here. Desmond has the barn rigged with explosives and I need to get Finley untied! Stall him!”

My heart plunges. Liam and Conor abruptly stop walking after Luca warns them that they’re heading straight into a trap. Which, of course, is going to let Desmond know that something is up. But, thank God, Liam seems to play it off smoothly as he reengages Desmond in conversation.

But, I know my brothers will only be able to stall for so long before Desmond realizes something is going on. He’s too damn smart and ruthless.

Luca stays low, working frantically on my bindings and I’m twisting, pulling and turning until my scraped wrists start bleeding.

“Fuck!” Luca glances up and I see fear and worry flash through his molasses eyes. Liam and Conor have turned back around and continue talking to Desmond again, still stalling, and I don’t see Rafferty anywhere.

Suddenly, chaos erupts up by the house and we look up to see my brothers fighting with enforcers and Desmond. *Oh, God.* My heart sinks. He’s going to hit the button that will blow this whole barn up.

“Luca, go!” I yell, shaking all over, trying to push him away. *This is it.* Desmond is going to get trigger-happy. I can see the

seconds counting down in my mind and know that I'm moments away from my entire world going dark forever.

But not Luca's. I refuse to let him die, too.

"You need to leave—now!"

"I'm not leaving you," he growls.

"Luca, please," I beg. "He's going to do it and—"

"I'm not leaving you," he repeats in a firm, steady voice as the hope seeps out of my body.

I'm going to die.

"I don't want you getting hurt or dying because of me. Please, Luca, go," I plead. Hot tears begin to fall from my eyes and trail down my face.

"No," he argues, voice firm. "I will never leave you, Finley. If you're going to die then I will, too. Because I am not leaving your side."

The weight of what he's saying hits me hard. I can't ask him to stay here in danger and sacrifice his life. Shaking my head, I gasp between sobs, and push him away with my tied hands. "Luca, no. Please. You have to save yourself!"

Luca grabs my hands, stilling them, and looks me straight in the eyes. "Look at me! I love you, Finley. I will never leave you!"

He swipes his thumbs over my wet cheeks then presses a hard, quick kiss to my lips.

Luca loves me? Oh, my God. My heart fills with joy and I swallow back a fresh onslaught of tears, wondering if I even heard him right. "You do?" I ask, feeling completely overwhelmed and bewildered all at once.

"So goddamn much. If you leave this Earth then I'm going, too. I refuse to live another day without you."

"Oh, Luca, I love you, too," I whisper harshly.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I press my forehead to Luca's as gunshots pop through the air and men start yelling. Right now,

we're caught in the middle of a situation we have no control over and my heart is breaking. It's also overflowing with so much love for this man.

"Luca!"

Our heads snap over to see Rafferty running by and he tosses something silver through the air. Luca catches it and I look down to see him quickly opening a pocket knife. The hope that crumbled earlier now comes back full force as Luca starts sawing through my bindings fast and furious.

We're going to make it. I keep repeating the thought over and over in my head, clinging to the belief that he's going to finish cutting through these damn ropes before Desmond realizes what's going on. And then we can safely escape. All of us.

Because, dammit, Luca loves me and I love him. We are on the verge of a future together and it's not some fake relationship anymore. It's the real deal. Somewhere along the way on this crazy, twisted journey, Luca and I really fell in love. I've known my feelings are real, but now to hear that his are, too, makes me the happiest woman in the world.

So I am not giving up. No freaking way.

One of the ropes drops and my heart soars. *C'mon, Luca. Almost.* Luca is low and out of sight, so Desmond shouldn't be able to see him from up by the house. Glancing up there, I spot Rafferty in the mix now, too. Everyone is fighting and shooting, and I'm hoping Desmond forgot all about me for the time being.

Looking back down, I tug and help loosen the ropes and, after a little more cutting and cursing, the last pieces break free.

"Oh, thank God," I whisper. Wasting no time, Luca tugs me up to my feet.

"C'mon!" He starts pulling me through the barn's rubble, and we're dodging around burned beams and heading for wrought iron gate.

But Desmond must see us on the move because suddenly my world tilts and a loud booms fill the night air. One right after the other. Flames erupt and I feel myself get picked up, lifted

right up off my feet, and thrown forward as heat singes my back. Ripped away from Luca, I fly forward then drop down so hard on the ground that all the air whooshes out of my lungs from the impact. Unable to move, momentarily stunned, I hope to God I didn't break any bones.

Desmond blew the charges. But the bastard failed because I'm still alive.

My eyes snap open and I carefully move my arms and legs. All good, no breaks. I have no idea how I'm still in one piece and all I can do is thank my lucky stars. Then I call out for Luca.

