



DANTE

A VALENTINO HEIRS NOVELLA

KYLLIE KENT

Dante

Valentino Heirs

Book 1

Kylie Kent

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[CLUB OMERTA](#)

Blurb

Dante

Being born a Valentino means there's nothing I can't get. We are royalty in this school.

Nobody fucks with us. Nobody ever says no.

Until she came waltzing through the hallways with her barely there skirt and white button-up blouse.

I took one look at her and knew she'd be mine. She doesn't know the rules yet, but she'll learn.

Nobody tells me what I can and can't have. Not even her.

Josie

Scoring a scholarship to New York Prep is the beginning of my future. I worked my ass off to get here. I belong here.

At least I hope if I keep telling myself that, I'll finally start to believe it.

As I stroll through the halls of this elite school with its overindulged occupants, I can't help but feel like I'll never belong. I have a plan though.

Keep my head down. Don't stand out.

That is until I gain the attention of the school's king, Dante Valentino. No matter how much he thinks he can claim me, I'll never allow myself to belong to anyone.

Especially him.

Chapter One



Other than stalking her social media accounts and the few images that have come through from friends, I haven't laid eyes on Josie for a month. A whole fucking month. And pictures do not do this girl justice.

After spending time with my family in Italy, I'm fucking glad to finally be back in New York. Don't get me wrong... I love my family, but when everyone is under one roof, it's easy to like them all a lot less.

I was also so far away from her. Josie Anderson. I haven't been able to stop thinking about her. I honestly thought the time away would help cure me of whatever fucking spell she cast on my good sense.

It didn't.

I'm still just as ensnared in her web as I was before I left. It wouldn't be so bad if the girl would give me the time of day.

As it stands, she sees me and turns the other way. And whenever I try to talk to her, she either pretends she can't hear me or tells me where to go.

I spent weeks chasing her around the halls—even got suspended for hacking into the school's computer system to get Josie's address. She wouldn't tell me anything, and there is very little information on her for my public viewing. The month-long suspension was worth it though. Because now I know where she lives. Which is exactly where I am right now, parked just down the road from her house. Waiting. Watching for the moment she walks out.

“Why are we here?” my cousin asks from where he's seated beside me.

“Because we are,” I tell him, and then she walks out of her front door and down the path. I wait until she starts walking towards the bus stop before I start the car and creep up on her.

“Never mind. Now I know,” Orlando says.

“We're giving a friend a ride to school. Get in the back,” I tell him.

“Fuck no. Why do I have to get in the back?” he groans.

“Because it's my car and I get to decide who rides up front. And today it's her.”

Josie looks over her shoulder and her eyes widen in shock, before her head turns back and she quickens her pace.

I roll the car next to her and lower the window. “Josie, get in.”

She ignores me. Of course she fucking does. I park and get out, jogging to catch up with her. Damn, this girl is fast.

“Josie, it's been too long.” I smile as I step in front of her. Causing her to stop walking.

She tries to step around me, and I block her. “Why are you here?” she asks, looking up and down the street.

“To pick you up for school. Why else would I be here?” I shrug.

“I don’t want nor need a ride to school with you. The bus will be here in a minute,” she says.

“Fine, we’ll catch the bus,” I tell her before stepping aside. Josie starts walking again, and my steps match hers. “How’ve you been?”

“What are you doing, Dante?”

“Walking to the bus stop, getting on the bus, and goin’ to school. With you.” The answer is simple enough.

“You’re going to catch the bus? You can’t just leave your car there on the street. It won’t be there when you come back,” she warns me.

“Yes, it will,” I say, confident that no one is stupid enough to jack a car with Valentino plates.

Josie shrugs. “Suit yourself. I don’t care anyway,” she says, walking faster.

I don’t know what makes me do it, but something about her nonchalant attitude pisses me off. I mean, how can she be so carefree when I’m wound fucking tighter than a guitar string about to snap?

I step in front of her and bend at the waist, throwing my shoulder into her stomach as I pick her up. Her backpack drops to the ground. I lower myself to one knee, snatch it up while holding her tight, and start walking back towards my car.

“Put me down, Dante. You can’t just manhandle me,” she screams as her fists pound against my back.

My hand lands on her ass, mostly to keep her skirt in place so anyone watching doesn’t get a full view of what’s mine. “I already told you. I’m giving you a ride to school,” I say.

I get to the car and Orlando opens the front passenger door. I hand him her backpack and place Josie inside, plugging in her seat belt and flicking the child safety lock into place before closing the door. She goes for the handle as soon as she can. But there’s no use in trying. She’s not getting out of this car until I let her.

I slide into the driver's seat and Orlando climbs into the back. Starting the ignition, I turn to glare at Josie from over my shoulder. "Miss me?"

"In what world, does *leave me alone* and *I don't want anything to do with you* translate to *oh my god, I've missed you so much* and *I'm so glad you're back*?" she asks me.

"In our world, babe." I wink at her. Usually, if I give a girl that look, she'd already have her panties around her ankles or her mouth around my dick. The only thing that look seems to do for Josie is piss her off more.

"Okay, first of all, not your babe. And second, you and I do not share a world, Dante. We are in fact worlds apart."

"So, what have you been up to the last month?" I continue our conversation without missing a beat.

"Living my best life because you weren't around." She smiles at me.

"Oh, damn, coz." Orlando laughs from the back seat. "You know, Josie, my boy here spent the whole month moping and pining around Italy. He didn't even look twice at those hot-as-fuck European girls."

I glare at him through the rearview mirror. "You wanna walk to school?"

"Nope, I'm good right here. I just wish I had popcorn because this whole *will they, won't they* thing is entertaining as fuck," he says.

"It's a definite *won't*," Josie tells Orlando.

When we arrive at New York Prep, I pull into my usual spot and see Aurora's car already parked next to mine. It's early for my cousin to be at school. She's more of a turn up whenever it suits her kind of girl.

"Everyone is looking," Josie says, fidgeting with her blouse.

"Good, I want everyone to know," I tell her.

"Right, I'll catch you later." Orlando jumps out of the car.

“Open the door, Dante. Let me out,” Josie hisses at me.

I turn in my seat to look at her. “Why are you fighting this?”

“I’m not fighting anything. Is it really that hard to believe someone doesn’t actually like you?” she asks.

“No, but I know you’re lying. I know you like me. So why not admit it?”

“I. Don’t. Like. You. Now let me out of this fucking car, Dante!” she screams.

I smile. Then, taking her chin between my thumb and index finger, I hold her face still and slam my lips onto her mouth. When she gasps, I push my tongue inside. Fuck, I’ve wanted to kiss this girl since the first time I saw her...

Chapter Two



A moment. I let myself enjoy this for a single moment. But the thing about moments in time? They pass. And those moments become a memory. Good or bad.

Then reality kicks in, because this isn't a moment I should be enjoying. Dante Valentino should be the last person I'm kissing. I cannot let myself fall for the fantasy where someone like me gets to be with someone like him. I know better than anyone that if I want to get out of the hellhole I'm stuck in, I need to keep out of trouble, focus on my studies, and graduate with New York Prep on my college applications.

I bite down on his tongue, and the taste of blood fills my mouth. "Ow, what the fuck, Josie?" Dante asks, quickly pulling away to look at me.

"Put your tongue in my mouth again and I'll make sure I bite it off completely next time. Now, let me out of this damn car, Dante," I yell at him.

The asshole smirks that stupid, annoyingly sexy, extremely cocky smirk that has absolutely no effect on me. “Come on, I’ll walk you to class,” he says.

“Or you could go and jump off a cliff instead,” I suggest.

Dante gets out of the car and takes his sweet-ass time walking around to my side. He opens the door. “Sorry, babe, I looked around. Couldn’t find a cliff, so I guess it’s your lucky day because you get me as an escort to class,” he tells me.

I shove the door open wider, pushing it into his legs. Right now, I don’t care. I just need to get away from him. It’s bad enough everyone is going to be gossiping about me being in Dante’s car. Kissing him. More like *him* kissing *me*. I don’t need any more drama coming my way.

“So, what’s your first class?” Dante asks, walking in step with me before draping an arm around my shoulders.

I duck, attempting to lose him, but he doesn’t budge. All my effort seems to do is squish me closer to his side. He smells like cinnamon and peppermint. It’s an odd combination but the scent has me wanting to lean in and inhale. Which can’t happen.

“You’re making a scene,” I tell him.

“That happens wherever I go. You’ll get used to it,” he says, nodding and waving at the crowd that’s stopped to gawk at us.

“Dante, let me go. I can’t do this. You don’t understand. I... I can’t,” I try to reason with him.

“All we’re doing is walking to class. It’s really not a big deal. Need to stop at your locker first?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, then quickly change my mind. “No,” I add, when I realize that stopping at my locker isn’t a great idea. It’s been embarrassing enough... what I’ve been dealing with every day since I arrived. I can’t handle having Dante, the king of these halls, witness my humiliation.

My first month here, I basically went unseen. Unknown. The only one who really paid me any attention was Dante, and

even that was only a few conversations here and there and a whole lot of me hiding and dodging him every chance I could.

“Which is it? Yes or no?” Dante chuckles.

“No, I don’t need anything from my locker. I just need to get to class,” I tell him.

Dante opens the door and waits for me to step through. Without looking in his direction, I walk right past him as fast as I can without physically running. I don’t get far before I’m stopped by another Valentino. Except this one clearly hates me. The last month might have been hell, but I have a feeling now that they’re back, it’s only going to get worse.

Everyone in the hall stands still and watches.

“Aurora, you becoming studious all of a sudden?” Dante asks, stepping up beside me.

“No, I had to come in early to remind people where they stand on the pecking order around this place.” Aurora smiles, but it’s more like one of those sinister smirks you see on the villain in the movie who’s trying to take over the world. Then she looks directly at me. “Did you tell him?”

My whole body goes cold. She knows. Of course she knows. The Valentinos run this place. Just because they were gone doesn’t mean they didn’t have eyes and ears all over these halls.

“I have to get to class,” I say, skirting around Aurora and hightailing it away from both her and Dante.

I don’t look back. I don’t stop at my locker. I head straight for my English class, to the back of the room, where I take my seat in the corner near the window. I like watching the world outside go by. Even the gardens around this building look like they’re out of my league. Too pretty, too nice for me to reach out and touch.

I pull my books from my bag as the classroom starts to fill with other students. I don’t look up. I don’t need to. I know they’re all talking about me. It’s been the same thing for the last month. The same taunts. The words *slut* and *whore* on

repeat and the occasional *I can't believe she does that* comment.

And then there are the boys who will outright approach me. Ask me how much. The ones who literally throw cash down on my desk and say thanks for last night. It's all bullshit, of course, but no one would believe me, so I don't bother arguing. Instead, I keep my head down and will myself to suck it up. Words cannot hurt me. They're just cruel taunts from spoiled little rich kids who couldn't survive a day in my hand-me-down shoes if they tried.

I don't know who started the rumor, but it's stuck. I honestly thought it would have fizzled out by now. I thought that if I didn't give them the reaction they were looking for, they'd move on to their next victim.

The room goes deadly silent. All chatter and movement die off at the same time. I lift my head and see the reason. Dante glances around until his glare settles on me. His jaw ticks. His face is stone and his eyes are dark, so dark I'm afraid if I keep looking into them, my soul is going to be sucked into some black hole in the pits of hell. I look away, turn my attention back to my book. I do my best to ignore him as he walks directly towards me, the sound of his boots heavy on the wooden floors. The desk to my right is already occupied, so at least there's that.

"Move." His voice is harsh.

I peer up, thinking he's talking to me. He's that close, but the command is aimed at the guy presently filling the chair next to mine. Some football player whose name I haven't bothered to learn. He's one of the assholes who likes to drop money on my desk, though, pretending he was serviced by me.

"Fuck off, Valentino. I was here first. Get in line. You want her? There's a sign-up sheet on her locker," the guy replies, and everyone in the room gets up and walks out.

What the hell is going on?

Even the teacher takes one look at Dante and turns straight back around. I glance from Dante to the asshole next to me. As

much as I don't want them to, his words do affect me. I'm humiliated. But I can't show him that. If I show weakness, it'll only make things worse.

The door slams shut and the sound has me jumping in my seat. I don't know what's going on here, but something tells me I probably should have fled when I had the chance. My eyes flick to the window.

Two stories isn't that high of a jump, is it?

Chapter Three



I laughed when Aurora told me what was happening. What had been happening for the last fucking month. Why the fuck didn't I know about it? Why didn't anyone tell me? I would have booked the first flight back and put a fucking stop to it.

Did these assholes really think we wouldn't be back? That they could get away with fucking with us? They might not know that Josie is one of us but that's not my problem. It's theirs, because now I'm going to make every single one of them fucking pay for what they've done.

When Aurora asked if the rumors could be true, I saw fucking red. The thought of Josie selling her body to the highest bidder...

Then I realized I didn't fucking care—I don't care if it's true or not. She's mine, and they've fucked with the wrong

girl. Who the fuck am I to judge her if she's had to do that? People do all sorts of shit to survive this world.

Survival isn't for the weak; that's for sure.

I wait. This asshole who just had the nerve to go up against me squirms in his chair. Everyone else has made themselves scarce. Everyone except Josie. But that's good. She needs to see this. She needs to know that I'm in this. All the way. That there isn't anything I wouldn't do for her.

"Looks like your friends up and left you all alone, Patrick," I grunt.

"You think I need backup? I'm not scared of you or your family," he spits out, pushing up from his desk in a lame attempt to intimidate me. He's scared. The way he looks to the door—for an escape—tells me as much.

"Really? Guess we'll have to fix that then." My right fist connects with his face. I don't give him the chance to hit me back. I lunge forward, forcing him to the ground.

He screams as I continue to land blow after blow. I don't listen to his pleas or whatever bullshit excuses he tries to hurl in my direction. What I do hear is her. Josie calls my name. I turn my head to look at her, and then the fucker uses the momentary distraction to get one punch in.

Josie screams, and then I feel arms tugging me back. I don't let up. This asshole deserves what he's getting. "Dante, stop," Orlando says.

I let my cousin pull me off Patrick, who immediately scrambles across the floor. As far away from me as he can get.

"I'm not fucking finished," I growl. When I look over my shoulder, I see Aurora and Mabilia standing behind me. My other cousins are here. I smile. They're the ones I need for this. Those two girls are the definition of insane. "Hold his arm still," I tell them as I pull the switchblade from my boot and flick it open.

