

Cora Reilly

By Sin I Rise

(Part Two)



BOOK

2

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CORA REILLY

DARK ROMANCE
VAJONA

BY SIN I RISE

(Part Two)



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A fatal bond that was never meant to be.

Marcella gave Maddox the impossible choice, and he chose her. Still, she wonders if Maddox is ready to commit to a relationship, or if he's scared of losing the uninhibited freedom his biker lifestyle offered him.

All his life, Maddox knew who his enemies were, but suddenly he's at a loss whom to trust. Will he ever find a place in Marcella's life and family, or will old companions give him a new home and purpose?

Can enemies ever truly become lovers if the odds are against them?



CHAPTER 1

Maddox

A sense of uninhibited freedom took hold of me as I drove away from my prison of the last few days. I hadn't really believed that Vitiello would allow me to leave—even if Marcella had asked him to grant me mercy—considering he wasn't in the business of granting mercy. My heart clenched thinking of her. The last few days with only glimpses of her had been torture. I missed this woman, more than I'd ever admit to anyone, even her. My feelings for her, the decisions I'd made for her, they had taken me by surprise and still shocked me.

Now I had things to settle before I could head back to her. Otherwise, my mind would always be adrift, and I wanted my sole focus on her when I was with her. I wanted us to work out. I'd given up too much for it not to work out.

I headed for the first hiding place in a park near our old clubhouse in New Jersey, ignoring the bouts of dizziness. As expected, the teak box buried in the soil beneath a bush was empty. Whoever had survived the attack had been heading there first too. I hoped it had been Gray. He needed the money. He'd yet to become as resourceful—or rather ruthless—as the rest of us and thus would have a harder time getting money by other means.

Mounting the bike again, I checked two more spots within the city bounds before I headed for a junkyard about thirty minutes outside of the city. It had been Cody's, which was why I had avoided the place. He'd used it to launder our drug money.

I didn't have keys for the gates, so I had no choice but to park the bike in front of them and climb over the fence topped with

barbed wire. The second my feet hit the ground on the other side, enraged barks sounded, and soon after, two Rottweilers darted out behind the small house that served as a maintenance building.

I didn't know these dogs, and worse, they didn't know me. They were most likely from one of Earl's litters.

"Fuck," I muttered. I didn't have any weapons on me. From the look of it, the way their ribs protruded, the dogs hadn't been fed in a while. Cody probably hadn't taken good care of them even before he'd been captured. He always said hungry dogs were the best guards.

The two massive Rottweilers charging at me seemed to see me as their next meal. I stormed toward the first heap of crushed cars and climbed up until I reached the top. The dogs leaped at the pile but couldn't climb it. Looking around, I figured out a way to reach the building, climbing from one pile to the next. The dogs followed me, snapping and growling. Their fur was matted and dirty, and one of them had a cut in its side that seemed to be infected. I got rid of my shirt, tore it in two and tossed it in the other direction. The dogs chased after it. This would give me a few seconds. I climbed on the roof of the building then grabbed on to the edge and lowered myself until my feet were level with the window. My biceps screamed in protest.

After days of malnutrition, my body was in no state for top sporting achievements. Gritting my teeth, I kicked back from the wall, trying to gain momentum to smash in the window. The glass splintered as my feet crashed into it. The snarl of a dog forced me to release my hold on the edge and I swung through the window. Shards caught on my naked arms and back. Hissing in pain, I landed on the floor, on even more shards.

I blinked up at the window for a moment. But the heads of the jumping dogs trying to get in as well quickly tore me from my exhaustion. I jumped to my feet, swaying briefly before I looked around for something to defend myself with.

Inside one of the drawers of the desk, I found a gun with three bullets. But then my eyes landed on a huge package with dog

food. I stumbled toward it and dragged it to the door. The first dog jumped through the window and landed on the floor with bloody paws. I kicked over the dog food so it spread all over the ground away from the glass shards. The dog perked up and, not paying me another glance, began scarfing down food. Poor beast.

I carefully opened the door and the other Rottweiler charged in. Like his companion, it ignored me in favor of food. I caught my breath for a couple of moments, half tempted to eat a couple of dog treats as well. My body was screaming for food. But I had come for money. I began searching the other drawers until I found rusty car keys that Cody had mentioned on occasion. Secrecy had never been his strong suit.

I grabbed them and rushed outside toward an old Chevy. I unlocked the trunk then dragged out the leather suitcase and opened it. My face split into a grin when I found several plastic bags with cash inside. At least fifty thousand, from the looks of it. Closing the suitcase, I carried it into the building then searched for the keys for the gates. When I finally found them, the dogs lay amidst the food, panting softly but looking appeased.