"Luca..." Turning onto my side, I look for him, but my eyes are still trying to focus after being knocked silly. Coughing from the smoke, I struggle to pull myself up into a sitting position, squinting through the thick billows of ash and black clouds. Finally, I spot Luca a hundred or so feet away from me.

He's lying on the grass and not moving.

"Oh, God, no." Is he hurt? Or worse? Heart in my throat, stomach dropping in dread, I pull myself to my feet and stumble over to him. Falling down beside him, I lay my hands on his chest and lean down. "Luca?"

When he doesn't respond, everything in me sinks hard and fast. Panic sets in and my fingers curl, grabbing hold of his shirt and shaking. "Luca!" I hiss.

This can't be happening. He came to rescue me, told me he loved me and would never leave me...and now this? No. I refuse to accept it. Fate can't be this cruel.

"You can't leave me," I cry, twisting his shirt up in my grip, pulling the material in desperation. "We only just found each other." His eyes are closed and I press my ear to his chest, listening for a heartbeat. For a panicked moment, I don't hear anything. But then I feel the subtle rise and fall of his chest followed by the low, steady drumming of his heart.

He's alive! Sagging against him in relief, I thank every angel in the heavens above.

“*Tesoro?*” His voice is raspy and I look down to see his beautiful brown eyes on me.

“Oh, thank God.” My heart soars and my shoulders slump as Luca pushes up and drags me into his arms. For the briefest moment, we hold each other, but then we know it’s time to go.

“C’mon,” he says, and we help each other up. “It’s time to get the hell out of here.”

Luca puts his arm around my shoulders and I curve mine around his waist. Together, we head toward the fence. The smoke is still thick and makes my eyes water, but it provides a nice cover for us. Unfortunately, it also hides my uncle who walks out of the darkness, gun trained on us.

On me.

“Don’t fucking move,” he snarls.

Gone is the smug Desmond I dealt with earlier. The man who thought he had a failsafe plan to destroy his entire family. But we turned the tables and now he’s livid. Face red and bruised, he stalks forward, waving the gun, and Luca steps in front of me, trying to shield me.

I grab onto his arm and address my uncle. “You thought you could kill us all tonight, but you lost.”

“Only a temporary loss, dear niece. You’re never going to beat me or take back control of the O’Shea empire. It’s mine!” he bellows.

It’s clear he’s losing his mind and I just blink, unable to process the mad man I see before me. I’d love to tell him off, give him a piece of my mind but, at the same time, I don’t want to poke the bear. My gaze moves to the gun he’s holding and I know we need to get it away from him fast. *Where the hell are my brothers?* I wonder.

“You think you and your brothers can take everything and toss me out again? Over my dead body.” His upper lip curls in a half snarl, half growl and spittle flies from his mouth when he speaks.

Fear begins to trickle through me and I realize he's not going to let us walk away from here. Desmond is too power hungry and too desperate. I need to be smarter than him, keep him talking until help arrives. Because I know my brothers are here somewhere, probably dealing with enforcers, but they'll show up soon and help save the day.

Luca seems to be on the same page. "Do you really think you can get away with this?" he asks. "Matteo is coming for you and there isn't a soul more ruthless than him. He won't rest until you're no longer a threat."

"He's right," I add. "Matteo will fight you until his last breath."

"You think I'm scared of Matteo?" Desmond scoffs. "After I take care of you, he's next. I've already hired the hitman to take him out."

Luca and I exchange a quick look. Is he telling the truth? I have no idea, but it's definitely possible. We need to get away from Desmond, but how? Suddenly, two huge enforcers appear and Desmond motions to us.

"Grab them," he orders.

My heart sinks as I'm yanked away from Luca and the enforcer forces me to walk toward the house. I have no idea what Desmond is planning, but I'm really starting to worry about my brothers. Where are they?

I find out the answer as soon as we enter the house. Liam and Conor are each sitting in a chair, tied up, and it looks like they went down fighting. Their faces are cut, bruised and bleeding, and my heart sinks. There's no sign of Rafferty, though, and I don't know if that's good or bad.

"Where's Raff?" I ask them in a low voice.

Neither responds, but I see the sorrow fill their eyes. *Oh, my God.* I refuse to believe anything bad happened to him. No way. While the other enforcer shoves Luca down into a chair and begins tying him up, I whirl, stomp down on the enforcer's foot with all my might then knee him in the groin

hard. Shocked by the pain, the brute releases me and I spin free of his hold.

Without pause, I take off, not knowing where exactly I'm going, but determined to shake things up. I refuse to let Desmond pick us off, one by one. No, I'm going to fight to the bitter end and somehow save us all. That's my plan, anyway.

The execution of my plan, though? To be determined.

My feet hit the stairs and I bolt up. I need a weapon and I need to put some distance between me and the assholes chasing me. When I reach the second floor, I see two more enforcers and they're blocking the hallway. *Shit*. I don't want to go higher, but I don't have a choice.

