

To Reflect the Sun

A Redemption & Ruin Duology

Book 2

By Carrie Cotten



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Dedication

To the girls who need to hear this:

You're not too much.

*God made you just the right amount. Let Him shape
all that wonderfulness into the light that shines His
gospel so brightly that the darkness has no choice
but to flee.*

Chapter 1 — Rafe

The woman I was ordered to kill twenty-two days ago stands trembling before me, lips pink and glistening from the kiss we just shared. The kiss she initiated. I don't know how she can bring herself to touch me after I stalked her across continents, took a shot at her, stressed her to the point of sickness, and, this morning, rendered her unconscious and held her captive in a warehouse belonging to my family's Albanian allies.

But as we linger in the temporary storage closet in the Tirana airport, she's in my arms, looking up at me with wide blue eyes. Her brown hair is piled on her head in a bun that's half flopped to the side; a few still-pink strands follow the curve of her face. The pink crossbody bag she always wears is yanked askew, its scuffed strap twisted over her chest. Though her body shakes, she leans against me, her jeans powdered with dust from hiding among toppled construction supplies. She's been crouched into a ball behind a pile of wood for who knows how long, terrorized by the thought of someone getting to her before I could.

I should've been here sooner. Should've driven faster—left the warehouse earlier to get to her. I shouldn't have let her walk out in the first place. Now, she's bruised, with tear tracks staining her cheeks and a dead man's handprint on the side of her face.

"Tell me who did this to you?" The steel in my voice is at odds with the tender way I lift the hand she's cradling. She jerks back and sucks in a sharp breath when I try to examine it.

“I fell,” she says, flexing her fingers. When I growl, she flashes those blue moons at me, her good hand patting my chest. My arm snaps up, fingers wrapping around her smaller ones. I don’t peel her hand away; instead, I push her palm flat against my shirt, over my heart. Hers is a touch I crave. The only touch I crave. I need her to know there’s something living inside of me, despite the moniker I carry. The Shadow is the mask; Rafael Moretti, the man, stands before her now. I have to believe there’s a difference.

“Relax, big guy,” she soothes. “It’s not some excuse. I did fall. A couple of times, actually, and landed wrong the first time.”

“And this?” I stroke my finger down the side of her face, barely skimming her crimson skin. “You fell here too?”

“No.” She tries to turn away, but I don’t let her hide. I want to be done hiding from each other. “That was something else.”

Someone else she means. Someone put their hands on her. Again. The satisfaction I felt this morning, taking out her *fallito* ex-boyfriend who was really a Russian Bratva spy, has worn off.

Bryan Ross made her cry. Confessed to murdering her father when he was supposed to be the FBI Special Agent’s friend and partner. Then, he put his hands around her neck. I cup her beautiful face, but my fingers twitch with the need for more retribution.

There’s no one left alive to receive my rage. When I finally got to the airport, I found the cartel’s deadliest assassin, neck broken, a hundred yards past the body of a burly Russian. The Russian’s blackened lips and a line of foamy saliva running down his chin told how the much smaller Colombian bested his opponent.

But even Culebra’s fast-acting poison couldn’t save him from the four star-tatted Bratva men who took revenge for their comrade.

They won’t be a problem anymore. They tried to prevent me from getting to Grace. They also led me right to her, so I have a vague memory of offering them the chance to walk away—something I’ve never done before. But based on the bodies I left scattered behind me, they didn’t accept.

Grace's gaze combs over my features, registering the fury I know is painted across my face.

I tap my finger against the dimple in her chin. "Give me their names."

"They're all dead." Her voice cracks with the last word.

"I'll kill them again."

That makes her smile a little. I like that.

"Your morally gray is showing," she says. "But we don't have time for you to go all touch-her-and-die. We need to go, right? Go home?"

Home. Right. Her home. Not Italy, where my father thinks I'm headed, but the United States, where I'll have to pass her off to someone who can truly protect her.

"Yeah, let's get you home." I swipe up the backpack at her feet and cradle Grace's battered face in my hands as I back us out of the storage closet. I force her gaze to stay on me and not the carnage I created to get to her. Her broken expression from a few hours ago, when she recounted witnessing the death of Pedro Langzano in a back alley in Colombia, is still fresh in my mind. I can't watch her go through that again.