"Wait... Wh-what are you doing?" Josie asks, stepping in front of me.

“Something that’ll let everyone in this school know we’re back, and when you fuck with one of us, you fuck with all of us.” I lean in and briefly connect my lips with hers. I’m pretty sure the only thing keeping her from pulling away or slapping me across the face is the fact she’s still in shock. I’ll take it though. “Don’t worry, babe, this won’t take long.” I smile at her before squatting in front of Patrick again. I cut through the sleeve of his shirt, and he screams out when my blade starts digging into his skin.

“Fuck! What the fuck are you doing?”

Aurora covers his mouth as I continue slicing away at the top layers of flesh. As soon as I’m finished, I push to my feet and admire my handiwork. WHORE. Written across his arm in big, jagged letters, blood pooling to the surface and ensuring it’ll scar. It’s the same word they’ve been calling Josie for the last month. Patrick here is the school’s quarterback. Which means every time he snaps that arm, everyone is going to see what a mistake they’ve all made.

“Next time, I’ll fucking break it,” I tell him. Then turn around and look at my cousins. “Make sure everyone knows about this.” My eyes flick around the room. “Where’d she go?”

“She left when you started cutting.” Aurora dusts off her nails, eyeing her manicure like it’s another day at the salon.

Fuck! I need to find Josie. This was not how I pictured our first day going. Then it hits me. Mabilia doesn’t even go to this school.

“Why are you here?” I ask her.

“Papa said a change of scenery was needed.” She shrugs.

“More like he didn’t get your expulsion overturned at that preppy girls school.” Orlando snickers.

“Pfft, please, if my papa wanted me back in that school, I’d be there. I wanted to come here with you lot. How fun is it going to be now that we’re all together?” She smiles.

I shake my head. It’s going to be a year of *crazy* is what it’s going to be, with those two girls roaming the halls. I don’t

have time to sit around and chitchat though. I need to find Josie.

“Catch up with you later.” I pick up my backpack and then Josie’s, shoving her books inside before slinging it over my shoulder.

“You know she’s not one of us, Dante. She’s not going to be able to handle it,” Aurora says as I walk out.

“If I say she’s one of us, then she’s one of us. And she’ll handle it just fine.” I don’t wait for a reply. I know my cousins. If I say Josie is *it* for me, then they will accept her. They will treat her like she’s blood. It’s how my family works.

Before I left for Italy, Josie used to spend most of her free time in the school’s little museum. It’s a room filled with artifacts that outline the building’s history. A room no one else bothers visiting unless you’re on a school tour. That’s where I head. She doesn’t know I used to sit in that same room and watch her. It was the only instance where she ever appeared to be at peace. The rest of the time, that girl looks like she has the weight of the world on her shoulders.

She’s not sitting in her usual spot when I enter the room. Instead, she’s pacing. When she hears me approach, she spins around and runs her eyes up and down the length of me, before that brief look of concern leaves her face and is replaced by annoyance.

“How’d you find me?” she asks.

“I know you.” I shrug. “You left this.” I hold up her backpack before handing it over.

Josie doesn’t say anything. She just takes her bag and then drops it onto the floor beside her feet. “Why did you do that?” she finally asks.

“Do what? Stand up for you?”

“I don’t need you to stand up for me. I don’t need you to do anything for me, Dante. What I need is for you to leave me alone.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen. Why didn’t you tell me? I gave you my number. I told you to call me if you were in trouble, if you needed anything. You should have called me,” I remind her.

“Why? So you could come in and save the day? Newsflash, Dante, I’m not some damsel in distress and you are no white knight,” she huffs. “I don’t need your help. I was handling it.”

“How? Because it looked to me like you weren’t handling shit. You were ignoring it, hoping it’d just go away on its own.” I cross my arms over my chest, daring her to tell me otherwise.

“Exactly. It’s a stupid high school rumor—they pass. Everyone gets bored and moves on.”

“No, they’ll see you as weak and they’ll continue to use you for their own entertainment until you show them you won’t take their bullshit,” I say.

Josie shakes her head. “How do you even know it’s not true?” she asks. “I could be out there selling myself to a different guy every night, for all you know. Why start fights over me, Dante? You don’t even know me.”

“I couldn’t give a fuck if it’s true, Josie. I know you, though. I know that you come in here to be alone. I know that you like your coffee with two squirts of hazelnut syrup in it. I know your favorite lunch day is Wednesday, when they serve sushi, but you only ever get one serving even though you want more. I know that your favorite subject is math.”

“That doesn’t mean you know me. That just means you know how to follow me around,” she fires back with a little more attitude this time.

“You know, this whole *knowing you* thing would go a lot better if you actually let me in.”

The bell sounds out, cutting off our conversation. It’s time for the next period.

“Come on, you can’t miss another class,” I say, taking hold of her hand with one of mine while grabbing her backpack

with the other. I throw the strap over my shoulder.

Josie tries to pull free of my grip. I hold on tighter. “What the hell are you doing? I’m not walking out there holding hands with you,” she hisses.

“Why not? Do you have any idea how many girls would kill to walk through these halls holding my hand? Why the fuck is it that the one girl I actually want to hold hands with wants nothing to do with me?” I ask aloud, to no one in particular.

“Why do you think all this nonsense with the rumor started, Dante? It’s because of you. Some girl got it into her head that it was my fault you got suspended. That it was my fault you weren’t here.”

“Well, it kind of was your fault. I wouldn’t have had to hack the database if you would have just given me your address,” I say as I start walking. Josie follows, still trying to tug her arm free.

Chapter Four



What is happening? I'm walking through the hallways holding hands with Dante Valentino. Everyone moves to the side. And stops. And stares. Some kids are even snapping pictures.

Dante pauses just outside my history class. "I should switch," he says.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"I'm not in your next class. I might try it out for the day, see if it sticks."

"It's AP history, Dante. It's not something that just sticks. You can't just come in and wing it."

He smirks. "Challenge accepted. Come on." He pulls me into the classroom and strolls to the back, where he finally lets go of my hand and passes me my backpack.

I sit in the desk closest to the window and dig through my bag. Shit. I keep digging, shuffling things around, but it's pointless. It's not here. My textbook is in my locker. I stand and place my backpack on my desk. I wouldn't normally leave it here but something tells me Dante's not going to let anyone snoop. And let's face it... if he wanted to snoop himself, he already had more than enough opportunity when I left it behind at first period. Not that I'm hiding anything in there. It's more the principle of the matter.

"Where are you going?" Dante asks.

"I need my textbook. It's in my locker. I'll be right back," I tell him.

Why am I telling him? It's none of his business where I'm going.

He stands, clearly prepared to leave right behind me. I hold up a hand to stop him. "Dante, if you follow me to my locker, I'm going to get a damn restraining order. Stay here. I'll be right back."

"It's cute that you think a piece of paper would stop me from coming near you," he says.

Ignoring him, I keep my head down and walk straight to my locker. I do a double take when there's nothing taped to the front this time. No posters. No sign-up sheets. There's nothing. I quickly put in my combination, grab my history textbook, shut my locker, and start back towards my class.

"You know he's not yours," I hear sneered in my direction, coming from a familiar voice. Krystal, the head cheerleader, AKA the biggest bitch of the school. At least she likes to think she is anyway.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I tell her.

"Dante. He's not yours and he never will be," she says louder.

"Well, that's a relief. For a while there, I thought I was going to have to find an extra room to keep him in. Is there a shelter or somewhere I can take him? Return him? Actually, if you want him so badly, why don't you just follow me? I know

where he is and I'm more than happy to have you take him off my hands for me. That's if you think he'll go willingly. Do you think he will, Krystal?" I ask her.

Her mouth drops, her lips in an O-shape, her expression clearly overcome by the fact that I've actually spoken back to her. For the last month, I've ignored them, not engaged with anything they've said. But right now, I've had enough. I just want to get through my classes and go home. Rinse, repeat, and graduate.

I step around her and keep walking.

"This isn't over," Krystal yells out.

"Like I said, you can have him. Come and get him," I taunt her. I don't know why I'm fighting back. Even if she did follow me... if she did take Dante off my hands... if he did walk right out of my life... do I really want that?

Yes.

No.

Damn it. I don't know.

Having him back, having him insist that I'm *his*—even though it's only been for a few short hours this morning—is confusing me. I storm back into the classroom, drop my book on my desk, and slump into my chair. I can feel Dante's eyes on me.

"What happened?"

"God thought today would be the day to test me, to find out exactly what my breaking point is," I tell him.

"What happened between leaving here and going to your locker?"

"I ran into your girlfriend," I mumble under my breath. "Or I think she prefers the term *owner*."

"So, you what? Looked in a mirror?"

I turn to glare at him. "No... I..."

“Okay, class, open your books to page forty-three.” Miss Benson’s voice stops me in my tracks. “And, Mr. Valentino, I don’t recall your name being on my attendance sheet.”

“I’m here on a try-to-buy basis, ma’am,” Dante says. “I think history might just be my thing.”

“This is high school, Dante. There is no try till you buy. You are either enrolled or you’re not. And, as of right now, you are not. Which means you need to leave,” Miss Benson says.

“Miss Benson, I’m enrolled. Why would I be here if I weren’t? You can check with admin. They must have made a mistake. I was supposed to be added last week.” Dante gives her that easy, *butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth* smile.

“Fine, stay. But if you’re here, you’re doing the work, Dante. Share textbooks with Josie for the day. And *if* you return tomorrow, I expect you to come prepared.” Miss Benson sits at her desk and opens her laptop.

The squeak of the metal chair legs being dragged across the floor runs through my body and up my spine. “What are you doing?” I hiss at Dante. He’s moved his desk and chair right up next to mine.

“You heard the teacher. I need to share your book, babe.” Dante wraps an arm around the back of my chair while leaning in and reading—or at the very least pretending to read—the page on the book.

I spend the rest of the morning with Dante acting as my shadow. When lunch comes around, I half expect him to disappear, to go and sit with his friends and his cousins. He doesn’t, though. No, he trails right behind me into the cafeteria. Picks up a tray and starts piling on food.

I, however, only take the amount that is actually covered by my meal card. I might have a full scholarship, but there are limits to what I can and can’t have. When I step out of line, Dante is still at my back. He swipes the tray out of my hands.

“Over here,” he says, nodding his head in the direction of his usual spot.

Okay, I might have spent my first month at NY Prep observing him, but that was only so I knew what areas to avoid. Areas like the one presently in front of me. The cafeteria is full of whispered voices, people pointing and staring. I mean, they've been doing that for weeks now, but today it's different. It's somehow worse.

I follow Dante to his table with every intention of grabbing my tray and walking away. Except, when we get there, I see Krystal sitting next to Aurora with a smug smile on her face. A smile that rubs me the wrong way. So I lower myself down, next to Dante. And immediately regret it. I'm so out of my element here. I don't know what I was thinking.

She's right. I don't belong here...

Chapter Five



Something shifts in Josie’s demeanor the minute we approach the table. “Just so you know, Dad already called to ask me what happened this morning,” Aurora announces, and I turn in her direction.

“What’d you say?”

“Nothing. But if he’s asking, then all the oldies know.”

I shrug a shoulder. “I’ll deal with it later.”

“Don’t worry. I think it’s going to take a whole lot of fucking up before we top what Lorenzo did in Italy.” Mabilia grins.

“What happened in Italy?” This comes from Krystal, one of the cheerleaders who’s desperate to be friends with Aurora. Not sure why. Maybe crazy attracts crazy?

“None of your fucking business happened. That’s what happened,” Orlando tells her.

I lean over to Josie. “My cousin ran off and got married. And now he’s moving to Australia.”

“Australia? Why Australia?” she asks before reaching over to take a fry off my tray and pop it into her mouth. She doesn’t even like french fries. Or at least I’ve never seen her eat them.

I look from my tray to her mouth. Fuck, I want to kiss those lips again. “Because the girl happens to be Australian,” I explain.

“Dante, I heard about what happened this morning. Are you okay?” Krystal asks, and I look at the girl, confused by her question.

Why is she talking to me?

I glance over at Aurora, who just lifts a shoulder in response. “I’m fine,” I say and return my attention to Josie.

“Should I move?” she says.

“Why the fuck would you move?” I ask her.

“So your girlfriend, owner—whatever she is—can sit with you?” Josie then gestures a hand across the table. “Krystal here insisted that you belong to her. Which left me confused. Because if you are hers, then why were your lips on mine this morning? And why would you pick me up and drive me to school?”

I smile. Josie doesn’t. She just continues looking at me like she’s really pondering the question. I lean in and press my mouth to hers. And I’m shocked when her arms snake around my neck and she tugs me closer.

I don’t pull back until something hits my head. “Get a room,” Mabilia says. “Gross. This didn’t happen at my old school.”

“That’s a shame,” Orlando chimes in. “Girl-on-girl action in the cafeteria? Fuck, think you can go back and wear a camera for me?”

“Ew, and fuck no, you creep.” Mabilia shoves at his arm at the same time I slide off my seat and jump onto the table.

Every single student in the cafeteria stops talking and turns in my direction. “Look out. The king has an announcement,” Aurora mutters under her breath.

“Just in case there was any confusion left, this girl right here. Josie. Yeah, she’s mine. Which means you fuck with her, you’re fucking with me. Do I make myself clear?” I call out as loud as I can, daring someone to speak up. I see a lot of nods, hear a few verbal agreements, before I jump back down and slide in next to Josie. The look on her face is pure murder.

“Really? I’m not a prized cow you can just claim, Dante.”

“No, but you *are* a prize, and you are mine,” I tell Josie, who turns to Aurora.

“Is he like supposed to be on meds or something?”

“You’d be surprised. He’s actually the more stable one out of all of us.” Aurora laughs. “But he means well,” she adds, then looks to Krystal. “Here. Don’t let this go to waste.” Aurora passes the girl a can of soda, and not even ten minutes later, Krystal is groaning and clutching at her stomach.

“What’s wrong with her?” Orlando asks.

“She tried to fuck with Dante and Josie. What can I say? I’m a sucker for young love.” Aurora smiles. “You might want to go get checked out by the nurse,” she tells her friend. Krystal’s eyes widen as she gets up and runs out of the cafeteria. “She won’t bother you again.” Aurora directs this to Josie.

“Um... thank you?”

“You’re welcome. I gotta go. I’m showing Mabilia the ropes.” My two cousins jump up from the table and saunter away as we all watch them leave.