I keep running up and I might have a couple of options up here on the third floor. It's always been used for storage and we used to play up here when we were kids. So I immediately head toward the far doors that lead onto the roof. If I can climb up and over it, I'll wind up on the other side of the house where I'll be able to drop down onto the balcony that attaches to my mother's room. Then, I can either sneak back into the house or climb down the trellis and escape that way.

I refuse to leave Luca or my brothers, so I'll circle around and somehow save them. Somehow. The details of my plan are slowly coming together and I'm trying hard not to think too hard about Raff and what may have happened to him. I need to focus on grabbing my father's old knife which hangs on the far wall in a glass shadow box. It's an old heirloom, a dagger from Ireland with our family crest on its handle.

Running feet follow me, but I don't dare glance over my shoulder. Instead, I rip the shadow box off the wall, throw the balcony door open and race out onto the small flat patio that is surrounded by a low, decorative wrought iron railing. At this point, my options are either climb up onto the roof or drop down to the ground below.

Since we're three stories up and it's a straight fall to the driveway, I'm not interested in that route. Smashing the shadow box down against the ground, the glass breaks and I grab the knife inside. Shaking off small, sharp, clinging

shards, ignoring them as they sting my hand, I lift the dagger that came straight from Ireland and turn to see who's chasing me down.

I expect to see a couple of mean-looking enforcers, so I'm surprised when Desmond casually steps onto the patio. There's a madness glinting in his dark blue eyes and my pulse quickens when I see he's still clutching the gun.

"Oh, Finley, you stupid girl," he murmurs, slowly stalking closer. "You're going to make this very easy for me."

I back away, moving right up to the edge, and glance over. It's a long drop and there's nothing soft to break my fall below. If I take a leap, the only thing that's going to break is my neck. "Get away from me, Desmond," I warn him, waving the knife in front of me.

"You can't win when you bring a knife to a gunfight, little girl."

He's so confident in himself and so sure of the fact that I'm just a weak fool that he doesn't even bother to lift the gun. He just keeps moving forward, trying to intimidate and scare me. Good. He's doing exactly what I want, so I bait him.

"Please," I say, trying to sound desperate, like trapped prey. "Please, don't hurt me." My hand tightens around the knife and I calculate the distance quickly closing between us. Just a little closer...

"You're going to have an accident, dear niece. A tragic fall. Or, better yet, maybe you want to die because you've lost everything. Your marriage is a lie, your husband leaves you and when you realize you're all alone in the world, you decide to come back home and end it all. Yes, I like that story."

"Desmond, no..." I beg, turning up my panic and hoping he buys it. He's paying no attention to the knife clutched in my hand.

Just a little closer, asshole...

"Sorry, Finley, but with every war, there's a winning side and a losing side. You, my dear niece, chose the wrong side."

Confident of his success, he tips his head toward the empty air behind me. “Now, jump.”

He’s so close that I can smell his body sweat mixed in with the scent of whiskey on his breath.

I’ve got one chance at this and failure is not an option.

Pretending that I’m out of choices and too scared to fight back, I take one more step back and my foot hits the railing. At the same time, I swing the knife up and let it fly. Desmond doesn’t even realize what’s happening until it’s too late.

The blade slices through his dress shirt and red blossoms across his chest, soaking the white cotton material. With a pained shout, Desmond’s eyes go wide in surprise then narrow on me with so much hate that it chills me. With the knife sticking out of his chest, right where his heart is located, he takes another unsteady step forward, lifting his weapon, gaze wild. But, I sidestep him, then I push him as hard as I can.

With a roar, Desmond hits the railing, arms flapping, and he topples over it into thin air. After a couple of seconds, there’s a loud thump and then silence. Moving back to the edge, I glance over and see him lying down on the cement driveway, body twisted, neck at a horribly broken angle.

My knees give out and I drop down to the rooftop patio, shaking so hard. The sound of pounding boots fills the air and I immediately tense—until I see Luca. He sweeps out onto the terrace, pulls me up and I sag against him.

“Thank Christ,” he murmurs, pressing a string of kisses against my temple. “C’mon, we need to go.”

We lace fingers and jog back through the storage room then down the three flights of steps.

“How did you get away? Where are my brothers? Rafferty? Is he okay?” I manage to ask.

“We overpowered some enforcer scum,” he tells me. “Rafferty was grazed by a bullet, but he’s okay, and your brothers are loading him up into the Jeep right now.”

“I-I killed him,” I murmur, still feeling a little shell-shocked.

“Don’t think about it,” he says, sliding an arm around my shoulders and holding me close. “You did what you had to do.”