"Gotta move, Rafe." My best friend's voice crackles through the Bluetooth in my ear, telling me what I already know. The little time I bought for this much-needed reunion has run out.

"Gonna need new transportation," I murmur to Sio. "And supplies."

The only thing in my pockets now is the set of antidote vials I snicked off Culebra's lifeless body.

"What happened to the bike?" I can hear Sio's magic fingers flying over his keyboard, likely hacking into a rental car system to secure transportation.

In my hurry to get to Grace, I left my motorcycle on the curb in a loading zone with my backpack locked in the back compartment. It was probably towed by now, but even if it wasn't,

holding onto me while riding it would hurt Grace's arm. "Not gonna work."

"I have a contact close, but I'll need about ten minutes," he says.

Grace lets me guide her out of the storage closet and down hallways formed by flimsy, temporary walls. Muffled sounds of airport announcements bleed through the sheetrock and plastic of the construction area. Grace flinches at every sound, her uninjured hand jerking in mine like she's battling the urge to break free and run the other way. She's still uncertain and afraid—and she has every reason to be, but not of me. Never of me. Not anymore.

I wish I could ease all her fears, but her apprehension seems to grow with each step, and Sio's blasting all the reasons we need to get out of this airport in my ear.

"Two more from the east," he says.

"Copy." I turn my attention to Grace, who's cradling her wrist against her chest, her mouth a rigid line against the pain. "We're going to have to move fast now, baby."

An annoyed huff blows past her lips, and I can't help the grin that splits my own.

"I hurt my wrist. I'm not crippled." There's that spark.

I quirk a brow at her, dodging a glance at her wrist. "We're still going to talk about how that happened."

We race down a corridor, chased by the thudding sound of footsteps, which Sio tells me belong to airport security. I duck behind a loose sheet of plastic and tuck Grace to my side until they pass.

"Stay there." Sio's instruction filters through my thoughts as I hold Grace's now-hard gaze.

I deserve her anger. She's been trying to tell me who she is, and I've been too stupid to listen. The woman I've been anonymously emailing for over a year, my Little Distraction, is pressed against my side. How long has she known? When did she figure it out?

“Give me my backpack. And the SD card.” Her hoarse whisper catches me by surprise, and I blink until she holds out her good hand expectantly. “I know you have it. It was my dad’s. I-I need it.”

Even that little falter at the end doesn’t diminish the fire behind her eyes. I hook her backpack over her shoulders and slip the tiny plastic square out of my pocket, dropping it into her waiting palm. It’s her turn to blink at me. She was clearly expecting denial or resistance.

“Did you erase it?” She narrows her eyes at me.

“No.”

“Did you copy it?”

“Yes.”

She frowns but nods in acceptance, curling that card to her chest before she deposits it into a small front pocket of her pink bag.

“What are you going to do with it?” she asks, not looking at me as I help her with the zipper she’s trying to manage with one hand. “I mean, I’m assuming it contains incriminating evidence against people like—”

She cuts herself off, and I chuckle.

“People like me?” I finish for her. “Made men in the Italian mafia?”

She stares up at me. “Yeah. Those people.”

My earlier decision to eliminate secrets between us becomes increasingly complicated, so I answer as honestly as I can.

“I don’t know yet.” Sio only had fifteen minutes with that encrypted intel before I left the warehouse. And I know Grace hasn’t seen it at all, since I’m the one who found it glued under the back cover of her dad’s Bible this morning. I opened that Book looking for answers and found more than I expected. When I let her leave earlier today, she took the Bible, obviously suspecting that’s where her dad hid the intel he died for—intel on every mafia syndicate, including my own organization, The Stidda.

“What will *you* do with it?”

I’m not the only syndicate man after Grace. She could live easy for the rest of her life by selling to the top bidder.

Her head drops low, and she strokes the grungy pink fabric of the bag. “I just want to go home. And...and make my dad proud.”

In the desperate email she sent from the storage room, she mentioned a way out for both of us, but it’s too much to hope that’s true. She just needed rescuing. And after what I put her through, I hold no animosity for that deception. The guilt that tore through me when I finally put the pieces together after she left the warehouse resurges.