“My dad’s picking me up this afternoon,” Orlando says, breaking the silence a few minutes later.

“Why?”

His dad, my Zio Luca, is the newly appointed underboss of the family. Our Zio Theo is the current Don; he took over from my nonno, who just retired. My own father is the mayor while Aurora's dad, Zio Matteo, is a criminal defense attorney; he and my mom have a law firm together.

"No idea. He just messaged and said he was picking me up." Orlando shrugs.

It's weird. Our parents don't just pick us up from school. They haven't since, well, I can't remember the last time. Unless we're going into lockdown, which does happen occasionally.

"I'm not locking down," I grunt as soon as the thought crosses my mind.

Orlando rolls his eyes. "It's not a lockdown. You think we'd still be here if it were?"

"Who knows? New boss, new rules?"

"The rules don't change," Orlando says dryly.

"What rules?" Josie asks, and both Orlando and I turn to look at her.

"Ah, family rules," I tell her.

"Never mind. Let's pretend I didn't ask. I don't want to know. I gotta go. I need to stop by my locker before my next class." She pushes up from the table and glances towards the door.

"I'll come with you," I say.

"Or you can try to act normal and stay here with your friends. I don't need a chaperone, Dante." Josie catches me off guard when she bends down and presses her lips to mine.

By the time my shock clears, I realize I'm watching her walk out of the cafeteria.

"Man, you have it bad. You should see your face right now." Orlando laughs.

"You should see yours after my fist has met it a few times," I'm quick to fire back.

“You could try.” Orlando picks up his half-eaten sandwich and takes a mouthful. “You know she’s right. You need to give her space. *Act normal.*”



I’d never admit it out loud, but I took Orlando’s advice and gave Josie space for the rest of the day. Or at least I gave her the illusion of space. In other words, I went back to watching her from a distance.

Right now, I’m standing by the doors, waiting for her to walk out so I can drive her home. I want to know her better. Having her tell me I don’t know her pisses me off. Mostly because she’s right. I don’t know everything about her and I fucking want to.

“Why have you been fighting?” Zio Luca asks, stopping in front of me.

“How’d you know I’ve been fighting?”

“Because your knuckles are swollen and your eye is bruised.” He nods his head towards my right hand.

“Someone’s face ran into my fist,” I say. “A few times.”

“It’s your first day back, Dante. You really think fighting is the way to go about it?”

Sometimes being on the receiving end of a lecture from Zio Luca is just as bad as the ones I get from my dad. The fact they look the same doesn’t help. The twin thing is creepy.

“It was either that or have someone disrespect me? What would you have done?” I ask him, already knowing the answer.

“Doesn’t matter what I’d do. You’re smarter than I am. You got your mom’s brains, kid. Don’t waste ‘em.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Pops that you think he’s stupid.” I smirk.

“You do that,” Zio Luca says as his eyes flick around the open space. “Where’s my son?”

“How the fuck should I know? Do I look like his keeper?” I say. Though my guess would be that he’s busy with his hand up some girl’s skirt in the janitor’s closet.

Zio Luca gives me that look. The same one my dad and all my uncles have, where they raise a single eyebrow at you. It’s a look that says: *Really? That’s how you’re going to play this?* Without having to say anything.

“Sorry,” I mumble before my glare lands on Josie as she pushes through the door. “I have no idea, but I gotta go.”

My uncle doesn’t move. Instead, he watches as I take hold of Josie’s bag.

“Miss me?” I ask her.

“About as much as I’d miss a tapeworm crawling around in my brain,” she says.

“A what?”

“It’s a worm. Basically, it crawls into your brain and kills you,” Josie explains.

“Huh, learn something new every day. You ready to get out of here?”

Josie looks behind me, to where I know my Zio Luca is still watching our exchange. “Ah, I’m going to catch the bus. I have errands to run. I’ll see you tomorrow. Or I won’t. Either way, I’m not gonna lose sleep over it.” She then reaches out and tries to take her bag back from my hand.

That's when Orlando appears. "Your watch broken?" Zio Luca asks him, as my cousin makes a point to glance down at the silver Rolex on his wrist.

"Nope."

"So, you're making me wait out here on purpose then?"

"Not my fault. I forgot my lucky pick in my locker and had to walk all the way back to get it," Orlando says.

"Sure you did. Let's go," Zio Luca says before turning to me. "And, Dante, you might want to take home a peace offering or bring some sort of buffer. Your dad's pissed."

"Thanks for the heads up." I look at Josie. "Come on, I need you to help me with my homework," I say and grab her hand.

"What? No. I'm not helping you."

"Please. I need you to help me catch up on what I've missed over the last month. If I don't, I'm going to fail." It's not a total lie. I know if she's there, my dad will keep that persona of New York's favorite mayor. And if she's not, I'm going to get my ass chewed out. Something that's gonna happen eventually, either way. But I like the idea of waiting till he's cooled down a bit.

Chapter Six



I can't believe I'm even considering doing this. Why do I feel compelled to help him? Because he stuck up for me? Because he was nice to me?

"I don't think that's a good idea," I say. Because, really, I *know* it's not.

"Agree to disagree. I think it's the best idea. Besides, there is a whole lot about you that I don't know. How else am I going to learn those things if we don't hang out?"

"I have homework of my own to do, Dante. I can't afford to not do it and I can't afford to fall behind either," I remind him.

"Great. We'll both study and get shit done. Come on." He pulls me towards the parking lot.

I'm trying to come up with another reason I shouldn't go with him. Any reason. Then I consider the alternative. Going

home and dodging my foster mom's latest boyfriend. It's absurd that going along with Dante seems like the lesser of two evils.

"Fine, I'll help you, but you have to do everything I say, and if you fail, it's not on me."

Dante smirks. "With you as my teacher, how could I possibly fail? You're like the smartest girl in this school, Josie."

"Thanks?"

"You're welcome." Dante holds open the passenger side door of his G-Wagon.

Must be nice to have parents with money, I think to myself as I slide onto the luxurious leather seats. I really didn't appreciate the interior on the way to school this morning.

Dante chucks our bags into the back seat and runs around the front of the car. I try not to look at him. But as he pulls out of the school's parking lot, I find myself unable to resist asking the question that's been weighing on my mind.

"Why me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you doing this to me?" I attempt to clarify. "Is it like some kind of bet? Are you getting a kick out of giving the scholarship kid attention? Is this one of those things where you get me to fall in love with you and then publicly humiliate me?"

Dante turns his head in my direction. "First of all, you're already in love with me. You don't want to be, and I get that, but you are. Second, this isn't a bet or any of that other shit you're talking about. This is real. This is me chasing you around everywhere, because when I can't see you, I get anxious. It's fucked up, but you bring me peace. You have some kind of spell over me, Josie. I don't know what it is, but I don't want to *not* be with you. That's why *you*," he says.

"You just spent a whole month without me. I think you can survive just fine."

“It was hell. I fell asleep stalking your socials every night.”

“Well, that’s just sad, Dante. Really sad.” I laugh. “You should have just asked me to send you photos. I would have made them nice and special for you.”

“Really? Fuck, why didn’t I think of that?”

“No, not really. Don’t ask me for photos,” I tell him.

“You’re right. That would be creepy. But if you wanted to send them, they’d be well accepted.” He winks at me.

I shake my head. “Where do you live?” I look out the window. The neighborhood just beyond the glass is a far cry from what I’m used to.

“Close by,” he says. “Look, when we get there, just... You’ll be fine.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that you’re safe there, even if it seems... daunting. My family, well, they’re... unique,” he says as he tries to choose his words carefully.

“I’ve met your cousins. I don’t think much else could shock me,” I tell him.



I take it back. There is still a lot that can shock me. Like the house Dante pulls up to, the garage he parks in, the... I want to say guards? But do guards walk around with machine guns?

Dante opens my door. “Want to play a game?”

“A game? What game?”

“The game where we pretend that whatever you’re seeing right now doesn’t exist. The kind where I get to be just a normal high school kid, bringing a girl home to a normal family that’s not gonna send her running.”

“So, like role play? In this game, can we pretend that I’m a normal girl whose only concern in life is whether or not the boy she’s crushing on likes her back? The girl who doesn’t have to barricade her bedroom door every night? The kind of girl who can fall for the kind of boy you are?” I ask him.

Dante’s face hardens before he releases his breath and smiles. “We are so coming back to all of that. But, yes, for now, let’s role play.”

Dante leads me through his house so fast I barely get time to take any of it in. “Where are you taking me?” I ask.

“My bedroom,” he says.

“Ah, wait. Can’t we just... study in the living room or something?” I dig my feet and try to force him to stop. It’s one thing to be in his house with him; it’s another to go into his bedroom.

“Sure, come on.” He turns and guides me down another hallway. Then he pushes open a door, reaches over to the wall, and turns on the lights.

My eyes flick around the room. No, not a room. It’s more of a library. A freaking huge library. The shelves are stacked with tons of books, all appearing in perfect order. There’s even one of those wooden ladder things I’ve only seen in movies. Two chesterfield sofas are set up in the center of the space with a small table between them, while a huge mahogany desk is positioned at the far end.

“Dante, this is... amazing,” I say, spinning around to get the full view until I feel him watching me.

“It is,” he agrees. “Sit down. Get your stuff out. I’ll be right back.”

I do as I'm told, lowering myself down onto one of the sofas while feeling very out of place in this house. I pull out my books, my pencil case, and then I take Dante's bag and get his out too. After a few minutes, I glance at my phone, mainly to check the time, and see I have a message from Chloe. My best friend, who I've somehow managed to keep in touch with despite all the moving around over the years. Chloe lives in Brooklyn. She was my neighbor before my parents died.

CHLOE:

Why am I seeing posts about you being the girlfriend of Dante Valentino???

I type out a quick reply.

ME:

Don't believe everything you read.

CHLOE:

Explain what I'm seeing then.

Shit, she's attached a picture of me making out with Dante in the cafeteria.

ME:

He was choking and I was giving him mouth-to-mouth? I saved a life today!!!

CHLOE:

Sure you did.

ME:

I'll call later and tell you everything.

CHLOE:

OMG, you're with him now, aren't you?

I glance around the room. Technically, I'm not with him, because he's God knows where doing God knows what while I sit in this room wondering if he's actually going to come back.

Then the door opens and he walks in. He's changed. And he's freshly showered too. How long was he gone? He's wearing a pair of sweats and a white shirt. Why does loungewear look so good on him?

"Sorry, I didn't know what you'd want?" Dante says, setting a tray on the table in front of me.

I look down at the arrangement of deli meats, cheeses, fruits, and crackers. "You made all this?"

"Well, I had Edna make it while I jumped in the shower." He smiles.

"Who's Edna?" I ask him.

"One of the house staff."

And with that one sentence, I'm reminded of my place in the world. Which is certainly not here. Not in this fancy house and not with him.

"Hey, role playing, remember? Get out of your head," Dante tells me.

"Right. Okay, so what do you want to start with? What subject do you struggle with the most?" I ask him.

Chapter Seven



You know all those movies you watch where you bring a girl home to study and it turns into a hot make-out session? Yeah, that's not how things are going right now.

Josie has me drawing up flash cards. *Fucking flash cards.* She's so enthusiastic about them, though. I don't have the heart to tell her I don't actually need them. She's in her element, organizing my study calendar and placing Post-it notes all over my textbooks.

"Dante, you in here?" I hear my mom call out.

"Yup," I respond.

She stops in the doorway. "Oh, I didn't know you had a... friend over."

I look at the time on my watch. It's six pm already. "We're just studying, Mom," I tell her, motioning to the textbooks and

school supplies covering every available surface. I even go as far as holding up my thick pile of flash cards.

“Studying?” Mom smiles, walking farther into the room before stopping in front of Josie. “Right. Well, I’m Livvy. The mom. It’s nice to finally meet one of Dante’s friends.”

“Hi, I’m Josie.” Josie’s voice is really quiet. She’s so nervous. I can see her hands shaking.

“Dinner is almost ready. I’ll set a place for you, Josie,” Mom says as she turns to leave.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I’m sorry I stayed so late.” Josie starts rushing to pack up her things.

“It’s not a problem at all. Dante can drive you home after dinner.” Mom nods to me and then walks away.

“So, looks like you’re staying for dinner.” I smile.

“I can leave. You can make up an excuse and totally blame me,” Josie says.

“You’re not leaving. Come on. Just remember we’re pretending we’re typical teenagers with normal families,” I remind her.

“Your mom seems really normal... and nice.”

“My mom is excited because you’re the first girl she’s ever met.”

“You’ve never brought a girl home?” Josie asks.

“Technically, I’ve brought girls to the pool house. But not in here.” I shrug.

“Why didn’t you take me to the pool house?”

“Because you’re different. I like you.”

“And you didn’t like the others?”

“Not the way I like you.” I take hold of Josie’s hand and walk into the dining room, while she tries to pry her palm free without making it look like she’s attempting to escape. The whole scene is quite comical. The dining room is still empty,

but the table is set. So I pull out a chair for Josie and claim the one next to her.

My sister is the first one to join us. “What’d you do?” Tilly asks me.

“Nothing. Why?”

“You brought a buffer, which means you’re putting off a lecture from Dad, so what’d you do?”

“I didn’t do shit, and Josie isn’t a buffer. She’s my girlfriend.” I feel Josie’s body go stiff next to me.

“Friend who is a girl, not a girlfriend,” she says.

Tilly laughs. “Well, I’m just glad I’m not the one in the hot seat.”

“As if you’re ever in the hot seat,” I scoff.

My sister is the literal princess of the family. Don’t get me wrong. I fucking love the girl, would do absolutely anything for her, but if you ask any of the oldies who the favorite is, they’ll all tell you it’s Tilly.

Mom and Dad come into the dining room a few minutes later. “Pops, this is Josie. Josie, my dad, Romeo.”

“Um, hi, Mr. Valentino.” Josie waves awkwardly.

“Josie, it’s nice to finally meet you,” Pops says, placing himself at the head of the table.

“How did you know about her and I didn’t?” Mom asks.

“She’s the girl Dante was stalking before we went to Italy,” Pops says.

“Ah, no, I was not stalking her,” I chime in.

“Actually, you kind of were—*are*,” Josie says.

“Dante, why would you be stalking a girl? Oh my god, I’ve raised a Ted Bundy. We’re going to have to take him away from society, Romeo. Move out to the wilderness or something,” Mom says to Dad.