I send up a little prayer that Desmond’s twisted body is lying on the side driveway and not here in the front because I don’t ever want to see it again. Luca hustles me down the stairs and right into the Jeep.

Conor revs the engine and once we’re safely inside, he slams his foot down on the gas and the Jeep lurches forward, kicking up stone and gravel in its wake. I turn to Raff who’s upper arm is wrapped up in a towel and he forces a grin.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“I’ll be fine. You got him, Fin.”

I briefly squeeze my eyes shut. Yeah, I did. “Desmond is never going to hurt us again,” I whisper.

“Good job, sis,” Con says from upfront, eyeing me in the mirror.

“Are you okay?” Liam asks, blue eyes full of concern.

“I will be,” I assure him.

“She’s going to be just fine,” Luca states, pulling me closer.

Leaning against his solid warmth, I realize that Luca Marino is my everything. The man I love and who I’m going to spend the rest of my life with—for real. There won’t be anymore pretending or putting on a show for everyone else. From this point forward, it’s him and me and our love.

Someone or something is definitely watching over us tonight and I’m so incredibly grateful.

“Everyone hang on,” Conor warns us and I look up to see he’s approaching the front gate at about eighty miles an hour, and he isn’t slowing down. *Shit*. Bracing myself, I hang onto Luca and the seat in front of me as the Jeep crashes through the wrought-iron barrier.

Bam! We make it out and I’m about to send up a silent prayer when I hear Conor swear under his breath and I sit up

straighter. *What now?* Spinning around, I look out the back window and see we're being followed. "Shit!" I exclaim when two big SUV's spin around the corner and start following us.

Conor takes one quick glance in the rear view mirror and hits his foot on the gas hard. We jerk forward and I slam into the back of the seat.

"Stay down," Luca tells me.

I drop down, staying as low as possible, while he, Rafferty and Liam roll down their windows and start shooting at the two vehicles pursuing us. Guns pop and bullets fly, and it feels like I'm in the middle of some big budget action movie.

Holding onto the seat while we weave back and forth, I squeal when the back window shatters.

"You okay?" Luca asks, and I manage to nod.

If I have to be in a movie, why can't it be a nice romantic comedy? Or even a sweet holiday made for television flick? But, no, it has to be a full-on, balls-to-the-wall chase scene straight out of a flipping *Fast and the Furious* movie.

Whoever is trying to take us down might be good, but my family is better. After a few minutes, Luca and Raff manage to shoot a tire out and the first SUV goes spinning out of control and careening into a ditch.

"Be careful of your shoulder!" I yell up at Rafferty, but he's hanging out the window and paying no attention to the blood soaking through the towel wrapped around his wound.

"One down!" Luca yells, and he and Rafferty slap hands. I smother a smile, love seeing them get along so well. After a lifetime of being told our families are enemies, it's nice to be able to put that shit to bed once and for all.

No longer. From this point forward, the only enemy around here is most likely Matteo. Desmond is no longer a threat to the people I love most. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get rid of the image of his dead, twisted body from my mind, but at least it's over.

I still can't get a good read on Matteo Marino, though. But he wasn't the one who murdered my father in cold blood. That was the work of Desmond and I can't wait to tell everybody that huge piece of news.

Justice has finally been served and I was the avenging angel who delivered the ultimate blow. I'm not exactly sure how to wrap my head around that.

The second SUV pulls up closer and manages to clip our bumper before Liam shoots their windshield out. Conor regains control of the Jeep, but the big car behind us spins out while Luca and Raff pepper it with a few more bullets for good measure.

Whew. We made it. Popping back up, I throw myself into Luca's arms and start dropping kisses all over his handsome face. I don't even care that my brothers are there; I can't help myself.

"We're alive," I whisper, kissing his nose, his cheek, his jaw. "Thank you for rescuing me for real this time."

"I'll always rescue you, *tesoro*," he murmurs. Then he takes my face in his hands and captures my lips in a long, passionate kiss that has my brothers smirking. When it keeps going, though, they tell us to save it for later.

"Break it up, you two," Liam growls, turning back around in his seat. But I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Yeah, somehow I don't think there's going to be an annulment," Conor adds with a wide grin, watching us in the rear view mirror.

"Or a divorce," Rafferty states. "And the strange thing is I think I'm okay with that."

Luca pulls back and looks deeply into my eyes, thumbs circling my cheekbones. "No fucking way. I love your little sister way too much, boys. I think you're stuck with me."

Then his mouth descends again and I return the kiss with all the love in my heart.

LUCA

After losing the assholes enforcers, the drive back to the city is uneventful. And that's fine by me. I've had enough adventure to last a lifetime. From this point forward, all I want is to focus all of my attention on Finley and make her the happiest woman in the world. I know I have some more apologizing to do, but right now, I just want to make it up to her.