With the keys and suitcase, I headed out toward the gates. Scratching behind me made me turn around prepared to fight off an attack. To my surprise, the two Rottweilers followed me and hesitantly wagged their tails.

I scratched my head. "What am I going to do with you?"

I didn't know Growl's number or I would have called him so he could pick them up. If I left them here, the next person who came looking for money would probably shoot them. Not to mention that the bigger dog, a male, needed treatment for the cut and its bloody paws.

My gaze strayed over the junkyard until it landed on Cody's big ass Ford with the truck bed. With a pang, I put the Kawasaki on the truck bed then stowed the suitcase in the legroom of the car. The moment I stepped back from the door, first the female Rottweiler then the male jumped in and made themselves comfortable on the passenger seat.

I had one more place to go before I could drop off the dogs, though. It was an encounter I was dreading.

I went over what to say as I drove to Mom's house to explain what had happened, why I had killed Earl, but no matter how long my brain fumbled over the words, they sounded hollow and wouldn't make sense to my mother. Most of what had happened didn't make sense to me either.

She came out with a shotgun when I pulled up, obviously worried about unwelcome visitors. When she spotted me, she didn't lower the gun. Her blonde hair was in curlers all over her head and she was in a plush pink bathrobe, her lips painted in a matching tone. At least one thing never changed.

I hopped out of the car, raising my hands above my head with a crooked smile.

"It's me, Mom."

Mom nodded, her eyes narrowing. Apparently, I was one of the unwelcome visitors she wanted to intimidate with her shotgun. "What are you doing here?"

The suspicion in her voice made me wonder if she knew about how I'd killed Earl, but there was no way word could have gotten out. Nobody knew except for Vitiello's men, and I doubted they would tell anyone my mother knew. Vitiello had said he hadn't allowed word to get out anyway. And whatever I thought of Vitiello, one thing was certain, he was in absolute control over his men.

"Are you going to shoot me, Mom?"

My arms still raised over my head, I walked closer.

She lowered the gun a few inches but still aimed it at my chest.

"What happened to you?" Mom asked, eyeing my naked, cut and bruised upper body.

"This and that," I said, not ready to divulge more information with her pointing a gun at me.

She nodded toward the truck. "Isn't that Cody's?"

"Yep. But he won't need it anymore."

Mom nodded and smiled bitterly. "He dead?"

"Yep." I slowly lowered my hands. Mom eyed me warily but

didn't shoot. I didn't doubt that she could shoot someone if provoked. "I grabbed his dogs from the junkyard."

"Not just the dogs, I bet," she said quietly. "He kept a stash of cash over there. You know how he could never keep his mouth shut when he was drunk."

"He had a big mouth on him." I gave her a wry smile. "Will you put the gun away?"

Mom shook her head. "Not yet. Word on the street has it that you're working for the Italians now."

"I'm not working for anyone, Mom. You know how badly I take orders."

She motioned to the truck. "You should have shot the dogs. Don't you have enough problems?"

I wasn't sure how much she knew, but considering her reluctance to lower the gun, too much. "Earl's dead."

She nodded solemnly. "I know. He and a few men were caught by the Italians. Nobody survives the wingtips."

"Yeah." I wasn't sure if I'd expected tears or at least more sadness on Mom's part because of Earl's death but considering how he cheated on her constantly and was barely home, I shouldn't have been surprised.

"Word has it that you were captured as well."

I sighed, walking up the steps to the porch until I was right in front of Mom with the barrel almost touching my chest. "What else have you heard?"

"That you are a traitor. Gray told me you betrayed their whereabouts."

My relief over this confirmation that Gray had indeed gotten away alive almost knocked me over. "I did—" I didn't get further when Mom's palm hit my cheek.

"If something had happened to Gray that day, I'd never forgiven you."

"I know, which was why I made sure he could save his sorry ass."

"He told me."

"Where is he now?"

“I don’t know. He left yesterday. Only dropped some money off and told me not to worry about him and that he’d make me proud.”

“Fuck. What the hell does that mean?”

Mom searched my eyes. “Why are you alive, Maddox, if you aren’t working with the Italians? They didn’t kill you. Gray said you made the Vitiello girl your woman.”

My woman.

I liked the sound of it. “She means a lot to me.”

“More than that if she’s worth becoming a traitor for. You lived for the club. Is one woman enough to make you forget what happened to your father?”

“I didn’t forget, but I’m sick of living in the past. Marcella makes me want to think about the future.”

“What kind of future? What do you want to do without the club? You don’t know any other life.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

She laughed darkly but at least she finally aimed the barrel at the floor. “If you work with the Italians, every biker will want your head. They’ll probably want it anyway once word gets around that it was you who killed him.”

I tensed. “What are you talking about?”