“Relax. He’s not a Ted Bundy, and he’s a shitty stalker anyway. He hacked into the school’s network to get Josie’s

address,” Dad replies, and my mother quickly turns her glare on me.

“You what? Why didn’t you just ask her for it?”

Right now would be a great time for the world to swallow me whole. But when I look at Josie, she’s smiling. It’s a real smile too. Not one of those fake ones she presents so often.

“I did ask her. She wouldn’t give it to me,” I tell my mom.

“That usually means a girl doesn’t want you around, Dante. You really need to learn to take a hint,” Mom huffs. Then she looks to Josie. “I’m sorry my son is a spoiled brat who hasn’t been denied anything in life. I swear I taught him manners.”

“Oh, he has manners. And it’s fine. He’s harmless, mostly,” Josie says.

“So, how’d you get here if you didn’t want anything to do with him?” Tilly asks.

“He needed help with schoolwork, because he missed so much when you all were vacationing in Italy,” Josie announces to the room, and the table goes dead silent.

Then Tilly breaks out in a fit of laughter, while Mom turns to Dad. “He’s your son.”

“Ah, why is he *my* son when he does stupid shit but *yours* when he does something good?” Dad grunts.

“Because that stupid shit... i.e. pretending to need tutoring... runs in your blood, not mine,” she tells him.

“Pfft, please, you loved tutoring me,” Dad says.

“Do you not need help?” Josie asks me.

“I do,” I tell her. My parents both glare at me, while Tilly holds her phone up in my direction. “Why the fuck are you recording me?”

“Because they didn’t believe me,” she says.

“Who are *they*?” I ask.

“The rest of the family.” She turns her screen around and I see my uncles’ faces staring back at me.

I roll my eyes. “I’m pretty sure you both have better things to do than crash our dinner.”

“Better than watching you squirm? Nope, don’t think we do,” Zio Theo says.

“It’s okay,” Josie whispers and takes hold of my hand under the table. I look at her. She mouths the words *role play* and I swear she steals a little more of my heart.

“So, this is the famous Josie? Hi, I’m Theo. If he gives you any kind of trouble, just come to me, and I’ll sort him out for you, sweetheart,” my uncle says.

“Uh, thank you,” Josie replies.

I reach over and snatch the phone out of Tilly’s hand. “Okay, that’s enough of *Keeping Up with the Valentinos* for one night.”

“Wait. How’d you get that shiner?” Zio Theo asks.

“I got distracted and the guy got a hit in,” I tell him.

“You got distracted? Stop by the gym tomorrow morning,” he says.

“See you there,” I answer and hang up.

“Who and why were you fighting?” This comes from my dad.

I grab Josie’s plate and start filling it up with food, giving her a bit of everything on the table. Roast beef, potatoes, beans, pasta, and bread.

“Someone said something I didn’t like,” I reply as I set the plate in front of her.

“What’d they say?” Dad asks.

“It doesn’t matter what he said. He was being an ass.”

“It was my fault,” Josie speaks up before I can stop her. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Dad tells her, using a much softer tone than he uses on me.

“It was the other kid... he... ah... he said something about me. That’s why Dante got mad,” she tries to explain.

“Did he walk away?” My dad turns back to me.

“Barely.” I smirk.

“Good.”

“Josie, tell me about you. What do your parents do?” Mom asks, obviously trying to redirect the conversation while making things so much worse. Josie looks to me, then to my mother, then to me again.

“They died, Mom,” I answer for her.

Josie’s head snaps to me. “How do you know that?”

“I know a lot of shit.” I shrug.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, sweetie. Who do you live with now? Family?” Mom tries again.

“No. My parents didn’t have any family. I live with a foster mom.” Josie’s eyes remain glued to her plate as she moves her fork around.

“Oh, well, now you have plenty. An entire family. With us. I mean, it’s crazy, and sometimes you’ll question if you’re just as insane as the rest of them, but it’s full of love,” Mom tells Josie, and I smile.

My mother is ready to accept a girl she’s just met. Bring her into the family like it’s nothing. She really is the kindest person I know. It’s where my sister gets it from.

“So, who was that guy who dropped you two houses down this afternoon?” I ask Tilly.

“What guy?” My dad drops his fork on his plate with a loud clatter.

“Tilly got out of some dude’s car, two houses down the street, after school today.” I smirk at my sister.

“Tilly? What guy?” Dad repeats.

“When I want you to meet him, Daddy, I’ll tell you who he is.”

“Any guy who’s okay with dropping you two houses down isn’t a guy worth knowing.”

“I heard Aurora poisoned some chick in the cafeteria,” Tilly says, and Dad shakes his head.

“These kids are going to kill me, Liv. Seriously, they’re going to put me in an early grave from stress or some shit.” He holds a dramatic hand to his heart.

“You’ll survive,” Mom tells him.

I lean over and whisper in Josie’s ear, “Eat. The sooner we finish, the sooner we can escape.”

Chapter Eight



My phone buzzes on the nightstand. I swipe at it but it doesn't stop. Groaning, I roll over and pick it up.

Shit, Chloe. I forgot to call her last night. By the time I got back here, my foster mom and her latest boyfriend were already high as a kite. I showered, then locked myself in my room.

I look over at the chest of drawers I pushed up against the door. It's not much, and if someone really wanted to get in, they could. But it'd slow them down and the noise would wake me up. Give me time to jump out the window and run. It's not the best place to live; it's also not the worst. But living here does allow me to attend New York Prep. It's only a half-hour commute. If I complain or request a move, not that child services would listen, I could end up anywhere.

My phone starts up again. I swipe at the green button. "Hello."

“Well, hello there, little Josie hoe. Hold on a sec. I need to cancel the search party I just activated,” Chloe says.

“Sorry... I fell asleep.”

“Yeah, well, if you didn’t spend all afternoon in Dante Valentino’s bed, you wouldn’t be exhausted—the things I’ve heard about him.”

“What have you heard?” I ask her, suddenly wide awake.

“Sooo much, but I’d prefer to hear it from you. What was it like? Is he really hung like a horse? Does he have a magic tongue?”

“What? Gross, Chloe. It’s not like that. I was just helping him with homework,” I tell her.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days, huh? *Homework*. If you want people to believe nothing is going on, come up with a better lie. Dante Valentino doesn’t need help with his homework. The guy’s like some genius or something,” Chloe says.

How does everyone seem to know everything about him but me?

“How do you even know that? You don’t know him,” I ask her.

“I don’t need to know him. I’ve got social media, Josie, and people talk. Besides, he’s Dante Valentino. Like the most eligible bachelor for us high school girls.”

“Okay. But you can just call him Dante, you know.”

“Nope, doesn’t have the same ring to it. So what’s really going on?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her, because honestly I don’t. “He’s persistent. And yesterday, he... ah... got into a fight when that quarterback guy called me a whore.”

“Well, now I like him even more. It’s about time someone put a stop to all that nonsense,” Chloe says.

“I was handling it,” I huff.

“You were ignoring it.”

“I gotta go. I need to get ready for school,” I tell her.

“Wear that red lip gloss I gave you last week.”

“I’m not wearing makeup to school.” I roll my eyes at her.

“Lip gloss isn’t makeup. Just do it, Josie. You can thank me later,” she says and disconnects the call before I can refuse again.

I stare at the ceiling. Maybe yesterday was like a freak accident or something, and today everything is just going to go back to normal. Then again, I don’t think I want my version of normal either.

My phone buzzes with a message. I pick it up, holding the screen over my face, and then immediately drop it when I see who the message is from.

Dante. Why is he messaging me?

It’s a DM on my Insta account. I open the app and see the little notification that tells me he’s followed me. Curious, I click on his profile. I’ve banned myself from looking at it until now. I didn’t want to acknowledge these weird feelings I have for him. They’re only going to lead to disappointment and heartbreak. But right now, I’m looking purely for curiosity’s sake.

Holy freaking cow, how the hell does he have six hundred thousand followers?

Because he’s Dante Valentino, duh. I can hear Chloe’s voice in my head. I open my messages and click on his request.

DANTE:

I’m out front. I need to stop at home before school.
How quickly can you be ready?

He’s out front? Why the hell is he out front?

ME:

Why are you here?

DANTE:

I've been here all night... Also, pack an overnight bag.

He can't be serious. But somehow I think he is. I jump out of bed, grab my uniform down from the closet, and push the dresser away from the door to get to the bathroom. After the world's quickest shower, I dress and go back into my room to get my bag. I stop by my nightstand and pick up the red lip gloss, swiping it across my lips. A quick look in the mirror, and then I'm running out the front door.

Dante is exactly where he stopped last night. I jog over to his car and open the passenger side. "Why have you been here all night?" I ask him as I climb into the seat.

"Something you said kept running through my mind." He sighs. "I couldn't leave."

"What'd I say?"

"Buckle up," Dante tells me.

I plug the seat belt in and Dante starts the car. "What did I say, Dante?"

"You said that you barricade yourself inside your bedroom every night. Why?"

I told him that? Oh, right, when we were agreeing to role play... I guess I did say that.

"It's not as bad as it sounds." I turn and focus my gaze out on the road.

"Really? So tell me why you have to barricade yourself in your room?"

“I’m part of the foster care system, Dante. And believe it or not, it’s not all rainbows and sunshine,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“That’s not an answer.”

“My foster mom has a tendency to attract creeps. I barricade the door so they can’t get into my room while I’m sleeping. That’s all.” I try to sound nonchalant, like I’m just being precautious. Not that I’ve learned from experience.

Dante turns his head to look at me. “Have they? Gone into your room at night?”

“Not in this house, but others, yes,” I say quietly. “It sounds worse than it is. Both times I screamed so loud it woke everyone else up. The thing about foster moms is they’ll kick you out real quick if they see you as a threat to their relationships.”

“Who were they?” he asks. His hands are gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles are white.

“I don’t remember names. Can we talk about something else? Did Aurora really poison Krystal?”

“Probably, but not with anything lethal,” he says.

When we stop at Dante’s house, I offer to wait in the car. Of course, he ignores my polite suggestion and drags me inside instead.

Chapter Nine



I take Josie into my bedroom. “I won’t be long,” I tell her before closing myself into the adjoining bathroom.

I’ve never brought a girl in here before. It’s weird. I like having her here. I didn’t sleep last night. I fought my urges to barge into that house and steal her away.

I figured that wouldn’t go down so well. I did take my dad’s advice, though, and planted a listening device in her bag. I spent the night waiting, listening. Ready to pounce at the first sound of trouble.

I strip off and jump in the shower. I go through the motions, but the whole time, my mind is whirling with creative new ways I can end the fucking assholes who were creeping into her room at night. I also need to find a way to get her out of that house, out of that fucked-up system. She’s not going to just accept my help. That much I know. And pushing her to do things is only going to get me so far.

Wrapping a towel around my waist, I walk out, pausing when I find Josie sitting on my bed. “Sorry... I shouldn’t have...” She goes to get up.

“Stop,” I say. “I like you on my bed, way too fucking much.” I close the distance, grab her face in my hands, and slam my lips onto hers.

She doesn’t fight me on this kiss. Her hands land on my chest and move down over my abs, then up again, running over my shoulders. I force myself to pull back. This isn’t why we’re here, and after what she just told me in the car, the last thing I want her to think is that I’m only after one thing.

I don’t want just one thing with Josie. I want every-fucking-thing.



We make it almost all the way out of the house before we run into my dad and Zio Theo in the kitchen. Shit, I wasn’t expecting anyone to be here. I should have gone to Starbucks instead of making coffee at home.

“Dante, Josie,” Pops says before turning to me. “I thought you took her home last night.”

“He did... He just decided to play bodyguard and sleep in his car outside my house all night. You should probably give him a curfew or something,” Josie tells my dad.

He and my Zio Theo fight smiles. “Why are you playing bodyguard?” my uncle asks.

“Because he has a hero complex,” Josie offers.

I look at her. Most people don't speak so... freely to my dad or uncles. Shit, Josie barely speaks to me like this. Why the fuck is she an open book with the oldies?

"Sorry, I blabber when I'm nervous." She shrugs, her eyes flicking to the ground.

Ignoring the fact that my dad and uncle are in the room, I turn my full attention on her. "Why are you nervous?"

"Because I don't want you to get into trouble, but I feel like I totally just threw you under the bus," she whispers.

"Josie, my son is more than capable of getting himself into trouble on his own, and if he does, it's certainly not on you."

"So, why does he need to play bodyguard, Josie?" Zio Theo asks again.

This time, she doesn't answer him, looking to me for help. "Because I have a hero complex," I answer for her.

"You didn't show up to the gym this morning," my uncle reminds me. "Come after school."

"Sorry," I mumble. I totally forgot about the gym.

"Bring Orlando. Alessandro and Enzo will be there too," he says.

"Okay, well, I'd love to stay and chat but I gotta run. School and all." I wave before picking up the two to-go cups I've filled with coffee.

"Hold up. Josie, show me your phone." Pops holds a hand out, fully expecting her to comply.

Josie reaches into her pocket, slowly, while staring at me with a questioning look on her face. Before doing as she's told. Pops shoves it into his pocket and hands her a brand-new device.

"Here's an upgrade. I've had all our numbers programmed into it. Call if you need anything," he tells her.

Josie's eyes widen. I pass her one of the cups of coffee and then snatch the phone out of my dad's hand, while giving him one of those *what the actual fuck* looks. How the hell am I

supposed to explain to her why she can't refuse his offer? I know my dad's going to have her old phone pulled apart in search of bugs.

"Let's go," I tell Josie, walking towards the garage. She follows behind me silently.

It's not until we're on the road that she finally says something. "So, that was strange."

"I'm sorry. It's a family thing. We all have to have approved devices," I tell her.

"A family thing?"

I look at her. I can't just come out and say it. I'm also not going to lie to her. "Just go along with it. Please."

"I'm not part of your family, Dante. Why would your dad take my phone?"

"He'll give it back, once he's made sure it's not bugged."

"Bugged? You think I'm like a spy or something?"

"No." I laugh.

"Well, it's not funny. I could be a spy, you know, if I wanted to be."

"My dad's the mayor, Josie. It's a high-profile job. He has to be extra cautious." It's not a lie. It's just not the whole truth either.

"Okay, but I have messages on my phone I would rather him not see." She sighs.