“Grace—”

“Okay, go now. To your left.” Sio’s hurried order cuts off my pathetic apology.

He sends us down an empty hall as I hear the slap of boots against tile from the direction we vacated. “Another left.”

“Where are we going?” Grace asks breathlessly, struggling to keep up with my pace.

When she grunts through a stumble, I slow but feel my senses sharpen. My eyes dart to every detail, cataloging, assessing. I refuse to allow more harm to come to her. Even from me.

The heart pumping out of control in my chest wants to burn the world to keep her, but Grace—my Grace, my Little Distraction—won’t be happy on a planet of sulfur and ash. She needs light and life. Two things with which I’m thoroughly unfamiliar.

“Rafe?” My name on her lips in that pleading voice forces my eyes closed through the length of a step as I wrangle violent thoughts. “Please tell me where we’re going.”

“Out.” I know my answer is harsh, sharpened by my own guilt. “It’s too dangerous to fly. Too easy to track.”

Since Sio is occupied taking my sister to a safe location I told him not to share, even with me, he barely has time to get us out of the airport, much less secure new identification for Grace.

“How many more could be tracking me?” There’s a hint of humor in her question.

“Too many.” No amusement in my answer.

“How will I get home?” That question is a knife to my heart. I’ve scared her again.

“I’m working on it.” I soften my tone, glancing back at her as we rush down the corridors. “But I won’t leave you, okay?”

“Dead end,” I hiss into my coms when the last turn leads us to a walled-off exit.

“Incoming,” Sio’s barked warning raises the hair on my neck, and I whip my head to find the danger. “I was hoping he’d pass, but he’s picked up on you. You’ll have to take him out and go back the other way”

I glance at Grace, mentally cursing what I’m about to do. I shift her behind me at the sound of thumping footsteps. Male. Taller than me, judging by the length of his stride. And angry, by the sound of his growling. He’s three steps away.

“Rafe?” A small voice speaks my name. Again. So many questions in that one word.

What’s going to happen? What will you do? Who are you going to be? Am I safe with you?

At least I know the answer to the last one. “You’re safe.” That’s a promise I can keep, because whatever else I am or will become, I was built for dealing with threats. The words are no sooner out of my mouth than a giant rounds the corner, weapon raised. Blond, blue eyes. Russian. There were five, not four.

But I’m ready. With a swipe of my arm, his wrist is locked in the crook of my elbow. His deep howl covers the crack of bone, and his weapon slides across the tile, landing out of my reach. Keeping his shattered arm trapped with mine, I twist and drive my other elbow into his nose, spattering the floor with a spray of red. I hear Grace gasp, but Sio’s shouting in my ear.

“Get out now. Go!”

I grab Grace's hand and step toward the Russian's loose weapon only to have the beast grab my ankle and jerk me down. Pain shoots up my leg to my hip as my knees hit the tile, and Grace falls with me. Grace's legs tangle in mine and then with the Russian's when he tries to get up. We are a mass of rolling forms, him trying to wrap meaty hands around my neck, me trying to keep our bodies from crushing Grace, and her trying to wiggle out from underneath this heap of male violence.

I grapple one-handed with his flying fists. He lands two out of five swings, one to my back and one to my kidneys. My elbow flies again, making contact with a hard part of his face. I glance back long enough to see his eyes are nearly swollen shut from the first blow to his nose, and he's missing a tooth. Grace slaps at that grungy crossbody across her chest, and then I'm hit with cast-off drops of an icy spray she shoots in the Russian's face. Some gets in my mouth, and I jerk, expecting the sting of mace, but it's minty instead. Is that...breath spray?

Whatever it is, she manages to douse him with perfect aim between the slits of his swollen lids. He claws at his eyes, howling with pain, occupied enough that I can push to my knees and force him off us. I crawl toward his weapon, which is, unfortunately, lying inches from his hand.

He slaps at the tile, his fingers somehow closing around the grip of his handgun, and I throw myself over Grace when he starts firing wildly. A stream of Russian profanity echoes between the blast of each unaimed shot.

Grace's hands are clasped tightly over her ears. Holding her to me, I army crawl us toward the corner of sheetrock where this dead-end alcove meets the hall.