Mom slapped me again. I saw it coming but didn’t try to defend myself. She had every right to be angry at me. “Don’t lie to my face, Maddox. I’m not stupid. The info comes from the Italians. Or are you telling me they’re spreading rumors to destroy your reputation?”

I looked away from Mom. Who had spread the truth? Only very few people that I knew of had been in the Famiglia prison. Luca, Amo, Matteo, Growl, and Marcella.

If one of them spread that I’d killed my uncle, that could only serve the purpose to make the other Tartarus chapters in the country and the Nomads of our chapter seek revenge on me. Someone had pretty much put a bounty on my head. They wanted me dead. Question was who.

On the first glance, Luca seemed unlikely since he could have me killed easily while I was his captive—but not without making Marcella resent him. Making the other bikers hunt me gave him an easy way to have me killed without getting his hands dirty and Marcella wouldn't blame him. "Do you know who's spreading the rumors?"

"Gray didn't tell me."

"Gray is the one who told you?"

"Did you kill your uncle, Maddox? That's all I want to know."

"You know how Earl could be, Mom. He was obsessed with revenge, even more than me. If we turn into monsters to kill a monster, we are as bad as him. Did Gray tell you what he did to Marcella?"

Mom nodded. "He's become more radical over the years. But you should have handled it in the club. You could have challenged him for the spot as president."

"I would have never been voted president. The more progressive, liberal members have all become Nomads over the years. The men who remained in the club were absolutely loyal to Earl. And even if I'd won, he would have never accepted the vote. The club was his whole life. Nothing else mattered."

"I know," Mom said bitterly. Her eyes searched my face. "I don't know what to think. I don't know if you are the same boy I raised."

"I am, Mom. I had to make a choice just like Earl made his choice when he tried to kill me with his dogs. But I'm sorry you are alone."

Mom laughed. "Oh Maddox, you know Earl hasn't been around in almost a year. But without the club, I can't pay bills. The ten grand Gray left me won't last forever." She put on a rubber glove as she always did when she smoked to prevent her fingers from becoming yellow. Considering she smoked about forty cigarettes a day, that was probably a good idea.

I jogged back to the truck and grabbed thirty grand from the suitcase. She watched me with a healthy dose of suspicion and

didn't look mollified even as I handed it to her. "This should get you through the year. I'll send you money once I start earning again."

She finally put the shotgun down. "You really going to work for the mob?"

"I won't work for them, but I might work with them for now. I'm just so mad about this girl... I can't..."

"I hope she didn't trick you. I really hope giving up everything was worth it. You gave up the only home you had for this girl. Does she even realize it?"

She was right. The club had been my home for as long as I could remember. Mom's house in Texas and now here had always only been the place where I'd gone to sleep.

So much had happened in the last few days that I hadn't had time to realize I was homeless now. I'd never had my own place, always only a room in the clubhouse. I'd had club brothers or club girls to keep me company when I needed it. I'd become a Nomad but without a place to return to. Marcella and I... we didn't have a place yet, and just thinking about moving in with a woman, my pulse picked up. How would it even work?

"I hope you don't come to regret your decision, Maddox."

"I won't," I said firmly. I'd never regret saving Marcella in the only way I'd known how. And killing Earl? I'd done him a service. He'd been spared a cruel death at Vitiello's hands. Still, a tiny part of me felt a pang thinking of the good times we'd had.

Mom grabbed my forearm, her long nails digging in. "I worry for Gray. You uprooted him. He's lost and you know how badly he needs people to look up to. He'll get in trouble, I can feel it. He'll look for another Tartarus chapter to join and get himself killed because they are going to go on a warpath with the Italians. Protect him. Bring him back here. Make sure he stays."

"I'll protect him. When I find him, I'll drag him back here and make him finish school and find a decent job. He's still young, he can choose a different path."

"I'd always wished for a different path for you as well, but not with the mob. Oh Maddox, stay safe."

“You know me. I can’t be killed.”

Mom became stern. “If something happens to Gray, I won’t forgive you. Don’t come back here without him, you hear me? This is on you. You took everything he had from him, now give him something else to live for.”

I swallowed, a heavy feeling of guilt settling in my chest. I had ripped Gray out of his home too, had taken his father, even if they’d only fought and barely gotten along. Gray hadn’t had a choice, unlike me. I wasn’t sure if I was the person he wanted to see. If he’d listen to me, much less come back home with me.

I looked over to the truck. “I should go now, I don’t want to bring trouble to your door.”

Mom gave me a look that made it clear it was too late for that. “Swear you’ll return with Gray,” she whispered harshly, her grip on me tightening even more.

I wasn’t sure if I could really promise it. Gray wasn’t a little kid anymore. Still, I said, “I swear.”

She finally released me. It was a promise I desperately hoped I could keep, for her sake, for Gray’s sake, but mostly for my sake. I didn’t need more guilty baggage added to my conscience, thanks a lot.