"What kind of messages?" Now I'm the one who wants to know what's on her phone.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it." She picks up the device my dad gave her. I take it and set it down in the center console.

"My dad isn't going to read through your DMs, Josie," I tell her. I might, but my pops wouldn't do that.

"Well, if he does, he's going to discover how much I don't like you," she huffs.

“So your DMs are full of shit then? Because you do like me.”

“I think your mom boosted your self-esteem up way too much.” She laughs.

“I just speak the truth, babe.” Reaching over, I take hold of Josie’s hand. “So, now that we’re official and all, I think you should let me take you on a date.”

“Who said we’re official?” she asks. “And how do you know I’m not seeing other people?”

“You’re not. I don’t have time to add any more names to my hit list. And we are official. You’re in my car, holding my hand. Fifteen minutes ago, you were on my bed, kissing me. We’re official,” I repeat.

If I say it enough, it’ll sink in.

Chapter Ten



Everyone stares as Dante holds my hand in a firm grip through the corridors. “I need to stop by my locker,” I whisper.

“I had your locker moved.”

“You what?”

“Had it moved, so it’s next to mine.” He smiles at me like he’s just solved world hunger.

“How?”

“I have contacts.” He shrugs.

“Okay, if you want me to actually go along with this madness, then we need rules,” I tell him.

“Rules? Like what?”

“Like no more moving my locker, no more sleeping in your car in front of my house, no more making decisions for

me as if I'm incapable of doing anything for myself," I list off the few things that come to mind.

"I won't move your locker again," he says.

"And the rest?"

"We'll work on it."

When we get to the wall of lockers, he opens mine first. "Your code is 0-8-1-3. It's the day we met, if you're wondering." He grins.

"You really are insane."

"Hey, lovebirds. Heard you met the boss this morning, Josie," Orlando says.

"Boss?" I ask him.

"Zio Theo."

"Don't listen to him," Dante tells me. Then he cups my chin and presses his lips against mine, kissing me like nobody is watching. And, for a brief moment, I forget that they actually *are* watching.

I break the kiss, and my hands push on his shirt, recalling when my fingers were tracing all over his bare chest this morning. Shit, not a thought I need right now.

"I need to go." I duck around him and power-walk through the halls.

When I get to my math class, I sit in the back corner and take out my books. I can't afford to let myself get too distracted by him. I need this scholarship, which means I need to keep my grades above a 3.7 GPA. I'm currently sitting at a 3.9. I was at a solid four, but the last month took a lot out of me. I couldn't focus on my midterms.

Five minutes later, the classroom starts filling with students. I look down at my book, trying to hide in plain sight. They're still talking about me. Only, this time, the whispers are different. They're not talking about me being a whore. No, now they're talking about me being with Dante.

“Hi. Josie.” A girl’s voice has my head snapping up to see who’s taken the time to acknowledge me. Amanda and Bec. Two of Krystal’s minions. I give them a small smile, having no interest in talking to anyone. They’ve never once said hello to me before, so why now?

Then *he* struts in. Dante. It’s hard not to see how every student worships him like he’s royalty. He stops at the still-empty desk to my right before he sits down, leaning over to press a quick kiss to my cheek. “Miss me?” he asks.

“You haven’t given me time to miss you,” I tell him.

“You’re welcome.” He takes out his laptop and textbooks.

He’s in a lot of my classes. I guess I let myself forget during those weeks he was gone. He never sat next to me in class before, though. It’s weird. I don’t know how to act. I’m so freaking confused about what I want.

It was easier last night, when we were role playing. It was easier to pretend I was someone else. Just an ordinary girl, who could admit she likes him, wants to belong to him.

“Wanna play a game?” I ask Dante.

He turns in his chair to look at me. “What kind of game?”

“Role play?”

Dante eyes my face silently before he nods his head. “Okay, who are we?”

“Two everyday teenagers. You live in the house next door to mine. We’ve been friends since we were babies and know everything there is to know about each other. We were best friends before we started dating,” I say.

“Got it. So if I know everything about you, do I know what you look like naked?” He lifts a questioning brow while a smirk dances across his lips.

“No, we’re waiting for marriage, because we’re very religious.” I try not to laugh at the look of horror on his face.

“Okay, we’re both virgins. Shit, I’m going to win an Oscar for this performance,” he groans.

“Well, it’s not that hard to act like you’ve never had sex,” I say.

“Only someone who has never had sex would say that.” His eyes round, and then he smiles wide as he leans in to whisper in my ear. “I’m going to enjoy deflowering you, Josie. I’m going to take all of your firsts,” he says, then adds, “After we’re married, of course.”

My face heats up. Great, now he knows how basic and inexperienced I really am. The fact that I’m still a virgin while everyone else around me is banging like a bunch of horny rabbits is an achievement, really. Maybe I *should* hold out till marriage.

No, because that would mean I’d have to get married in the first place. And I don’t think I ever want to do that.

“Okay, class, open your books to page twenty and complete all the warmups,” Mr. Juniper says.

I open my textbook and Dante cracks his laptop. He turns the screen slightly out of my view and then starts typing furiously. I lean back in my chair and peek over. The screen is full of code.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Getting information,” he says.

“On what?”

“You don’t want to know,” he tells me.

“Mr. Valentino, care to share with the class?” Mr. Juniper calls out from where he’s seated behind his desk.

“Nope, I’m good, sir,” Dante replies without bothering to look up from his screen.



The rest of the morning goes by in a blur. I'm in some kind of blissful bubble with Dante. It's nice to pretend not to be me for a moment. Even if I know I have to go back to reality eventually.

When lunch comes around, I scan the cafeteria but don't see him. Aurora waves me over to their table. I could just wave back and go and sit in my usual spot. By myself. Except I don't. I walk over to her instead.

"Hey."

"Sit down. We don't bite," Aurora says. "Well, Mabilia does, but I don't."

"I don't bite. I might stab or shoot you, but I'd never bite. It's not very hygienic," Mabilia says.

"Well, that's comforting," I mutter under my breath.

"I heard you met the bossman this morning," Aurora says.

That's the second time someone's mentioned that today. "Who's the bossman?" I ask her.

"Zio Theo. Dante didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

The two girls share a look before Aurora turns back to me. "What do you know about our family?"

"Besides the fact that you guys breed insanely beautiful people? Nothing." I shrug. "Oh, and there's the whole thing

about your lot being one of the five mafia families of New York,” I add.

A look of relief washes over their faces. “Thank god. So you do know. Anyway, while we were in Italy, Nonno retired and Zio Theo took over as boss, and Orlando’s dad stepped in as underboss.”

“Should you really be telling me all this?”

“Meh, you’re part of the family now.” Aurora smiles.

“So I keep hearing.” I look around again for Dante but he’s not here. I wonder if I should message him.

“He had to run an errand. He’ll be back by the end of the day,” Aurora says, as if reading my mind.

Chapter Eleven



I spent the whole first period hacking into Josie's CPS files. I got the names and addresses of every fucking house she's ever been assigned to. I then searched the database for complaints or frequent shuffling of teenage girls between locations. It didn't take that long to nail it down to three homes with asshole foster parents.

Right now, I'm currently parked out front of a garage where one of them works. Watching.

"You know, once you do this, there's no going back. You can't undo it, Dante," my cousin tells me from the passenger seat.

I called Enzo and asked him to lend a hand. I didn't ask him to sit here and try to talk me out of it. I know what it means. I know what it makes me. I've been in a lot of fights. I've done some mean fucking shit to people. What I haven't done is taken a life.

But when I think about Josie and how these men tried to take advantage of her...

I read the first report. She told her social worker what happened, and all they did was move her to a new home.

“No girl should be afraid of going to bed at night, Enzo,” I tell him.

“I agree. I’m just sayin’ I can do this. You don’t have to be the one.”

“I want to do it.” I open the car door, my heart pounding as I walk towards the garage.

In and out. I don’t even need to talk to the fucker. He’s the only one in here. There are no cameras. No one’s watching. I press the button on the wall that lowers the car he’s currently working under. The platform comes down much slower than I’d like.

“What the fuck?” the asshole mumbles and starts to scoot backwards. I step over and press a boot on his shoulder, halting his movements. “What are you doing? Get the fuck off me!”

I lean down. “I bet that’s what all those little girls were screaming in the middle of the night too, isn’t it? *Get off me. Stop.* But you didn’t stop, did you?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“The Grim fucking Reaper,” I hiss, watching as the car finally starts to crush him.

He screams so fucking loud I’m surprised no one has come running. Once his body stops moving, aside from the occasional twitch, I take my foot off his shoulder and walk out. I get back in the car and start up the engine. I thought it would feel different. I don’t know what I was expecting. Remorse maybe. But I’ve got nothing.

“You know you have to tell them,” Enzo says.

“I know.”

He means I have to tell the family what I've done. I have to take the oath. I have to look at my dad and see the disappointment in his eyes. I know he didn't want this for me. He's always said that I was lucky. I could do anything I wanted to do. I had the ability to choose. It's my mom who's going to take it the hardest, though.

When she finds out I've taken the oath, that I've officially joined the ranks of the Valentino Crime Family, it's going to hurt her. She worries. She's always worried about us. Before she met my dad, she had planned on becoming a district attorney. She wanted to lock people like my dad away. People like me.

Then, I guess, love made her choose a different path. The other side of the law. She's now the best defense attorney in the city. Although, if you ask my Zio Matteo, he'd tell you that was his badge of honor. It's an ongoing competition between the two of them.

"Well, I got your back," Enzo says.

"Thanks." I drop him off at his house. I need to get back to school. Back to playing the little game I have going on with Josie.



By the time I'm crossing the school parking lot, the bell for the last class has rung. I wait outside until Josie walks out. "Hey," she says, stopping in front of me.

"Come on, let's get out of here."

“Don’t you have to go see your uncle at the gym or something this afternoon?”

“I do. What are your plans for today?” I take hold of her hand and lead her towards the car.

“Homework. I need to get my grades back up. Not all of us are born geniuses,” she says.

“Your GPA is a 3.9. That’s pretty fucking amazing, Josie.”

“Yours is a 4.0,” she counters.

“What can I say? You can’t fight genetics,” I tell her.

“Where did you go today?” she asks when we make it to the car.

I don’t answer. I don’t want to lie to her, but I know I can’t tell her what I’ve done either. I’m still processing it myself.

“You know we’re best friends, right? Just because you want to get into my panties now, doesn’t mean you can’t tell me something. We don’t keep secrets from each other,” she says.

“I did something I honestly wasn’t sure I was capable of doing. I can’t tell you what it is because we’re not married. And honestly, even if I could, I don’t know if I would tell you because then you’d only see me as a monster.”

Josie is quiet. She looks out the window for a long time. “Do you think if a good person does a bad thing it means they’re not good anymore? Does a little bad really outweigh all the good in someone?” she finally asks me.

“No, why?”

“If you knew I did a really bad thing, would it make you think I was a monster?”

“No,” I repeat. “There is nothing you could do that would make me think differently of you.”

“Want to play a game?” Josie turns in her seat to look at me.

“Sure. What are we playing?”

“You’re the hotshot king of the school, the one boy every other boy wants to be and the one every girl in the school wants to be with,” she says.

“I think I’ve got that role down pat.” I smirk. “And who are you?”

“I’m the girl who had to go into the system because she watched her father kill her mother when she was eight. The little girl who was so scared she picked up the gun that had fallen to the floor and pressed the trigger. The same girl who didn’t know what she was doing when that bullet went straight through her father’s heart,” she says.

I glance over and see a single tear falling down her cheek. Just one. I pull the car to the side of the road, reach out a hand, and catch the tear with my finger. “You know what I think?”

“That she’s a terrible person?”

“That she’s a survivor. That, that little girl has good survival instincts, and she did what she had to do so that she could be where she was always meant to be.”

“Where’s that?”

“Right here, with the boy who rules the school,” I tell her. “I think she could make it a bit easier on that boy, though. I mean, if we’re really getting into character, that girl would throw herself at that boy. She’d be so madly in love with him that she’d want to be with him 24/7.”

“I think that boy’s stardom has gone to his head.” She giggles.

“You know, if that were true, if we really were those people, I’d still love you just as much as I do now. Probably a little more.”

“You can’t love me. You don’t even know me,” Josie says.

“Don’t I?” I ask her.

Chapter Twelve



I flinch and squint my eyes. It's the kind of thing you don't want to see but also don't want to look away from. Dante is in a ring sparring with his cousin, Alessandro. His much older cousin. It doesn't look like either of them is taking it easy on the other. Although I will say I'm a bit impressed with just how well it seems Dante can fight. For every hit his cousin gets in, I think Dante lands three.

"Are you here for the view, or some lessons?" a voice asks from behind me. I turn to see a man standing a few feet away. I haven't met him before but I can tell from his features he's a Valentino.

"Um, Dante brought me here," I tell him.

"Ah, you must be Josie." The man sits next to me on the bench, not all that close, but too close for my comfort. I move over slightly to create a little more distance between us. "I'm Matteo, Dante's uncle," he says.

“Aurora’s dad, right?” I ask him.

“Depends on what day and what she’s done.” He chuckles. “What’d she do today?”

“Um, nothing that I know of,” I say. “She’s really nice.”

Could I sound any lamer? *She’s nice?* Where did that come from?

Matteo throws his head back in a full-blown laugh this time. “I’m not sure *nice* is the right word. But my daughter has a good heart. She’s just a little unhinged at times.”

I turn my attention back to the ring. “Is that...? Are they...? No!” I jump to my feet. I must be shouting because the guys turn and look at me.

“Babe, you good?” Dante asks.

I shake my head, and he flies out of the ring and is standing in front of me within seconds. His movements are so damn fast I’m almost knocked backwards.

“What’s wrong?”

I glance around. Everyone is looking at me. I mean, there aren’t that many people in here and all of them are related to Dante. But still. Their eyes are glued to me.

I lean forward and whisper in Dante’s ear, “Why do you have knives? You’re going to get hurt, worse than you already are.”

“It’s just training. We’re not going to actually stab each other.” He kisses my cheek and then runs back towards the ring.

I lower myself onto the bench, my teeth digging into my fingernails and my blood going cold as I watch. I’m afraid for him. Not for myself. And then it hits me. I went and let him in. It took a whole two days before I cracked. Which means I’m going to end up destroyed when this blows up in my face.

Shit. What do I do? It’s too late to run.

No, it’s not. This is just us role playing, right? It’s not real. My heart starts to calm slightly.