Sio hasn't stopped shouting, demanding to know what's happening, but I'm too breathless to answer. A bullet whizzes over my head—so close I feel it trim off a bit of my hair. When I reach the corner, I scramble to my feet, dragging Grace up with my arm

belted around her waist. The Russian is still firing, and a chunk of sheetrock blasts free, powdering my face with dust.

“Are we clear?” I rasp into my coms.

“Yes,” Sio answers frantically. “Go now! Through the next set of doors to your left.”

Grace’s shallow breaths haunt my steps as I drag her behind me. She’s trying not to cry, not to fall apart. I can hear the sobs she’s attempting to swallow.

“Almost there, baby,” I promise, though I don’t know that for sure. “You’re so brave, so strong.”

She doesn’t answer but stays with me as I push through the door Sio led us to. We’re met with the loud whirring of machine engines, the organized chaos of a maze of conveyor belts carrying luggage to different destinations.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She tries to catch her breath, her wide eyes trailing the lines of zigzagging suitcases. “What is this, *Die Hard*?”

I don’t know what that means, but I don’t get to ask her because Sio cuts through my comms with his next instruction. “Go through to the exit on the opposite side.”

We’re three steps in when the door we came through flies open and a very angry blind Russian stumbles through. Two more shots ping off the metal frames of the conveyor belts, and I sweep Grace under one and roll both of us onto another. Pressing her head protectively against my chest, I whisper for her to stay quiet as we ride between a line of suitcases.

Three security agents rush in, their own weapons brandished, and I pull Grace off the belt as they body slam the Russian to the ground. Grace and I duck under rising belts and dodge carts of stacked luggage, emerging on the other side to another web of corridors.

I weave through the labyrinth, pausing and rushing according to Sio’s orders until Grace and I push through double doors into the

cool night. A tug on my hand lets me know she's stopped. I turn to find her staring at the sky with a confused look.

"What time is it?" she asks.

"Just after nine."

Her eyes fall on mine, a blank stare occupying her usually sharp gaze. "That late?"

I grit my teeth at the thought of her crouched in that tiny hiding place for so long, waiting for me to find her.

"Gotta keep moving, baby." I slide an arm around her shoulders and urge her on as Sio directs us to an employee parking area.

"Cross the lot," Sio says before murmuring something to someone else—I assume my sister.

When I hear the words gag and handcuffs, I growl into the phone. "What is going on?"

"Nothing," he scoffs. "You never mentioned that your sister is a psycho." Without missing a beat, he says, "See the black Mercedes in the third row?"

"If you touch my sister—"

"It's not her you should be worried about. It's me. Now, do you see the Mercedes or not? And you're welcome, by the way. I had to pay triple to get your supplies this fast."

"You mean I had to pay triple." Still, I grunt my appreciation, hating the growing rasp in Grace's breathing.

"Just a little further." I look down, catching a glimpse of her pinched expression. "I'm at the car," I say to Alessio.

"Keys are on the back tire. Supplies in the trunk."

I find the keys and help Grace into the passenger seat. She wears her backpack like a shield clutched in her arms, but I'm thankful she doesn't resist. She knows we aren't safe out in the open and need to get as far from this airport as possible. I know the Russians. Five men is only the beginning of the army they'll have sent if they really want this intel.

With a click of the remote, the trunk lifts. I grab the bag Alessio secured with my usual requests.

"I've sent directions to your phone," he says as I slide into the driver's seat. "It's thirty minutes to Durres. You'll catch the ferry there, but you'll have to hurry. Last one leaves at twenty-two hundred. I've got tickets reserved. Leave the car in the parking lot there."

"Got it," I say.

"I secured protection for the ride to Durres; it's in the bag. But you won't be able to take a gun on the ferry. I don't have time to arrange the documents."

I let out a long breath. Not ideal. But I can't afford to be separated from Grace by security officers.

"Fine."

"I'll get you another as soon as I can."

"Good."

"Rafe, once word of what happened today reaches the Russians, there will be war. We still don't know what promises Don Giorgio made behind your back."

"I know." I lean forward, checking to ensure the road is clear before pulling out of the parking lot. "That's why I need you to keep my sister away from this. She's the only thing that can keep my father on his throne. I won't have him forcing her to become a Bratva bride."