“Can you give me one of my old shirts before I leave?”

Mom disappeared inside without a word and I didn’t follow her. I had a feeling she didn’t want me inside her home right now. I wasn’t welcome and wouldn’t be until I found Gray, and even after that... we’d never been close but this was probably the nail in our relationship coffin. She returned with two black shirts and handed them to me.

After I’d put on one of my old shirts, I drove back toward the city but eventually pulled over on the side of the road and let the dogs out for a piss. My gaze caught on the Kawasaki on the back and I couldn’t resist. After I’d heaved it down, I drove up and down the road for a while, hoping it would clear my head. I couldn’t stop thinking about Gray. Mom always said he wouldn’t have survived what I had witnessed. He was softer than me,

maybe that was why Mom had always preferred him to me. If I'd been in her stead, I'd have done it too.

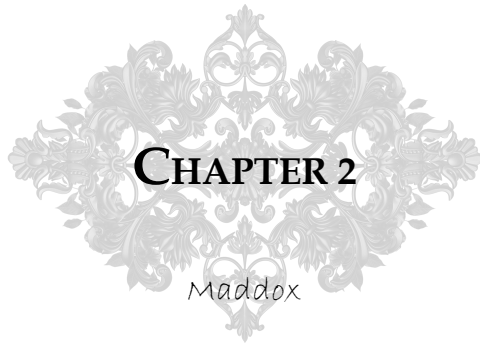
The dogs waited beside the car, watching me. Eventually I pulled up beside them but stayed on the bike. I couldn't explain why I suddenly felt hesitant to ride back into the city. I wanted to return to Marcella. I'd given up everything for her, and I wanted to be with her, but someone had ratted me out. I doubted it was Growl. He didn't seem like the vindictive type and didn't really have reason to do so unless Luca had ordered him to do it. Matteo had definitely wanted me gone. Maybe he had spread the information. Or Amo. The big guy definitely hated my guts and wanted to see me dead and far away from his sister.

Now every member of Tartarus in the country would know I'd killed Earl and they'd see me as a traitor. I'd be their main target. Finding Gray would be especially difficult like that. If I returned to Marcella to tell her I had to search for my brother Gray, whoever had ratted me out would very likely find out soon after and then spread that information, maybe even make it look as if I wanted Gray dead as well.

"Fuck," I muttered. I needed to find my brother before someone could get it in his head that I was actually a danger to him, if it wasn't already too late for that.

I perched on the bike and watched the sunset. Riding my Harley into the sunset had always meant freedom, even if MC life had been full of responsibilities and rules.

I decided to spend the night on the truck bed before I would make up my mind what to do next. I was dead tired and needed a night to really come to terms with the turn my life had taken.



CHAPTER 2

Maddox

When I woke on the truck bed early the next morning, my longing for Marcella was just as strong as the call of the street. The two loves of my life: the endless road ahead of me and the woman with the cold blue eyes. Mom's parting words kept repeating in my head. "I don't want to see you again until you've made sure your brother is safe. This is your fault."

Finding Gray would be difficult. The majority of my old contacts would avoid me and those that didn't might try to kill me. They had every reason not to trust me. But Mom was right. I needed to save Gray from himself. Not only was he probably still on the hit list of Vitiello but pissed off bikers out for revenge might be after him as well. If Gray got it in his head to attack Vitiello in revenge, I wouldn't be able to save him.

I hoisted the Kawasaki back onto the back of the truck. I needed to get rid of it and the dogs, preferably without running into any of the Vitiello men. Once the dogs had taken their seats again, I headed toward New York. The male Rottweiler was panting constantly, probably from pain because of the gash, so I decided to take the dogs to a safe place first. During our research on the Famiglia and its many affiliations, we'd also come across the dog shelter run by Vitiello's enforcer, Growl.

Vitiello probably wouldn't be happy if I showed up on his mansion's doorstep uninvited and I had no way to contact Marcella. We'd destroyed her phone when we'd kidnapped her and so far there hadn't been time to ask for her number anyway. I didn't even know what exactly to tell her that wouldn't jeopardize my search for Gray.

Growl had been semi-friendly when I'd talked to him, so he seemed like a safer option than any other Famiglia soldier.

When I pulled up in the driveway of the shelter, I parked beside another big pickup. I hadn't even gotten out when Growl and a tall, lanky boy came out of the house and headed my way. Growl became more alert the moment he spotted me, but at least he didn't pull a gun. That was the most friendliness I'd gotten from the Italians in years, and it still felt strange. I doubted being on semi-friendly terms with the Famiglia would ever not feel strange.

I got out of the car, making sure to keep my hands in sight. I really didn't want to end up with a bullet in my head, unless I'd really given them reason to.

"What are you doing here?" Growl asked.