And my plan is to start with multiple orgasms. Butter her up a little first then pour my heart out and beg for her forgiveness. Hopefully, it's a good plan.

I've lost what little faith and trust I had in Matteo, so I tell Conor to drop us off at the hotel where their mother is staying.

"But I want to stay with you," Finley murmurs softly. She's curled up on my lap and my mouth edges up.

"You will. Don't worry, I'm not letting you out of my sight. I just don't want to go back to the apartment my father gave us. I'll never trust him again and we'll get our own place soon, *tesoro*."

When Conor finally pulls the Jeep up to the curb, I think we all let out a collective sigh of relief. Tonight was scary in so many ways and I'm incredibly grateful we all made it out in one piece.

"We have a lot to discuss," Liam murmurs.

It's nearly three in the morning and Finley can barely keep her eyes open. "We do," I agree, reaching over to open the passenger door.

“We’ll let you guys rest up and then regroup. Say, in two days?” Liam suggests.

Two days should be enough time to do all the things I want, multiple times, to Finley’s luscious little body. Plus, beg her to forgive me and convince her to stay married to me. “Sounds good,” I say and slip out of the vehicle.

“Take care of our little sister,” Rafferty tells me and I give a solemn nod.

“I’ll guard her with my life,” I assure them as Finley gives them each a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“You better,” Conor adds over her red head.

Her brothers still make me a little nervous, but once they realize how much I love their baby sister, I know everything will be fine. Turning around, I sweep Finley up into my arms and carry her into the hotel.

“Luca!” she gasps. “I can walk.”

“No need. I’ve got you.” I press a kiss to her temple. “I will always have you, Finley.”

Walking over to the counter, the clerk behind the desk smirks when I ask if there’s an available room. Lucky for us, they have one and it doesn’t take long until I’m waving the keycard in front of a door on the fourth floor.

I push it open with my shoulder then let it fall shut and immediately lock it. Finley starts kissing my neck and I groan, slapping the keycard on a table, enjoying the soft flicker of her tongue as she explores my throat and jawline.

“I thought you were tired?” I murmur, my desire ramping up. I was ready to wash my girl up and tuck her into bed. But if she has something better in mind then I’m all for it.

“Mmm, not anymore. There’s something else I’d rather do than sleep. If you’re up for it?”

I’m instantly hard, my dick pressing against my zipper. “Oh, *tesoro*, I am most definitely up and raring to go. For whatever you have planned.”

Her mouth curves up into a smile against my neck and then she pulls back. “Good. Because I want you. Now.”

I set her down on her feet then reach over and wipe some black soot off her cheek. “I want you, too. But, we should clean up first.”

“Let’s clean up together,” she says and immediately begins getting undressed.

I am in perfect agreement and strip down to my birthday suit in the blink of an eye. Our clothes stink like smoke and we toss them in the corner. For the next two days, we’re going to be gloriously naked or wrapped up in the fluffy, white hotel robes.

Right now, though? Naked and wet sounds pretty damn good.

I grab Finley’s hand and tug her into the bathroom then turn the water on, adjusting the temperature.

“Can we take a bath?” she asks, blue eyes shining.

I would never say no to that, so instead of flipping the shower on, I close the stopper and let the tub fill with water. It’s not filling as fast as I would like and I make a frustrated sound. “This is going to take forever,” I grumble.

“Why don’t we kill some time then?” she suggests.

Before I realize what’s happening, Finley drops to her knees and has my rock-hard length in her hand. Stroking, exploring, pumping. With a groan, I thread my fingers through her long hair and tighten my grip. When her small, pink tongue licks around my engorged tip, I nearly lose it.

“Christ,” I hiss, my hips bucking forward.

Finley’s mouth wraps around my dick and sucks me into its wet, silky warmth. Her soft tongue swirls and teases, and my eyes roll back in my head. *Fuck*. Her mouth and hands feel like heaven, and my hips thrust. Not hard. Just light thrusts. I don’t want to choke her and I don’t want to take control. I’m curious to see what she has planned because it’s absolutely fucking delicious so far. Plus, I need to maintain my control while this damn bathtub takes its ever-loving time to fill up.

The intensity of her sucking increases and even though I'm trying to be good and not blow, it's getting damn hard. "Fuck, Finley," I swear. It's all too much and the moment she hums and those little vibrations skate up my aching length, I grab her shoulders and pull her up.

"I wasn't done," she says with a frown.

Fighting for control, a muscle flexes in my jaw as I turn her toward the tub and help her step inside. "I want to come inside that sweet pussy, baby girl. And you're going to take my cock deep inside you and ride it hard. Can you do that for me?"

She licks her lips in answer and I nearly blow my wad.