"Don't worry about Stella. But that cute cargo you're carrying could save your place too."

I know she can't hear Sio, but I glance at her anyway, searching for signs of fear.

"Not an option." I grind out.

He pauses a beat. "*Vale tanto, frate?*"

He's asking me if she's worth it. The weight of his question presses on my shoulders. What she's worth, what protecting her will cost, can't be measured. By defying my father, I'm going against more than my family. A glance at the five-pointed star

permanently inked between my thumb and index finger reminds me that I'm betraying the entire Stiddari. There's no crime worse than disloyalty, and there's no out for men like me other than death. If I'm caught, the end won't be quick. Still, my answer comes without consideration because none is needed.

"Si. "

Ending the call, I open the map on my phone and set it on the dash. Grace only nods when I tell her the plan. Once I'm on the highway, I release a full breath and glance at her. She's staring out the window and jumps when my hand finds her shoulder. I ease away, fingers tight on the wheel.

"Oh, sorry," she sighs, offering me a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

"You don't have to let me touch you, Grace." I don't like that she apologizes for feeling uncomfortable next to a man like me.

"I know that." I don't like the sadness in her tone either.

"Grace," I start, but I don't know what to say—how to start this conversation we need to have. Turns out, I don't have to; Grace does it for me.

"Was any of it true?" she asks, a sharp edge to her voice.

"What?"

"The stuff you said in your emails? Is that really you?"

I want to say yes. Every word I said to her in our online conversations was true. But from the way she's glaring at me, I don't think she'll believe me or forgive me for not being the sweet, normal businessman she nicknamed Gelato.

A week ago, she clung to me in a hotel room in Peru because of fever-induced delirium. This afternoon, she messaged me for help out of life-or-death desperation. When I came, she kissed me in the supply room at the airport, but she was scared and in shock. This morning, heartbreak and betrayal were written all over her face. She knew exactly who I was, and I still thought she was a ruthless assassin I had to kill.

She doesn't have to explain. I know my Little Distraction well enough. I've deceived her. There's nothing more I want than to use whatever time I have left to fix what I've broken. And I'm certain that time is short.

Once Giorgio realizes the photo I sent him this morning was Grace unconscious and not dead—once he discovers that I've whisked Mother and Stella away where he can't find them—my name is going to be on every list he can afford.

"I guess not." Grace huffs.

That's right, she asked me a really complicated question. Is what I told her in our emails true?

"Do you want it to be true?" I ask. "Would it matter?"

"Of course it matters." I hate the pain in her voice, but we can't take the easy way through this. Not if there's going to be anything left of us on the other side. I cling to the tiniest shred of hope for that possibility.

"Why?"

"Because..." Her explanation trails off.

"Because?" I push her even though I really want to take away her pain, feed her, and let her sleep.

"Because I loved—" She stops. I keep my eyes on the road, not daring to interrupt that thought. Disappointment weighs on my shoulders when she finishes. "I loved talking to you. I never shared myself with anyone like that."

"What about Bryan?" The thought of that Bratva thug makes me want to spit. I can still see him in the Albanian parking garage this morning, using her as a shield against me after pretending to be the one sent to save her.

"Ugh." She lets her head fall back against the seat. "I tried, but Bryan obviously was only interested in what my Dad was doing. Explains a lot, I guess."

"Like what?"

"Like his over-interest in my family. In wanting me to move in with him even though I told him from the beginning I didn't believe that was right."

"Why not?" I don't really have an objection to her belief, but she's talking to me, and I want to keep it that way.

"Because that's reserved for a husband and a wife." She says it softly, almost reverently. "And I think that intimacy, that gift God gave us, is worth waiting for."

"So, you really believe what's in the Bible?" I'm not mocking, just curious. I know she believes some—a lot of people do. Even my father believes some of the Bible. But he ignores the parts that don't suit him.

"Every word." She doesn't hesitate. "You had Dad's Bible for a week. Did you read any of it?"

"I have to say, I wasn't expecting to find that in the bag you left for me at the front desk in Peru. Or your note."

"I'm full of surprises." Her sarcasm is sharp, but I laugh anyway.