"I have two more dogs for you, saved them from the junkyard of one of my dead club brothers. One of them is injured."

Growl still looked wary, but some of his vigilance disappeared as he saw the dogs on the passenger seat. "Lead the way."

I went over to the passenger door and opened it. "Hop out." The dogs actually obeyed and leaped out of the car. The bigger one growled when Growl walked up to him, but the tall man got down on his haunches and talked in a calm voice with the dog. Soon they calmed and trotted closer to him.

He patted them. "I'll call our vet so he can look at the wound, and you should head back to the city and meet with Luca."

I ignored the last part and motioned at the truck bed. "I have Matteo's bike. Can I leave it here so he can pick it up?"

Growl straightened, the suspicion returning to his face. "Why don't you bring it to him?"

"I'm not returning to New York right now. I still have a few matters to attend to before I can join Luca's team."

Growl shook his head. "That's not how it works."

"It's how it works with me," I said simply. "I'll probably be back in a couple of days, tell Luca that."

"What business do you have to take care of now?"

“That’s only my business. But it’s nothing that concerns the Famiglia.”

“Everything concerns the Famiglia, especially if Marcella Vitiello is concerned. Does she know you’ll be gone?”

“You can tell her. She’ll understand.” I wasn’t really sure that was true, especially because I couldn’t give her details about my plans, not with someone ratting me out. I’d never been accountable to a woman, except for my mother when I was a little boy, but even that stopped when I became a teen.

Growl narrowed his eyes. “If you aren’t sure about Marcella or where your loyalties lie, you better not come back. Luca gifted you with your life once. He won’t be as gracious again.”

“What’s it to you?”

“I know where my loyalties lie. Luca took me in when I had nowhere else to go. I’m not someone who tramples on a gift like that.”

“Just tell Marcella I’ll be back once I’ve taken care of business and tell Matteo thanks for his bike.”

I turned and got back inside the car. I didn’t need a guilt trip from Growl. I had half a mind to drive to the Vitiello mansion and ask for Marcella, clear things up with her, but finding Gray before he got himself killed was my top priority. Once he’d told me who’d leaked the information about me killing his father, I could decide how to handle it. I wasn’t even sure how long that would take, but Marcella and I had gone through worse than a few days of separation.

Soon we’d be reunited, and fuck, I couldn’t wait to taste her again.



Marcella

Being at home still felt strange after weeks of captivity. I had spent pretty much every second of the day with Maddox and being separated from him felt odd. I missed his presence, even his dirty mouth, and in more than one sense, but he obviously had made his choice to move on and enjoy the freedom only the biker lifestyle could offer him.

My lips twisted with bitterness as I glanced out of the window, down at the street in front of our house. I kept doing it, even if Matteo had told me an hour ago that Maddox wouldn't return. The kidnapping had messed with my mind, even if I didn't want to admit it to anyone. Maybe it was good that Maddox had made the decision I had been too weak for, too infatuated for, and cut ties between us. Was it really possible to rebuild a relationship on the basis of a normal setting, without fear and lack of freedom? We'd never find out.

I didn't hate Maddox for leaving. I too had held doubts if it hadn't been better to let Dad kill Maddox because then things would have been easier. A life with Maddox would have been a challenge not just for me but for my family and the Famiglia, one I wasn't sure everyone would have mastered.

Amo let out a low sound of displeasure. "Stop staring out of the window like a dog waiting for its owner. He won't come back. He's a disloyal biker, and you're better off without him."

I gave my brother my best death glare, furious about his comparison. "A dog would wag its tail and welcome its owner after his return, but you can bet your ass on me kicking Maddox in the balls when he struts back into my life."

Amo shook his head. "I know you would, but you should let Dad handle the idiot and have him killed. That's the clean cut you need, Marci. That he's still out there is holding you back and you really shouldn't let that happen. You need your energy and brain to show Dad's soldiers who's boss."

I finally turned my back to the window. Only Amo's window

had a view of the streets while my window pointed out toward the gardens, probably one more of Dad's safety measures.

"Nothing is holding me back. I can separate my heart from my brain. My work in the Famiglia doesn't have anything to do with Maddox and me."

"There's no Maddox and you. He dumped you."

I narrowed my eyes. "He can't dump me. We weren't in a relationship to speak of."

Amo waved me off. "Don't go on. I don't want to know details about your prisoner with benefits status."

I hurled the next thing I could grab at Amo, a heavy algebra book from the floor. He barely managed to dodge it, then he raised his arms. "All right. Let's not mention the biker again."

"Thanks." I walked over to his sofa and sank down. Amo returned his focus to his computer screen where he was reading up on the topography of Pennsylvania. I wasn't sure if it was for homework or for their biker hunt.