“Hey, Pops, didn’t know you were going to be here,” Aurora says, walking up to where her father is still sitting beside me.

“I know you didn’t. Why do you think I’m here?” he says to her. “We need to talk about that little episode in the cafeteria at school yesterday. With the cheerleader.”

Aurora rolls her eyes. “I didn’t kill anyone. Besides, Krystal deserved it. She was bullying Josie, and you always told me we don’t let people get away with attacking the family.”

“Is that true? Was Krystal bullying you?” Her dad turns to me.

“Yes,” I say, because she kinda was. I mean, I could have handled it without the whole spiking her drink thing but still.

“You should have given her a higher dosage,” Matteo says. “She’s out of the hospital but she’s telling everyone that you poisoned her.”

“Please, it was just something she ate. That pudding didn’t look right at all.” Aurora shrugs.

“It really didn’t. It smelled funny so I didn’t eat it,” I’m quick to add.

Aurora smiles while her father looks at me with a skeptical brow raised in question. “You, Tilly, Mabilia, and Liliana need to go to your grandmother’s tonight. She wants to see you all,” he says, instead of interrogating us further. “Take Josie with you. Nonna would love to meet her.” Matteo then kisses Aurora on the head before walking away.

“Ah, you do not need to take me to your grandmother’s,” I tell her as soon as her dad is out of earshot.

“Actually, I do. If my pops tells me to bring you along, and all the other girls are coming too, then something is going down and we all need to be in one place,” Aurora says.

My brows furrow. “What do you mean *something’s going down?*”

“I have no idea. I don’t get to be in the big boy meetings,” she huffs. “Don’t worry, though. You’ll love my grandparents’ house. It’s the best.”

Aurora sits next to me and watches her cousins fight each other while providing commentary on everything they’re doing wrong.

By the time they’re done, Dante is dripping with sweat. “I need to hit the showers, then we can get out of here,” he tells me.

“Actually, I have to take her to meet Nonna,” Aurora chimes in.

“Why?”

“Because my dad said all the girls have to go there.” She shrugs.

“They know. Fucking Enzo,” Dante curses under his breath. Then he takes hold of my hand and tugs me to my feet. “I need help in the shower.”

“Ew! Half an hour, Dante, then I’m coming in to get her,” Aurora calls out.

Dante pulls me into a bathroom, and it’s not how I imagine a typical gym locker room to look. This one is fancy as shit. “Wanna play a game?” he asks me.

“Sure, what are we playing?”

“Let’s pretend that we’ve been dating for years, that the fact you’re meeting all of my family isn’t going to scare you off, and that you going to my grandmother’s house is totally normal and not at all weird.”

“Okay, but who are you in this game? Where will you be?”

“I’ll be the bad boy who’s not good enough to be touching something as precious as you are. The boy mothers warn their daughters about. The type of boy you should stay away from but can’t, because you’re head over heels in love with me.” He smirks.

“Mmm, I did always want to date the bad boy who skipped classes and didn’t care about authority,” I muse.

“Perfect.” His lips slam onto mine. Dante pushes me up against the wall as his hands drop to my ass. “Fuck,” he curses before pushing back.

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to take a shower. And we need to not be doing this in here. I mean, we *are* waiting for marriage, right?”

“I don’t think the bad boy would wait for marriage. Besides, if we’ve been dating for years, why wait any longer?” I ask him.

“Nope, you deserve way better than to be felt up in some stank-ass gym bathroom.” Dante leans down and kisses me again before he steps back and turns on the shower. Then he kicks off his shoes and socks.

“Ah, I’ll just wait...” My words drop off the same time he *drops* his shorts. Dante Valentino is standing in front of me naked. Completely naked. Then he steps into the stall, and I lose my view behind the frosted glass. “Well, that’s just mean,” I mumble to myself.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say as I lean back against the wall and take my new phone out of my pocket. I pull up my contacts and text Chloe.

ME:

It’s me. Josie. Don’t ask about the new number. I think I’m in trouble.

CHLOE:

What happened? How big a hole do we need to dig?

ME:

Not that kind of trouble.

CHLOE:

???

ME:

I think I like Dante.

The phone vibrates in my hand and her number flashes across the screen.

“Hello?” I whisper into the receiver.

“What do you mean you think you like him? And why are we whispering?” she whispers back.

“I’m in the bathroom. Dante’s in the shower,” I tell her.

Chloe screams, like so loud I have to pull the phone away from my ear. “What? OH MY GOD, JOSIE!”

Dante’s head pokes around the glass divider. His eyes go to my phone and then travel back up to my face.

“Sorry. It’s my friend. Chloe,” I tell him while pressing the phone to my ear again. “Chloe, shut up. He can hear you.” I flick my eyes up and see Dante disappear back behind the glass.

“You’re in a bathroom with Dante Valentino, and he’s in the shower? Why are you on the phone with me? Get yourself in that shower.”

“I’m scared. What if it doesn’t work out?”

“We’re sixteen, Josie. Nobody is thinking of forever,” she says.

“I am,” I tell her. “That’s what scares me.”

“Okay, so you more than like him. I mean, I don’t blame you. I’d totally jump his bones, given the chance.”

“Really?” I ask, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “You’d jump my boyfriend’s bones?”

“Well, no, not now that he’s yours, *obviously*. And when did it go from *I’m just helping him with homework* to *he’s my boyfriend*?”

The shower turns off. “Chloe, I gotta go. Call you back later,” I say and quickly hang up on her.

“Hey, Josie?” Dante yells out.

“Yeah?”

“Can you pass your boyfriend a towel?” He holds out an arm in my direction.

I roll my eyes, pick up a towel from the shelf, and shove it into his chest. “Here. And don’t overthink it.”

“Overthink what? That I’m your boyfriend, or that your friend wants to jump my bones?”

“Either,” I grunt in reply.

Chapter Thirteen



Everyone is here as I stand in front of a long table. My Zio Theo is in the middle, Zio Luca on his left side, Zio Matteo, and my dad to his right. My grandfather is leaning against the far wall. Watching. My cousins are here too. The only one missing is Lorenzo—considering he’s in Australia with his new bride, I’m not surprised he didn’t show.

“You knew that this would happen. That after what you did today, this would be the only way forward?” Zio Theo asks me.

“I knew.” I nod my head.

“And you did it knowing what you’d have to do?”

“I did.”

“Okay. Hold out your hand.” He reaches for the knife on the table and picks up the card of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the

patron saint of students and chastity. And I have to tamp down my urge to roll my eyes as I hold out my hand.

Chastity, my ass.

Zio Theo runs the blade across my palm, grabs my wrist, and lets my blood drip onto the card. After repeating the family oath, I watch my uncle light the card. Once it's nothing but ash, I'm an official working member of the Valentino Crime Family.

My dad pushes to his feet, walks around the table, and grips my shoulder. "Come on," he says.

I follow him out of the room into a smaller sitting area at my Zio Theo's house. Dad pours two glasses of whiskey. Then he hands me one. "I'd hoped this day wouldn't come. For your sake, not mine," he says. "But nonetheless, I am fucking proud that you're my son, Dante."

"You are?" I was expecting a lecture, the disappointment, not for him to tell me he's proud.

"Of course I am. You're a good kid. A little shit at times, but you have a good heart," Dad says. "Why'd you do it?"

"Josie's lived in a lot of foster homes. Some of them she had to leave because the men there had a thing for little girls," I tell him, and watch my dad's face turn to stone.

My family might be involved in some bad shit—okay, we *are* involved in bad shit. But there are lines we don't cross, lines we don't sit and watch other's cross either. Sexual assault of any kind being one of them.

"You got a list of names?" he asks.

I pull out the piece of paper I've been carrying around with me since I first sifted through Josie's file. There are two more names that need to be crossed out. I hand the folded-up note over to my dad.

"I'll deal with them. You need to focus on school. What's Josie's living situation now?"

"Not great." I sigh. "She hasn't said much, but she did mention how she barricades herself in her bedroom every

night so no one can get in.” I get angry just thinking about that.

“No girl should have to live with that kind of fear,” Dad says.

“I know.”

“What are you going to do about it?” he asks me.

“What can I do?”

Dad doesn’t say anything. He gets up and places his empty glass on the table. “You’re a smart kid, Dante, with unlimited resources at your fingertips. You’ll figure it out,” he says finally.

“Does Mom know?” I ask him.

“Not yet.”

“We have to tell her.”

“We do,” he agrees.

“She’s not going to be happy.”

“That’s an understatement,” he grunts, before turning on his heel and leaving the room.



I look at all the cars in the driveway. I was hoping I’d be able to swoop into my grandparents’ house, snatch Josie up, and leave without running into anyone. But they’re all here. My mom, my aunts, and all my female cousins. Not an environment I’d walk into willingly.

I pick up my phone from the center console and call Josie's number. "Hello."

"Want to play a game?" I ask her.

"Always. What are we playing?" I can hear the smile on her face.

"Romeo and Juliet. I'm waiting outside for you. You need to sneak out of that house and come jump in my car."

"Are you serious? I don't even know how to get to the front door, Dante," she says.

"Where are you?" I ask her.

"Dante, get out of your car and walk inside if you want to take her." My Zia Savvy's voice takes over the phone.

"Zia Savvy, give Josie the phone," I grunt, adding a quick, "Please," to be respectful.

"Sure, but if you want her, you'll have to come and get her," she says.

"Sorry." Josie's voice pipes up on the line again.

"I'm coming to get you."

"Guess the game's changed," she says.

"Yeah, now I'm the hero saving the girl being held hostage." I slide out of my car. "Don't move," I tell her before hanging up.

Seconds later, I'm walking through the front door. I follow the noise. It's not hard. I find everyone in the living room playing some kind of game. It looks like charades.

"Dante, you're back? Did your father come with you?" Mom asks, her eyes glancing towards the door.

"No, I think he was doing something with Zio Theo." I keep my hands in my pockets as I walk over to my mom and kiss her on her cheek. I then repeat the greeting with my grandmother and my aunts before finally making it to Josie. "I need to get her home. She has a strict curfew," I lie.

“Not so fast.” This comes from my Zia Izzy, Mabilia’s mom, who is actually my second cousin. But we’ve all grown up calling her our aunt. “Show me your hands,” she says.

“Why?” I ask her.

She takes hold of my wrists and turns my palms up, her eyes landing on the bandage placed across my palm. Zia Izzy looks at my hand and then at me. “I’m going to kill them. How could they do this? You’re fucking sixteen.” Her voice rises and everyone else stops talking.

“What? Dante, no.” My mom follows my aunt’s line of sight.

“It’s okay,” I tell her.

“No, what did you do?” she asks, then corrects herself. “Actually, don’t answer that. I want you home within the hour. Then you’re going to answer that question. Take Josie home.”

“This isn’t Josie’s fault,” I tell her.

“I know that. It’s yours. Does she even know, Dante? Did you even discuss whatever you did before you went and put your entire future at risk?”

Josie reaches out, takes hold of my good hand, and squeezes it. She doesn’t say anything, but that simple gesture is everything. It’s all I need to know she’s here. With me.

“No. Mom, can we do this later?” I ask her. I don’t need Josie knowing what I’ve done.

“What’d I miss?” Nonno walks into the room. He heads straight for my grandmother and bends down to kiss her. When he rises back up, he reads the room. “Never mind. I know what I missed.”

“Zio T, he’s a kid. He shouldn’t be inducted at sixteen,” Zia Izzy says.

“He made his own decisions, Izzy. No one held a gun to the kid’s head.”

“I have to take Josie home,” I repeat before quickly walking out of the madness.

My mom is not far behind. “Dante, wait.”

I stop in the foyer. Her arms wrap around me.

“I love you. I’m not upset that you took the oath. I’m upset about whatever it is you had to do to make you take it. I didn’t want this for you.”

“I know.” I return her hug with my free arm, not letting go of Josie’s hand. “I love you too, Mom.”



I drive Josie into the city, towards an apartment my family owns. No one lives there. We just use it whenever anyone needs a place to stay and doesn’t want to drive back home. I’m not taking Josie to that foster house. I can’t leave her there, knowing she’s not safe.

“Where are we going?” she asks, her eyes focused on the city lights growing brighter in the distance.

“I’m taking you to my family’s place in the city. No one’s using it right now.”

“Dante, just take me home.”

“I can’t drop you off at the house and just drive away, Josie. At least I know you’ll be safe at the apartment.”

“I... What happened tonight?”

“I took an oath, for the family.”

“You took an oath. Like a mafia thing?”

“It’s kind of a big deal. It means I’m officially a working member of the family.”

“Why? Why would you do that? And what did your mom mean when she said *whatever it is you had to do*?”

“I... I can’t tell you. I don’t want you to hate me.”

“Dante, I’m going to think it’s something so much worse than what it probably is if you don’t tell me.”

“I found them.”

“Who?”

“Your old foster dads.”

“Dante, what did you do?” she repeats. “I never asked you to do anything.”

“I know you didn’t ask me to do it. But I had to. I couldn’t let them just go on with their lives like nothing happened. Think of how many others there are, Josie. How many more there will be? It’s not just you. There are millions of girls in the world like you, still getting taken advantage of.”

“I know,” she says, her gaze focused on her hands in her lap now.

“I don’t want this to change us,” I admit.

“I don’t even know what *us* is.”

“Us? You know what we are, Josie.”

“And what are we?”

“Best friends, neighbors, first and last loves. We’re whatever we want to be. We’re us.” I smile at her.

“Okay.”

When we get to the apartment, I park the car and show Josie the code for the elevator that takes you straight up to the penthouse. “There’s probably no food in the fridge. Did you eat already? If not, I can order something.”

“Your grandmother fed me,” she says.

“She likes to do that.” I take her hand. Josie looks really unsure about this whole thing. “The bedroom’s through here.” I guide her down the hall, stopping at the threshold. “And there’s a bathroom through there.”

“Thank you,” she says quietly.

“Are you okay?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“No one can get up here without the code,” I tell her.

“Okay.”

“I have to go. My mom is going to kill me if I don’t go home.”

“How much trouble are you in?”

“None. She’s just... She has to get used to the idea of me being made. That’s all.”

“You say it so nonchalantly, like it’s not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal, but it’s also my family, Josie. My last name is Valentino. It’s kinda in my blood.”

“Okay, well, you should go.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“You don’t have a choice,” she says. “I’ll be fine, honestly. I’m going to shower and jump straight into that bed that looks like it’s made of clouds.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, go.”