"You only think you're kidding." I check my mirrors to make sure we aren't being followed. "Was it the fever or some other reason you gave a stranger such a precious possession?"

"You aren't a stranger," she mutters, twisting her fingers. "Not really."

"Okay," I agree. "But still, why, Grace?"

She makes a quick move to run her hand under her eye and shrugs. "Was the right thing to do. But you're deflecting. Did you read any of it?"

"A lot of it, actually."

"And?" She shifts again, her fingers dancing over her injured wrist.

"And it was...interesting." I lift a shoulder. We only have forty-two minutes and fifteen seconds to catch that ferry. The true answer to her question will take longer than that. I'm also still thinking about the right words to explain.

"Interesting?" She aims a skeptical glare my way.

"Mhm." I check the rearview and change lanes.

"That's all?"

"What else am I supposed to say?" I flash her a grin, and she rolls those captivating blue eyes. Eyes that crave acceptance she feels unworthy of. That see so deep that others often reject her rare gift of empathy.

"I don't know...nothing, I guess." She doesn't try to hide what she thinks is that same dismissal.

A quick exit and two left turns lead me toward my first destination.

"You never answered me." Her whispered reminder catches me off guard.

"About what?" I wait for a passing car before taking my final turn.

"If the things you said in your emails were true."

I glance over, meeting her waiting gaze.

"Can I?" When I reach for her hand, she lets me take it. I rub gentle circles across her knuckles with my thumb. "Yes, baby. It was—is—all true."

She doesn't refuse the nickname that she turned into my new obsession, nor does she pull her hand away. Even when her body falls back against the seat and her head rolls to the side to look out the window again. "Okay."

"That's all?" Amusement lifts my tone.

"What else am I supposed to say?" I can hear the humor when she repeats my question even though she's facing away.

That little bit of joy—of her true self, shining through the wall she's erected between us—acts as deft fingers slowly loosening the knot of hopelessness inside. Maybe there is a way out after all.

With a laugh, I draw her hand to my mouth and place a chaste kiss on the back. She lets me do that too. "I don't know...nothing, I guess."

When I park, Grace jumps again, and I'm certain she fell asleep. She must be exhausted. So much has happened today.

"We can't be there already." She reaches up to rub her eyes, seeming to forget about her injury until she lets out a sharp hiss.

"We're at a pharmacy. I'm getting you some ice and a wrap for that wrist."

"Do we have time for that?" She pivots to look out the windows, searching the parking lot. "What if someone followed us?"

"I can afford five minutes to take care of you." Her roaming gaze doesn't change with my answer. "And no one followed us; I made sure."

"But—"

"Grace."

At the gentle coax of her name, her wide eyes abandon their restless sweep and fix on mine. I can't help but touch her, desperate to soothe the lines of worry slicing across her forehead. My fingers brush a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, and my thumb explores the curve of her cheek. It's exactly what I imagined she would feel like. Warm. Soft. Familiar in a way that shouldn't be possible. When her breath hitches, I offer her an easy smile.

"This is what I do, baby. Trust me."

"I...I shouldn't find that comforting," she admits, little flags of color darkening her cheeks, which are already tinged pink by the fluorescent store sign.

"We can dissect all that later." I shift, throwing open the driver's side door. "Right now, I'm going to make you feel better."

She swallows hard and nods, but her gaze flicks nervously to the windows again. With a sigh, I drop my pistol in her lap, stealing her attention again.

"If anyone but me approaches the car, shoot."

"Shoot?" she asks, staring at the gun like it's a snake. "Like, shoot a person?"

“You said you went to the range with your dad, right? So you know how to use it.”

That gains me a wide-eyed gaze. “Yes, all the time, but...you remember that?”

She only said it earlier today, but I think Grace has lived a decade’s worth of trauma in the last few hours. I lean over the center console, bracing my weight with a hand on the back of her seat, pleased when she remains in place and doesn’t curl away. My lips brush the shell of her ear as I whisper, “I remember everything, *mia piccola distrazione*.”

Then, before she can punch me, I plant the barest of kisses on her heated cheek and jump out of the car, aiming for the brightly lit pharmacy ahead. Stealing a glance back, I see her see me and jerk her hand away from where it rested on the place I kissed her.