"Our soldiers will accept you eventually," Amo said but there was a hidden but in his tone. Our soldiers. To him, everything about this came naturally. He was welcomed with open arms, and nobody ever questioned that he would become Capo once Dad retired.

I also knew what Amo wasn't saying.

"Because they respect and fear Dad."

He didn't deny it.

"I'll earn their respect."

"You'll have to work harder for it than I ever will."

I knew that. Women were looked down upon. We were supposed to be pretty and know when to keep our mouths shut. I'd be spared sexist comments because of Dad, but the men wouldn't take me seriously for myself.

"You still sure about the tattoo?" Amo asked, motioning in the general direction of my back.

I tensed like I always did when I was reminded of the ugly words tattooed on my back.

Vitiello Whore.

“Yes. I won’t spend months trying to remove it only for scars to remain. People would know what those scars meant and that what happened bothered me enough to want to erase it completely from my body. That would look weak. I’ll keep the words but cover them with my truth.”

Amo nodded. “Maybe I’ll get another tattoo as well.”

I scoffed. “Good luck convincing Mom. You wouldn’t even have your first tattoo if you didn’t need it for the Famiglia.”

“Dad would talk to her.”

I rolled my eyes. A soft knock sounded.

“Yeah,” Amo answered.

Mom poked her head in, her expression worried but clearing up when she spotted me. “There you are, Marci. I went to your room first.”

I rarely spent time in my room. Amo hadn’t complained about my presence yet. If it really didn’t bother him or if his protectiveness came through, I wasn’t sure.

“What do you need?” I asked, giving Mom a firm smile. She still worried about me, especially since Maddox’s disappearance. Secretly, she was probably as relieved about his leaving as Dad, but she’d never say it.

“Giovanni is here.”

My mouth fell open, completely taken aback. “He didn’t call?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Mom said. She glanced at Amo.

He gave a one shoulder shrug. “I don’t have his number or he mine. We’re not that close.”

I swallowed down anger. “Dad. I doubt Giovanni would dare to come by without asking for permission first.”

Mom gave me a placating smile. “Your father worries about you as much as I do. Maybe he thought it would do you good to see him.”

I paced the room. “How will it do me good to see my ex-boy-friend only hours after Maddox left?”

“Old flames burn longer, right?” Amo muttered.

I would have hurled another book at him, and not missed this time, if Mom hadn't been present.

"Will you see him, or should I send him away?" Mom asked. "He's down in the foyer."

I couldn't believe Giovanni was here. Of all the people I didn't want to see right now, he was at the top. "Send him away. I can't deal with him right now."

Mom nodded and turned.

Maddox was probably already getting cozy with one of his pass-arounds right this moment, having her give him a blowie. The idea made me sick and furious at once. I didn't regret what had happened between us, I'd enjoyed it too much, but I wished I hadn't gotten emotionally involved.

"Wait!" I shouted, stumbling after Mom.

She turned with raised eyebrows.

"I'll talk to him," I said quickly. "It would be rude to send him away when he came all the way here."

"That's true," Mom said. "Be open minded."

She meant maybe I'd reconsider Giovanni. My first instinct was to say no, because breaking up with Giovanni had felt liberating. I couldn't see how getting back together with him could make me feel better. Returning to an ex-boyfriend only because one couldn't be alone or to soothe a broken heart was the worst option.

"Should I tell him you need to get ready?"

I glanced down at myself. I was in gym leggings and a sweater, clothes I'd only ever worn in public on my way to or from the gym. Still, I shook my head. "I don't feel like dressing up."

Giovanni could see the real me, the no-makeup, sweater girl. It was only one tiny part of me, but it was one he'd never met. Only perfect Marcella. I followed Mom downstairs. Like she had said, Giovanni waited in the foyer, regarding an old family photo with mild curiosity. He must have seen it a hundred times already. He turned to me when I was on the last step, his eyes taking in my outfit. Surprise flitted across his face but he quickly masked it with a warm smile.

To my surprise, I was no longer angry at Giovanni for his words about me being ruined if I broke up with him. The kidnapping put everything into perspective. He'd been hurt and shocked, so he'd lashed out in the only way he could.

I gave Mom a nod, indicating to her that she could leave. She slipped into the living room and closed the door.

Silence spread between Giovanni and me. He was, as usual, immaculately dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks plus Budapesters. The outfit didn't do anything for me anymore. Maddox had turned me into a leather jacket, biker boots, and jeans lover, which made me even angrier, considering nobody in our circles dressed like that.

"Marci," Giovanni said gently, tearing me from my thoughts.

I forced a smile and took the last step down but didn't go closer to him. "Giovanni, you look good."

It was the most inane thing I could have said and could only be topped if I started talking about the weather.

His smile broadened. "You do too."