“I’ll be back in the morning. I’ll bring you a uniform for school,” I tell her, my feet still glued to the spot. I really don’t want to fucking leave her.

“Okay,” she says, and I force myself to walk away, being sure to lock the door behind me.

Chapter Fourteen



I'm in a daze. Dante left ten minutes ago, and I'm walking around this huge apartment, trying to figure out what the hell I'm doing here. I feel like an intruder, and no amount of role playing makes this okay.

I find myself back in the bedroom before wandering into the bathroom to take a shower. After that, I climb into the bed in my underwear and bra, because sleeping in a school uniform I've been wearing all day isn't really for me.

I pick up my phone and call Chloe. It's late but I know she'll answer.

"Hey, you still alive?"

"I am," I tell her.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know."

“Where are you? Want me to come get you?” I can hear the worry in her voice.

“No, I’m in the city. Dante brought me to an apartment his family owns.”

“So, he’s there with you?” Chloe asks.

“No, his mom wanted him home. He’s coming to pick me up in the morning.”

“He just left you alone in an apartment? Why?”

“I might have mentioned how I barricade myself into the bedroom at night. He didn’t like it and told me to sleep here.”

“That’s sweet.” She sighs wistfully.

“Is it? Or is it strange?”

“It’s sweet. You get to sleep without worrying about who’s going to try to creep into your room at night. When was the last time you had that, Josie?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Exactly. So don’t overthink this. Take the opportunity to sleep peacefully and dream of your best friend finding her own Prince Charming.”

I laugh. “You’d swallow Prince Charming whole.”

“Yeah, I probably would.”

“How was school?” Chloe asks.

“Weird. The rumors have stopped. Like, completely. It’s almost like they never existed, and I made the whole thing up in my head. But people still stare and whisper. Say hello to me when they wouldn’t give me the time-of-day last week.”

“That’s because they’re assholes. Don’t worry about them. You’ve got the king, Josie.”

“You don’t even go there. How would you know he’s the king?”

“I have Instagram. Have you seen his latest story?” she asks me.

“No, what is it?”

“Go look. I’ll wait.”

I open the app and click on Dante’s profile. “Oh my god. He didn’t!” My eyes land on the picture of me with the caption: *I’M HERS*. “What the hell?”

“That’s a romantic gesture. He’s publicly showing everyone that he’s off the market and you own his ass. And what an ass it is,” she says.

“Chloe, I will pour bleach in your eyes and blind you,” I growl.

“Wow, possessive much? I was joking, but it is funny seeing you get all territorial over the guy.”

“I’m not. I just... Argh, I don’t know what I am,” I whine.

“You’re in love,” Chloe says.

“I think it’s worse than that. Ever since I stopped fighting him on this—well, as much as I could—I just feel like I’ve known him forever. Like I’m supposed to be with him. Like I’ve somehow known him before. It’s stupid.”

“You think you’re, like, lovers from past lives? I’ve heard of that happening.”

“I don’t believe in that stuff. But it’s hard to explain. It’s been two days, Chloe.”

“Technically, he’s been chasing you for two months.”

“He wasn’t even in the country for one of them.”

“Meh, it still counts. Just enjoy it, Josie. You deserve someone like him. You deserved to be loved,” she says. “I love you, and if you let them, more people will too. You just have to let your guard down a little.”

“What if I get hurt?” I ask her.

“Then I’ll be there to put all your pieces back together. Now, go to sleep. It’s late. And stop worrying about all those *what ifs*.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I tell her, then add, “I love you too, Chloe.”

“Night.”

I hang up the phone and set it on the bedside table as my gaze goes straight to the door. It doesn't feel right leaving it open like that. I get up and shut it, and then get back in the bed. There's a light on in the bathroom, enough that I can still see but not enough to bother me.

I look back towards the door and try to ignore it. After tossing and turning for ten minutes, I get up and move the single sofa chair across the room. I don't put it up against the door but close. So that if anyone were to open it, they'd hit the chair.



I must have eventually drifted off, because I shoot up on the bed when I hear a bang followed by, “What the fuck? Josie?” coming from the door.

I reach for the bedside lamp when the chair is shoved aside. “Dante?”

“Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you,” he says.

“What's wrong? Why are you here?”

“I couldn't sleep,” he tells me, pulling his shirt over his head before he yanks the blanket back and climbs onto the bed.

“So, you thought both of us being awake and losing sleep was better than just one of us?” I ask him.

“I wasn’t trying to wake you,” he repeats while rolling onto his side to face me.

I mirror him. “It’s okay. What happened with your mom? Does she hate me?”

“No.” He chuckles. “She wants to adopt you. I told her that was a firm no, because I wasn’t into incest and I couldn’t date my sister.”

“Right, that would be frowned upon,” I tell him. “What happens now? I can’t just stay in this apartment, Dante. I have to go home. If I’m gone for too long, my foster mom will report it. I can’t risk being moved, because then I might lose my spot at school.”

“You’re not losing your spot at school. And we’ll figure something out so you don’t have to go back to your foster house either. My dad said you could stay here as long as you wanted.”

“Why is your family being so nice to me? I thought they were supposed to be big, scary mafia people?” I ask him.

“Because to them, you’re family. And we don’t turn our backs on family. We help each other out.”

“I don’t get it. We’ve been dating for what? Twenty-four hours? That does not make me family.”

“Technically, we’ve been dating since I first met you. You just didn’t know it.” He grins.

“That’s not how things work, Dante.”

“It is if I say it is.”

“No, it’s not,” I tell him.

“How about we go to sleep? And we can figure everything else out tomorrow? Or the next day?”

“Do you believe in past lives?” I ask after a few minutes of silence.

“I believe that I’ve known you before,” he says.

“It’s weird, right? This feeling that I know you, that I’ve always known you.”

“It’s nice.” He sighs.

“Yeah.”

Dante kisses me on the forehead. Then he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls my body close to his. I’ve never slept in a bed with anyone else before, especially not someone like him. I lean into the feeling, though, and take comfort in knowing I’m not alone for once as I drift back to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen



I wake up to the blaring of an alarm. I peek out through one eye, and the other immediately springs open when I see Josie in my arms. The blankets have draped down and her chest is on full display, her skin visible through the thin lace bra she's wearing. I cover her back up before I turn over to wake her.

“Josie, babe, it's morning.” I pepper her face with kisses.

“What?” she asks, her voice still heavy with sleep.

“Your phone is making some god-awful noise,” I tell her.

Josie shoots up in the bed. “Shit, what's the time?” she asks, reaching for her phone. “We need to get up. We need to go to school.” She jumps out of bed and walks into the bathroom.

I'm not sure if she knows that she's only wearing her underwear or if she just doesn't care. I'm not complaining,

though. I hear the toilet flush and then the tap running.

When Josie walks back out again, she's covered herself up with a towel. "I don't have clothes," she says, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Aurora is bringing you some. She'll be here soon."

"You know, everyone at school is scared of her, but she's been so nice to me," Josie says.

"That's because you're family," I remind her. "I'll make coffee. You go shower."

When I walk out to the kitchen, Aurora is already standing there. "About time you got up. I was going to come and knock on the door but I didn't want to be traumatized by the image of you two bangin'."

"It's not like that, Aurora," I tell her.

My cousin stares at me. Her jaw drops. "You're serious."

"I am. I love her," I tell my cousin.

"That's just... sickeningly sweet."

"Did you bring the clothes?"

Aurora points to a pile of bags. "And everything else she may need. I'll send you the bill," she says before adding, "Now that you're on the family payroll officially and all."

I look down at my hand. "Would you do it? If they let girls take the oath, would you?"

"In a heartbeat. I think it's fucked up that I can't, just because I'm a girl."

"I agree with you," I say.

"Okay, well, I'm out. Tell Josie I said hi."

I nod and wave Aurora out before I take the bags and coffee into the bedroom. Josie is wrapped up in a different towel this time. Her hair's wet, dripping water down her body.

"You really are fucking gorgeous," I tell her.

She ducks her head. "Thanks."

“Aurora just dropped these off. If you’re missing something you need, let me know and I’ll get it.”

“Thank you. You know we could have just stopped at my house, and I could have gotten changed there,” she says, and I ignore her.

“I’m gonna go shower in the other bathroom. There’s coffee on the dresser for you.”

I get to the door when she calls out, “Dante?”

“Yeah?”

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Then why are you acting like this?” She waves a hand up and down my body.

“Like what?”

“Like you can’t get away from me quick enough.”

“Because you’re currently standing in front of me in nothing but a towel, with those delicious little water droplets on your skin. The ones I want to lick off with my tongue. There are a lot of things I want to do with you. To you, Josie, but I’m not going to do anything until you’re ready for it. Until you want it,” I tell her.

Her breath hitches. “I want it, but I also don’t want to rush into anything. If that makes sense...”

I walk back over, cupping her cheeks in my palms as I rest my forehead against hers. “It makes perfect sense, and I’m not going anywhere, babe. We will wait as long as you want.”

I kiss her lips and then quickly walk out of the room. I need a cold shower. I might be prepared to wait, but that doesn’t mean I’m not full of fucking hormones and hard as fuck after just one look at her.



“Are you planning on going to class today?” Josie asks me as she grabs her textbooks from her locker.

“Depends?”

“On?”

“On whether or not I can convince you to skip class with me. We could go make out under the bleachers instead.” I raise an eyebrow at her.

“As tempting an offer as that may be, I’m going to have to decline. I need to attend class,” she says.

“Hey, lovebirds, what’s new?” Orlando stops by our lockers. “Thanks for not picking me up this morning, by the way,” he says.

“You have a car,” I tell him. Multiple, actually. Why he always wants me to drive him to school, I have no idea.

“Yes, but it’s so much better having you drive me around,” he says. “Besides, we’re missing out on all that cousinly bonding time.”

Josie shuts her locker and looks between the two of us. “It’s my fault. Sorry,” she tells Orlando.

“Josie, he’s fucking with you. And it’s not your fault. The idiot has five cars. *Five*,” I tell her.

“Why would anyone need five cars?” she asks.

“Because they’re all different?” Orlando says at the same time I reply, “Because he’s showy.”

“Sure, I’m showy. Hey, Dante, what time is it?”

I slide up my shirt sleeve to check my watch. “Time for you to find a purpose in life,” I tell him as I look up again.

“Nice watch, not showy at all.” He laughs before walking away.

“Is he always like that?” Josie asks.

“Only in small groups. Get him around a crowd and he’s quiet as hell,” I tell her.

“Why?”

“No idea. Moody artist type.” I shrug. “Come on, we got English first.”



By the time lunch rolls around, I’m fucking exhausted. I follow Josie into the cafeteria and feel the eyes of every fucking student on us. Usually, it doesn’t bother me. I’ve grown up in the spotlight. But it’s not just me they’re looking at now.

It’s her.

They’re all fucking looking at her, and that pisses me off. I place a palm on the small of her back, holding my lunch tray in the other hand. Josie put barely any food on her plate again, even though I saw her eyeing most of the menu, so I made sure to pick up everything that seemed to catch her attention. When we position ourselves at our usual table, I pick up the burger and fries and set them in front of her.

“I heard the oldies talking last night,” Aurora says, dropping her tray on the other side of the table with a loud *clack*.

“About?”

“Josie,” she says.

This has my attention. My gaze snaps to hers. “What about Josie?”

“Apparently, your mom wants to adopt her.” Aurora laughs. “So you’ll be, like, dating your sister.”

“I told her to find another way. My parents are not adopting her. I’m not dating my sister.” I shiver at the thought.

“Why is your family talking about adopting me?” Josie asks.

“Because of your family,” Aurora tells her with a shrug. “And we’re not going to sit around and leave you to fend for yourself.”

“I have a home,” Josie is quick to remind us.

“You have a shitty foster mom who’s more concerned about her next hookup than she is about taking care of you,” I tell her.

“It doesn’t matter. I only have a year and a half left. Then I’m eighteen. Tell your parents I don’t need help, Dante. I’m not a charity case.” Josie pushes to her feet, picks up her bag, and storms out of the room.

“Thanks,” I grind out while shooting a glare at my cousin. Then I get up, place all of our food on one tray, and go in search of Josie. There’s only one place she’ll be.

Chapter Sixteen



I can't believe this. I should have known I wasn't enough. He's probably embarrassed to be dating the scholarship kid. But if that were true, why would he chase me so damn hard?

I slump down on the wooden floor, my bag hitting the ground with an audible *thud*, and I flinch. Aurora didn't just bring me a new uniform this morning. No, she brought me a new everything. Shoes and bag included. I didn't want to use them. I wanted to keep my old things, even if they're tattered and cheap—at least they were mine. Instead, I wore these shoes that I know I'll never be able to afford. Because of him. I didn't want to disappoint *him*. I changed everything in my backpack over to the new bag for him.

Why have I gone from not giving a fuck what he thinks to suddenly wanting to impress him at every turn?

It's like I've lost sight of myself in just three days. Dante Valentino has swooped in and taken over my life. The sound of shoes thumping on the floor has me wiping at my cheeks. I didn't even notice I was crying until now.

Dante sits down across from me. He takes one look at my face and curses under his breath. Then he reaches out and wipes his thumbs under my eyes.

"I'm sorry. Whatever I did, I'm sorry for doing it," he says.

I shake my head. He doesn't get it. He will never understand. He's grown up with a silver spoon in his mouth. He's always been loved, always been worshiped like a freaking king.

"Tell me what to do, Josie. I don't like seeing you cry," he asks, his voice quiet.

"I don't know," I tell him. "I just wish I could be good enough, Dante."

"What the fuck are you talking about? You are more than good enough for me. Too good."

"If that were true, then why are you trying to change me?"

"How am I trying to change you?"

"The clothes, the shoes, the bag. Do you have any idea how much these things are worth? People like me could eat for a year on the money it cost to buy this one bag alone. And now you're talking about having your family save me from my living situation."

"No. That's not what I'm doing."

"Isn't it?"

"No. I don't want to change a thing about you. I didn't buy you that shit. Aurora did. And that's only because she wanted you to have them—it's her way of showing you she cares, and not for any other reason."

"I think we should just stop. Whatever this is, let's just stop it, before it gets out of control. Eventually, you'll see that I'm always just going to be me. Plain, old me. I'll always be

the orphaned girl with no family, no money, and no home. That's not going to change."