Lowering myself into the tub, I guide Finley down to straddle me, and rest my arms along the porcelain edges. She takes a moment to get situated then shifts forward, spreading her legs wider. I drop a hand into the warm water, grasp my throbbing cock and push at her entrance. "Take it all," I encourage her. "Every last inch."

With a soft moan, Finley starts to sink down, her body stretching around my thickness, her sweet channel expanding to take me deep into her warmth. Welcoming me home.

Once she's seated and her soaked pussy is full, I dig my fingers into her hips and encourage her to move. "Fuck me, Finley. It's all yours. Ride your cock, baby girl," I tell her, my voice hoarse with need.

"Yes," she moans, lifting up and then sliding down, pulling me deeper. "It's mine. All mine. You're mine, Luca."

"All yours," I rasp.

Beneath the water, my fingers find her swollen clit and I rub circles around it. My hips buck up, and I thrust up as she sinks down. Arching her back, Finley pushes her breasts forward and I latch onto a rosy nipple, sucking and teasing it into a tight peak.

If I didn't know better, I swear I died in that explosion and now I'm in heaven. I'm lost in Finley—lost in the passion flaming between us. Threatening to consume us. She's squeezing around me, pulsing hard, and I thrust harder, my

fingers moving faster on her clit, encouraging her straight to her release.

My mouth releases her nipple with a pop and I lean back, helping guide her up and down faster, encouraging her to let go. I watch her toss her head back with abandon and her hands slide over my chest, nails grazing across my skin. I've never seen anything so fucking beautiful and then she comes hard.

"Luca!" she cries, grinding down. Her mouth opens and her entire body shudders as the orgasm slams into her.

As she collapses on my chest, I can't hold out any longer and give in to the spasms of pleasure that rack through my body. With a shout, I empty into her and then lower my head on the rim of the tub. My arms tighten around her and, for a long moment, we stay connected. In every possible way.

There are no words to describe what it feels like when I'm deep inside her body. We're completely connected and I have no idea where I end and she begins. *Fucking heaven.*

Pressing a kiss to her flaming red hair, I run my fingers through the gorgeous strands. "I love you, Finley. So damn much."

Finley lifts her head, looking right into my eyes, and says, "I love you, too, Luca." Then she rests her cheek against my damp chest and I hear her whisper, "I think I always have."

"I'm sorry for hurting you, *tesoro*. Please, forgive me."

Her answer is a deep, passionate kiss and I feel my cock thickening again. The bath water is growing cold, though, so I stand up, pulling her with me. We step out of the tub, dry off and then I scoop her up and take her out of the steamy bathroom and deposit her on the bed where we make love again. I've never referred to fucking as making love, but that's exactly what it is with Finley. Something about it is powerful and intense. I've never had feelings like this and the need to be with her, to be inside her, is nearly overwhelming.

Even though we're both tired and it's late, we don't go to sleep afterwards. Instead, we lay on our sides, facing each other, and

start talking about everything. I apologize again about bringing Ewan into the mix and tricking her into marrying me.

“I regret my original intentions,” I tell her. “But, at the same time, if I didn’t do it, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

So, in essence, it took my desire for revenge against my father to bring us to this point. And now that my eyes are fully open, I couldn’t be happier. Maybe the bastard actually managed to do one good thing in his life. He brought Finley to me, and I am so in love with this amazing woman that I’m not sure what to do with myself. All I know is I want to please her and make her the happiest woman in the world. Every single day for the rest of our lives. And I don’t care what it takes.

Nothing is about me anymore. Now, my world revolves around Finley and whatever my beautiful wife wants, I will give it to her.

“You could’ve just agreed to your father’s terms upfront.”

“Never,” I whisper defiantly and tuck a lock of red hair behind her ear.

Finley laughs softly and lays her hand on my stubbled cheek. “Oh, my rebel. Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

My heart expands and it’s like that moment in that holiday cartoon. When the cartoon character’s heart grows three sizes bigger. But I think mine just blew up a million percent.

“It can’t be any more than I love you, *tesoro*.” I lean in and capture her soft lips in a lingering kiss. “Does this mean you aren’t going to divorce me?”

“Never. You’re stuck with me, Luca Marino,” she declares.

“Good. Because you’re my wife, Finley Marino, and I’m never letting you go.”

We kiss again and it heats up fast, scorching the sheets until we’re lost in each other and making love again. At some point, we finally tire out and my woman curls up in my arms, her sweet body pressed to mine.

Yes, I have definitely found my heaven on Earth. And she’s all mine. Knowing that I have all I’ll ever need right here, I press

a kiss to her head and drift off to sleep.

EPILOGUE

FINLEY

“Welcome to the family, Luca. Officially,” Liam adds, his champagne flute extended, and we all chuckle. The toast makes my heart happy because for the first time, what’s happening between our families is genuine.