I shook my head. "I'm in gym clothes with no makeup. You don't have to lie."

"I'm not lying, Marci. I'm not a fan of your outfit but you are as beautiful as always."

"Thanks," I said, and smiled more honestly than I had all day. This remark about my outfit would have set me off in the past, but I didn't care about Giovanni's approval anymore. Being perfect in everyone's eyes had been ripped from my hands, and in many ways, it made life easier.

"Can I come closer?" Giovanni asked.

"Why would you ask?" But then it dawned on me. The rumors had reached his ears and he thought I'd be scared of his closeness. Not that he'd been the touchy-feely type before, but I was certain his hesitance stemmed from a different place now.

"Sure. I'm fine, Giovanni. You don't have to treat me like I'm breakable."

Giovanni closed the distance between us and took my hands,

something I hadn't expected, but I didn't pull away. Being close to someone other than family felt good after everything, but Giovanni wasn't the man I wanted to be consoled by. Yet, that man had taken off like a goddamn coward. I shoved any thought of Maddox aside.

Giovanni met my gaze. His was infatuated and devoted as it had been before. He wouldn't run off. No, he was here, asking me for a second chance.

"I want us to try again. This time everything can be different, Marci."

"Different how?" I asked.

He lowered his voice as if he feared someone might be eavesdropping. That almost made me roll my eyes again. "I wouldn't hold back anymore. I'd give you everything you need. I'd kiss you everywhere, touch you everywhere. I'd sleep with you."

"You would?"

"Yes," he said. "Nothing is holding us back anymore. We could be like a normal couple even without being married. People won't expect bloody sheets anyway."

It took me a moment to process his words and then to get over them. He sounded relieved that I'd slept with Maddox, because the rumors about me getting nasty with a biker meant he didn't have to preserve my virginity anymore. It meant he didn't have to fear my father anymore, because in comparison to Maddox, me sleeping with Giovanni was something Dad would probably applaud.

I pulled my hands out of his, once again angry. "You are wrong. Something is holding us back, my feelings for you. I don't want to be with you anymore, not in the physical sense and not emotionally either. I've moved on, Giovanni, and so should you."

"Marci, you don't have to be ashamed of what happened. The rumors will die down eventually. Once we're married, people will only see you as the woman at my side."

It took impossible self-control not to scream at him from the top of my lungs. I'd been bottling up too many emotions anyway,

but I didn't want to alert Mom, or worse, Dad. They were already babysitting me 24/7, and a mental breakdown definitely wouldn't help my case.

"Please leave now," I pressed out. "I'm not interested in being the woman at someone's side right now. I want to focus on work. Learning the ins and outs of the Famiglia will take time and dedication. I think you should look for another woman."

I had to admit I was proud of myself for my moderately calm voice.

The hint of a sympathetic smile flitted across Giovanni's face. "My father mentioned your plan to join the Famiglia." He shook his head in a way that couldn't be described as anything but condescending. "Listen, Marci, your dad's humoring you because you were hurt, but people are starting to talk. It's not fitting for a woman to want a place in our ranks."

Women weren't supposed to want anything. Not sex, not love, and definitely not a place in the world they were born into. "I only want what I deserve as a Vitiello. Amo and Valerio won't have to justify their desire to be part of the Famiglia."

"They are men," Giovanni said, as if it was news to me. Had he always been this insufferable, or had I been more compliant in the past? I honestly couldn't say.

"And I'm a woman who's strong enough to demand the same."

Giovanni sighed. "But you aren't facing the same trials as every man who becomes part of the Famiglia. We have to swear an oath, get a tattoo. We have to bleed and suffer pain for the cause."

I lost it. "I was tattooed, I bled and I suffered pain for a feud between the Famiglia and Tartarus, Giovanni." I shoved my hair aside, revealing my missing earlobe. Then I opened the zipper of my sweater and tugged down the shirt beneath so my shoulder was bare, revealing the top of the tattoo. Giovanni's eyes widened when he saw it. "What kind of pain have you suffered that's worse? Hmm?"

"I'm sorry, Marci. You suffered, you are right. But you didn't do it with the Famiglia in mind, you didn't suffer for the cause."

You were collateral damage. And if you'd known any secrets of value, you would have revealed them the second they threatened to cut off your ear." Seeing my expression, he added, "Which is understandable. You are a woman with a different level of resilience to pain."

"Come on, Giovanni," Amo drawled, coming down the steps. "Last time you had to do practice fights, you almost bawled because someone twisted your fucking wrist. Marcella is tough as nails. If our father expected her to suffer pain for the cause, she'd do it again and she wouldn't break, because she's a Vitiello. And taking a tattoo doesn't make you more loyal. Marcella lives and breathes for our family, and our family is the Famiglia."