"Bullshit. You have a family. Mine. You want a home of your own? I'll buy you one. I don't know how to fix this, Josie. Just tell me how to fix it."

"You want to fix it by throwing money at me? I don't want your money, Dante. I don't want to be your family's charity case."

"First of all, you are not my family's charity case," he says. "And second, there's an easy solution to all of this."

"What?"

"Marry me." He smiles.

I laugh. "Right, sure, let's just go and get married because when money doesn't fix your problems, marriage does."

"I'm serious. Marry me. I'd marry you in a heartbeat, Josie. I can get us a place together. Just the two of us."

I blink at him. He's freaking serious. "No," I say. "We're sixteen, Dante. We're not getting married."

"Why not? I love you. You love me. We're going to get hitched eventually, so why not right now?"

"Because we're sixteen. Can you even legally get married at sixteen? That's insane," I huff.

"In some states, you can. I already looked it up." He shrugs. "Fine, you don't want to marry me? I'll try not to take that one personally. But can you at least let my parents help you? It's not charity, Josie. They want to help because they care. My mom actually told me that if I break your heart, she's going to rip mine out. I think she likes you more than she likes me at this point." He smirks.

"I doubt that."

"You can ask her yourself, after school. We have to go to her office for a meeting."

"What kind of meeting?"

“No idea. She sent me a message this morning. Told me to stop by. With you.”

“I’m sorry I stormed out.”

“Don’t be, but just know I’ll always follow you,” he says. “Want to play a game?”

His question brings a smile to my lips. I really love our games. “Sure, what are we playing?”

“You’re the hot nurse and I’m the patient in desperate need of mouth to mouth.”

I laugh. “Well, I guess you better lie down then, you know, if you’re dying and all.”

Dante flops onto the ground and plays dead. I crawl over to him, lean forward, and press my lips against his. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me on top of him.

He then rolls us over so he’s on top now. “I love you. And I meant what I said. We are going to be married one day.”

“I love you too,” I tell him, my heart pounding in my chest. But the smile on his face, how happy those words seem to make him, has me wanting to say them over and over again.



The rest of the school day goes by in a blur. Dante has somehow managed to transfer into every one of my classes. I have no idea how he gets away with half the shit he does around here. I’m guessing it’s the name.

“Hey, wait up.” Aurora runs over to the car just as Dante and I reach the passenger side door. “If my dad asks, I’m at the library studying. I need you to cover for me,” she tells Dante.

“Why? What are you really doing?” Dante questions her.

“None of your business. Just tell him you heard me saying I had a study session in the library,” she says and then walks away.

Dante’s fists clench when we watch her get into a car—a car with some guy behind the wheel.

“Who is that?” I ask Dante.

“No fucking idea, but I’m going to find out,” he says, tapping something into his phone. Then he pockets it and opens the car door. “Come on, the sooner we get this meeting with my mom over with, the sooner I can have you all to myself.”

My stomach twists the whole way there. Why does she want to see me? What is she going to say? When Dante parks in the underground garage, my nerves increase tenfold.

He opens the door and holds my hand as I jump down. “Why do you look like you’re going to throw up?”

“Because I feel like I just might,” I tell him.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be in and out, and then we’re going on a date.”

“A date? Where?” I ask him.

“Movies and dinner.”

“Oh, like normal teenagers.” I smile up at him.

“Just like normal teenagers,” he says.

Chapter Seventeen



Josie's hand is shaking a little as I walk us through my mother's office. I'm greeted by the secretary, who tells us to go right in. Josie stops in the doorway before we cross the threshold. Her eyes land on everyone presently seated at the conference room table. Mom, Dad, Zio Matteo, Zio Theo, and Zia Maddie.

There's also another woman I don't recognize. She pushes up from her chair. "Josie, it's nice to see you again."

"What's going on? Why are you here?" Josie asks.

"What do you mean? I was under the impression you knew that Mr. and Mrs. Valentino wanted to adopt you," the woman replies.

My stomach turns. She cannot be talking about my parents, can she?

Josie's hand squeezes mine, fucking tight. And then Zio Theo pushes to his feet, buttons his jacket, and walks over to us.

"Sorry, Josie, I forgot to mention that Stephanie would have to be here for the paperwork. But we're ready to sign the documents. Maddie and I can't wait for you to join our family," he says.

Josie looks from my uncle to me, the question on the tip of her tongue. But it's clear she's afraid to ask it.

I lean into her. "Just go along with it. Please. Don't do it for me. Do it for you, because *you* deserve to be in a home where you can sleep at night and not be afraid of what's on the other side of that door."

Her eyes well up. She's fighting tears. Then Josie takes a deep breath. "Right, sorry, Mr. Valentino. I was just surprised. Everything is happening so fast. It's a lot."

"It's Theo, and I'm sure it's a lot to process, but this is just a technicality. Come on. Have a seat." Zio Theo holds out his arm, motioning us forward.

I sit down next to Josie. She keeps her hand locked in mine under the table. I don't listen to what the oldies are talking about. I do, however, watch as both Zio Theo and Zia Maddie sign the papers to adopt Josie into their family. Our family. A tear runs down Josie's face. She swats it away.

"Okay, it's official. I had Gabby go ahead and pack your things for you. I collected them and have already handed them over to Mrs. Valentino." Stephanie, who I've since learned is Josie's social worker, claps her hands together before rising from her chair.

"Thank you," Josie says.

The woman leaves the room. And everyone goes silent. "I know this is a shock, and probably a little unexpected, but we really do want you to be a part of our family," Zia Maddie tells Josie.

"I wanted to adopt you, but Dante had a hissy fit about it," my mom is quick to add.

“Don’t worry. She’ll be your daughter when I marry her,” I chime in.

Zio Theo glares at me from across the table. I have no idea what his problem is.

“Which won’t be happening for at least another twenty years,” Josie reminds me.

“I knew you were a smart kid when I met you.” Zio Theo smiles as he hands her a set of keys. “Here. When you’re ready, come home. But make sure you’re ready by dinner. We’re having a party to celebrate the new addition to the family.”

“We have plans for dinner,” I interject.

“Yes, you do, at my place,” Zio Theo reiterates.

“Yep, that was the plan.” I nod. It wasn’t, but he’s the boss. And when the boss wants you somewhere, you bet your sweet ass you better be there. Family or not, there are some rules that apply to everyone. I stand, pulling Josie up with me. “Come on,” I tell her, then turn to my elders. “Thanks, everyone. See you tonight.”

When we’re back in the car, Josie looks over at me. “Did that really just happen?”

“It did.”

“Your aunt and uncle just adopted me, like legally adopted me,” she says. “I don’t get it. What are they getting out of this?”

“Nothing. This isn’t some exchange where they want something in return. That’s not how family works. You’ll get used to it.”

“So, what now?”

“Now, we go to the movies, like normal teenagers.” I reverse the car and drive out of the garage.



As it turns out, being normal teenagers is fucking awesome. I couldn't tell you a thing that happened in the movie, but I can tell you exactly what Josie's mouth tastes like. Feels like. We spent the whole date making out. I had to walk behind her when the credits started rolling, to give my boner time to die down. Impossible fucking feat, mind you.

Now we're about to walk inside Zio Theo's place. There are no cars in the driveway, which tells me no one is here yet.

"You ready?" I ask Josie.

"Are you sure they actually want me here?"

"If I don't show up with you, I'll be skinned alive. Trust me. They want you here. And I'm going to apologize in advance for whatever craziness they throw your way. My Zio Theo and Zia Maddie are a little extreme when it comes to their children."

"I'm not really their child, Dante."

"Legally you are, and that counts more than you know."

"Isn't your family about breaking laws rather than conforming to them?"

"*Our* family, babe. And we only break some laws, not all of them. We ain't heathens," I tell her.

"Right, but if I'm really your aunt and uncle's daughter, you do know that makes me your cousin. We're kissing cousins, Dante." She laughs.

“Better to kiss my cousin than my sister.” I gag at the thought.

If there were any other way to get Josie out of that foster system, I would have done it. But at least I know she’s safe here. My Zio Theo and Zia Maddie will show her what it’s like to have a family. I know that. Besides, there isn’t anything to *not* love about this girl.

The moment we enter the house, there’s a huge sign in the foyer that reads: *Welcome to the family, Josie.*

Josie smiles. “I told you they go all out,” I murmur into her ear.

“Josie, you’re here. Come on, let me give you the tour, and then I’ll show you to your room.” Zia Maddie pries Josie away from me and into her arms for a hug. “Dante, your uncle wants to see you in his office.”

I look to Josie. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I know you’re not suggesting that I can’t look after my own daughter, Dante. Go, before I tell Zio Theo you said I was a horrible mother.” My aunt pins me with a glare.

“I didn’t say that,” I grunt, then turn back to Josie. “I’ll come find you.”

Then I spin around and head towards my uncle’s office. The quicker I get this over with, the quicker I can return to Josie. I knock on his door.

“Come in,” Zio Theo’s voice booms like something straight from the pits of hell. “Dante, sit down.”

I do as I’m told. I know enough to not talk before he does. He’s called me in here for a reason. I’m not going to lie. I’m a little nervous. He could have a job for me to do already. I might have only taken the oath last night, but that doesn’t mean shit. If he needs me to do something, I have to do it.

“What are your intentions with my daughter?” he asks, and I can’t hold back my laugh. He has to fucking be kidding me.

“Excuse me?”

“Josie, what are your intentions with her?”

“You mean *my girlfriend*?”

“Well, that’s to be determined. What makes you think you’re good enough to date my daughter?”

“Ah, the fact that I was dating her before she was your daughter?”

“Doesn’t matter. So, I’ll ask you one more time. What are your intentions with my daughter, Dante?”

“I intend to marry her. I intend to spend the rest of our lives together.”

“How could you possibly know that? You’re sixteen.”

“Zio Matteo knew Zia Savvy was the one at sixteen,” I remind him.

“They weren’t cousins.” My uncle smirks.

“Oh my god, Josie is not my cousin. She’s my girlfriend, and nothing you or anyone else does or says can change that,” I grunt, then add, “With all due respect.” Because I don’t really want to get shot right now.

“Good. But just so you know, if anything happens to her on your watch, I will hold you accountable for it,” he says.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to her,” I tell him.

“Great. We have an understanding then. You can go.” He waves a dismissive hand. I stand and almost get to the door before he speaks again. “Oh, and, Dante, she has a curfew. Ten pm. If you break it, I’ll break your face,” he says with a smile on his lips. He’s enjoying this way too fucking much.

I roll my eyes. “Hey, Zio Theo, did you catch Travis’s game last night?”

“No, why?” he asks me.

“Huh, so I guess you didn’t see how he skated up to Liliana and kissed her in front of the whole stadium, then?” I smirk.

My uncle's face turns to stone. I don't stick around long enough to find out what he's going to do about the blatant PDA going on between his actual daughter and her ice hockey boyfriend. I need to find Josie. Hopefully, she's not running scared yet.

Chapter Eighteen



Maddie has walked me through the whole house. I'm not sure if I'm expected to know my way around or not, but I'm going to have no idea how to get from point A to point B in this place. This isn't just some building with four walls; it's a goddamn palace.

She left me a minute ago, told me to make myself at home. I'm standing in what she says is my bedroom. She made a point of opening the closet and said she guessed my sizes but I can exchange anything if I don't like it.

My mouth dropped open. The closet is full, and I mean *full*. Of designer clothes, shoes, and accessories. Then I went into the bathroom to find the cabinets stocked up with all kinds of products and makeup.

I wonder if this is how Cinderella felt when she went to live with the prince? I'm so out of my element here.

Maddie also mentioned that everyone would be here in about an hour, so I had time to take a shower and change if I wanted to. During the exchange, I learned she's a hugger. I think she hugged me and told me how excited she was that I was here at least ten times.

I sit on the bed. I need to call Chloe. She's not going to believe this is happening to me. I really need to find the time to go back to Brooklyn to see her.

There's a tap on my door, pulling me from my thoughts. I look up to see Dante. "I'm almost afraid to step over the threshold. I think your new dad might shoot me." He laughs.

"Your uncle is not going to shoot you, Dante." I roll my eyes. At least I hope he's not...

"He just gave me the third degree about what my intentions are with his daughter, Josie. I told you these people don't do anything by halves."

"*These people* are your family," I remind him.

"*Our* family," he says, then adds, "Nice room."

"Your aunt has spent way too much money, Dante. I don't know how I'll ever repay them."

"You're not repaying them, Josie. And nobody expects you to."

"I can't just take all this stuff, Dante. It's too much."

"How about we argue about it later? After you tell me again how much you love me?" He grins.

"I don't think your ego needs any more boosting."

"Probably not." He lifts a shoulder into a half shrug.

"Can you... do you think..."

Shit, how do I ask him if he'll stay here with me tonight?

"You know you can ask me anything, Josie. What is it?"

"Will you stay? Here. Tonight?"

"I'll stay any night you want me to. It's not exactly a hardship, being in your bed."

“Thank you. I just... I don’t like sleeping in new places that much. I should be used to it, but I’m not.”

“It’s okay. You and me, Josie. Always. Remember we’re going to be married one day, and then you’re going to have to share a bed with me for the rest of our lives anyway.”

I laugh. I don’t know why he’s so insistent on the fact that he’s going to marry me. I mean, I’m not opposed to the idea anymore. I just won’t do it at sixteen. That would be insane.

“Want to play a game?” Dante asks me.

“With you? Always. What are we playing?”

“I’m Dante Valentino, nephew of the current Don of the Valentino Family. And you are Josie Anderson, the adopted daughter of that same Don. Also, my very amazing girlfriend.”

“So, we’re just going to be us?” I ask him.

“Just us. You and me.”

“Let the game begin, but I’ll warn you. I’m probably going to turn into one of those stage-five clingers. I’m needy and I have a lot of issues, Dante,” I admit.

“Good. We can be clingers together,” he whispers as he leans in, his lips a breath away from mine. “I love you, Josie.”

“I love you, Dante,” I say before closing the gap.

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About the Author

Kylie made the leap from kindergarten teacher to romance author, living out her dream to deliver sexy, always and forever romances. She loves a happily ever after story with tons of built-in steam.

She currently resides in Perth, Australia and when she is not dreaming up the latest romance, she can be found spending time with her three children and her husband of twenty years, her very own real-life, instant love.

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Let's stay in touch. Come and hang out in my readers group on Facebook, and follow me on instagram.