Looking down the table, I take a moment to soak in what I see—endless smiling faces and a fierce love that brings tears to my eyes. Except for Matteo, Anna and Giovanni, everyone is here and it’s amazing.

We’re at the hotel, celebrating in the attached restaurant. My brothers sit with their wives and my two nephews are being held by their glowing mothers. Rory and Liam are incredible parents and I hope to follow in their footsteps one day. Same with Sofia and Rafferty who is healing up quite nicely and being fussed over constantly by his adoring wife. Conor and Emma will be having their own little one soon enough and the way he looks at her makes my heart tumble.

My mother sits beside Harrison Shepherd who’s been welcomed into our dysfunctional chaos with open arms. It makes me happy to see my mother is finally happy with a man. That kind of loving expression never reached her eyes when she was married to my father. And he treats her well—like a beloved equal and a best friend. Whatever they’ve found together is magical and I wish them all the best.

A few days after defeating Desmond, I visited my mom and we had an in-depth, private conversation about her relationship

with the O'Shea men. Wanting to be completely honest and upfront, I told her everything that Desmond said.

"Oh, Finley," she said. "I'm not going to sit here and lie to you. I got tangled up with Nolan and Desmond when I was young and naive. I'm embarrassed to say I was more attracted to their money and power than the men themselves. It's terrible, I know that now. Spending time with Harrison has made me realize what's important. At one point, I was so backwards. I didn't understand what love was. Not truly."

"So did you ever love either of them?" I asked.

"I loved what they could provide," she said carefully. "And once it became clear that Nolan would be running everything, I chose him. Love wasn't an issue or a determining factor."

I'm still not exactly sure how I feel about her answer, but I respect her honesty.

"Desmond said he thought you loved him at one point."

"Of course, he did. Because he was an arrogant man. But I'm not entirely innocent."

"What do you mean?" Even though I was scared to ask, I needed answers. It was important for me to put all of this to rest.

"I used to pit them against each other. If Nolan made me mad, I'd pay more attention to Desmond. I would lead him on and encourage him, even though I had no intention of following through with anything. With a future," she clarified.

"Oh, Mom." Her words made me a little sick but, at the same time, I'm glad she never loved him. Maybe she did have an affair, but I couldn't ask her. It was none of my business and the idea of her being with Desmond gave me chills. It was better if I didn't know every single dirty detail.

Thank God, Harrison Shepherd came into her life.

I'm glad my mother and I talked, but it's not a conversation I want to dwell on. She admitted to being young and naive, and she made poor decisions. But I can hardly blame her. Don't we all?

Hell, I married a total stranger.

The corner of my mouth lifts as I look over at Luca. But, unlike my mom, marrying Luca Marino has taught me what it's like to love and it's been the best decision of my life.

Feeling my gaze, he turns, leans over and presses a lingering kiss to my lips. A few catcalls and cheers fill the air and when we finally come up for breath, I see everyone grinning at us. My cheeks heat up and we find each other's hands beneath the table and squeeze.

There's now the issue of dealing with a few loose ends. Word on the street is that Sean Flannigan ran back to Ireland with his tail between his legs the moment he found out Desmond had mysteriously plummeted to his death. Good riddance. One less snake to worry about.

The bigger issue is once again Matteo Marino. I have no idea how the situation is going to play out. Or, if Desmond had really hired an assassin to take him out. Rory and Sofia weren't happy to learn from Luca that their father wasn't willing to make a trade to save my life. In fact, everyone was absolutely furious about that. And I'm sure Matteo is livid now that Sean is gone. He was the legal brains of the operation and knew everything that was going on behind the scenes. We'll have to get the scoop from Anna Marino, but she's out of town now, visiting a sick relative in Italy.

In the meantime, there's so much to celebrate. First and foremost, we finally defeated Desmond. He no longer holds claim on anything that belongs to our family, and my mother and brothers will be moving back to the compound.

Me? I plan on living with my husband in the new apartment we found here in the city. And I cannot wait to make it our own in every way possible. Luca already told me we're going to christen every room with hot sex and just the thought makes my insides turn warm and heat pools between my legs.

"Everything okay?" Luca asks, eyeing the champagne I haven't touched yet.

With a nod, I take a tiny sip and set it aside. I have a funny feeling that I won't be drinking any champagne or alcohol in the near future. At least for the next, oh, I don't know, nine months or so. I haven't mentioned anything to Luca yet, but I know my body very well and it hasn't been its normal self lately. I also just missed my very timely and on-schedule period a few days ago. And that never happens.

Of course, I have no idea if I'm actually pregnant or not yet. It's still a little early, but I scheduled a doctor's appointment for next week. With the way Luca likes to get it on, I know it's only a matter of time. I have no doubts that my husband is going to knock me up sooner rather than later.