I could have hugged him right then. I could deal with Giovanni by myself, but Amo's support and the casual way in which he confirmed that I had indeed suffered for the cause had a different kind of weight in Giovanni's eyes. My brother's and father's word would probably always weigh more heavily than mine, but I'd make sure that my words were at least heard.

Amo stopped beside me, giving Giovanni a slightly unsettling smile. "Is there anything else you want?"

"I think Giovanni wants to leave now," I said.

Giovanni took a step back, then another. He nodded. "I'm sorry you feel the way you do, Marcella. I hope this won't shine a bad light on you and your family."

"Goodbye," Amo muttered, and Giovanni finally turned and rushed outside.

I let out a suppressed scream, balling my hands into fists. "I want to hit something really bad."

"You can pummel my boxing sack to the ground if you want. I was heading down to the gym anyway."

"All right," I said. "I have no better place to be anyway." Going outside or meeting with friends was still out of the question.

The door opened and Dad stepped into the foyer with Valerio by his side. Dad's gaze immediately zoomed in on me. He must have run across Giovanni or at the very least seen his car. Though

the bodyguards probably had informed him about our houseguest the very second he'd arrived anyway.

"Is everything all right?" Dad asked, looking from me to Amo.

"We were heading down to the gym so I could beat up Amo's boxing sack."

Concern filled Dad's gray eyes. "What happened with Giovanni?"

"He's a douche," Valerio commented. "I never liked him and I'm glad Marci dumped him. She needs someone cooler at her side."

"Thanks for the dating advice," I said with a laugh. "Next time I'll run my boyfriend by you first."

"Amo?" Dad asked, a hint of impatience in his voice.

"Nothing happened," I said firmly. "He wanted a second chance and I said no. Then he informed me that I shouldn't join the Famiglia because I would never suffer pain for the cause like men do." I shrugged. "No big deal."

Anger twisted Dad's face.

Valerio strolled over to me. "Some of my friends said the same, but I kicked their asses and told them you were really tough, now they believe me."

I ruffled his blond mane. "I'm the luckiest girl in the world to have such loyal and brutal brothers."

"I'll handle Giovanni and the other men who badmouth you."

"I'll prove myself to them, Dad."

Dad nodded distractedly, probably already making a list of people he'd punish. It wouldn't make them respect me more.

"Can I talk to you after my workout?" I asked.

"I'm in the office, just come by."

"Can I come with you?" Valerio asked when Amo and I headed into the basement.

"Sure, but we want to work out, so you should put on gym clothes," I said.

"Be right back!" Valerio called, already whirling around and dashing upstairs.

“He’s like a squirrel on steroids. Where does he get all his energy from?” Amo muttered.

I grinned and followed Amo down to his gym.

Amo showed me how to hit the boxing sack, making it look effortless, and soon my knuckles burned. Valerio dashed inside, all lanky limbs and tousled hair. We soon all laughed as we took turns kicking and boxing the sack. Even Amo took his workout only semi-seriously for once.

When I headed back upstairs a little while later and headed for Dad’s office, I felt the happiest I had in a while. Today had shown me once again that I could survive anything as long as I had my family.

After a knock, I entered Dad’s office. He gave me a strained smile. “What do you want to talk about, princess?”

“I want to hear your honest opinion on how I can earn the respect of your soldiers and really become part of the Famiglia. Half-assing it won’t work, I realize that now.”

“They won’t see you as part of the Famiglia as long as we don’t officially make you part of the Famiglia.”

“Then let me take the oath.”

Dad shook his head. “You’d have to cut your palm and receive the tattoo.”

I raised my eyebrows. Dad’s eyes moved to my earlobe, turning scary for a moment before he released a harsh breath. “I wish I had killed Earl. Are you sure you don’t want me to kill the other Whites?”

Gray and... Maddox. The man who kept popping into my head uninvited. Killing him wouldn’t change that.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said firmly. I walked over to Dad’s side and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Maybe your men need a gesture, one that shows I really want this and that you’ll demand certain things from me in turn as well. I don’t mind cutting my palm, Dad. Not after surviving Tartarus.”

“Because you suffered cuts by Tartarus’ hands because of me, I don’t want you to suffer them again.”

“This time it would be on my terms, my blade doing the cut.”

“It’ll be painful nonetheless.”

“I can handle it,” I said firmly.

“I know you can.” Dad touched my cheek. “But I won’t have you tattooed in front of a hall of leering men. You’ll always be treated differently, a tattoo won’t change it.”

I knew when to stop negotiating. “When can I take the oath?”

Dad shook his head with a chuckle. “There’s an initiation of four boys in a month, or if you want to be initiated by yourself, then—”

“No, I want to be initiated with the men.”

Dad nodded once. “You’ve chosen a very difficult path. I’m glad you won’t be burdened with White in addition.”