And I have no problems with that. In fact, I'm looking forward to having his baby and raising our child together, surrounding him or her with so much peace and love. Luca is going to be an amazing father and I feel so good knowing that Rory and Sofia will be there to help me along the way, through the ups and downs of pregnancy.

But, first things first. I reach over and lay my hands on either side of my husband's handsome face, locking eyes with him. The beautiful molasses swirl of his irises pulls me right in and I smile. If I look deep enough, I can see our forever. And it's such a warm, comforting and lovely sight.

"What do you need, *tesoro*?" he asks, voice deep and gruff.

"Only you," I whisper.

"You have me."

"I look forward to christening our new apartment tonight."

All around us, the sounds of laughter, love and family fill the air. And I know there's no other place I'd rather be.

"Me, too," he says softly. "I think we should sneak out."

"Now?"

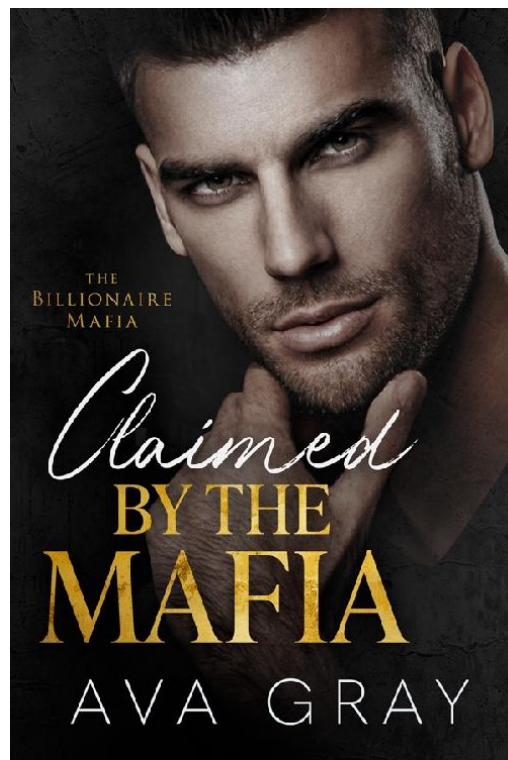
"Now," he says and presses a quick kiss to my lips. "Let's go home."

With a nod, I stand up and we give a quick wave to our loved ones, then hurry out the side door. I am absolutely thrilled to

be starting our lives together.

This time, for real.

EXCERPT: CLAIMED BY THE MAFIA



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emma

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

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

But he pretends not to notice and instead turns the volume up on the television set. Rolling my eyes, I finish up, turn the vacuum off and throw the cans in the garbage can. My dad hasn't worked in almost a year because of an injury—which healed about eight months ago. But he's milking it and still claiming his back hurts. And maybe it does. Who am I to say?

Either way, it's fallen on me to take care of the bills. Glancing down at the slim watch on my wrist, I realize I have to leave in twenty minutes to go to work.

As a cashier down at the corner grocery store, I don't make a lot of money, but I'm stuck in a position where I have to work full time in order to take care of the rent, bills and, of course, my dad. Plus, I don't have enough money right now to go to school and get a degree. Maybe one day. But the good thing is we're pretty much caught up on the utility bills and doctor bills from when my dad hurt his back. Unfortunately, it happened at home and not on the job, so his work isn't covering anything. They simply laid him off indefinitely without pay.

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

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

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

And he started drinking more and more.

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

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

turns into a deep depression and then I get so worried about him that I don't want to leave the house.

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

After wiping down the top and the front of the drawers, I pull one open and do the edge. For whatever reason, I reach in and remove a stack of letters, looking for the ones addressed to Elizabeth Shepherd. I easily find one and run my finger over my mother's name. I understand why we keep things like this—so we can still feel and remember her—but, at the same time, it's so damn hard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean it's taken care of? Did you pay it?"

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

Somehow his lack of concern doesn't comfort me.

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

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

"Dad—"

"I wanted to send you to college. Like any good father. And then I hurt my back and figured I could use that money for

doctor bills and to live off until I got better and was able to return to work.”

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

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

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

“I know,” he murmurs, looking contrite. “But, hey, the good news is he’s gone and the debt died with him.”

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

“Never. I swear it.”

“You’re sure?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More often than not, it feels like I’m the parent and he’s the child. Stressing about it does nothing, though, except give me

anxiety and make my stomach hurt. Doing my best to calm myself, I try to clear my mind and think zen thoughts.

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

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

Crap.

There's also the awful possibility that my dad didn't tell me the entire truth. Maybe someone already came for the money, but he dodged them. I hate to say it, but I wouldn't put it past my father to sneak out the back door if he thought he was in some kind of trouble.

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

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

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

If only we could be so lucky.

[Read the full story HERE!](#)

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