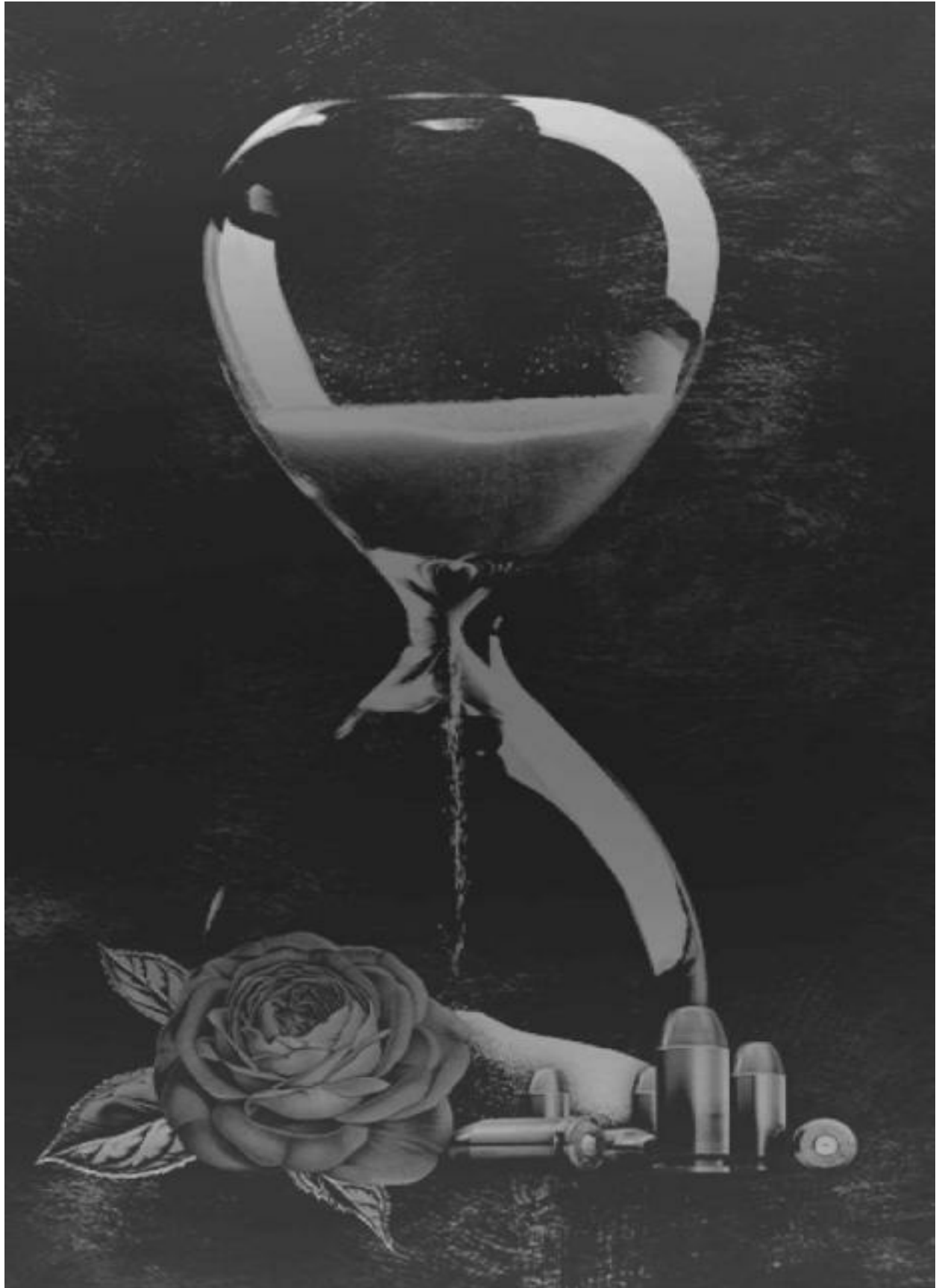


A dark, moody background featuring a large, elegant glass of red wine. The wine is a deep, rich red. In the foreground, a single, vibrant red rose lies horizontally, its stem and leaves visible. Scattered around the base of the rose and the stem of the wine glass are several bullets, some whole and some partially broken, suggesting a theme of violence or danger. The overall aesthetic is noir and sophisticated.

A VALENTINO
SERIES NOVEL

A
Valentino
REUNION

KYLIE KENT



A VALENTINO REUNION

The Valentino Empire

KYLIE KENT

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Kat Pagan

The Valentino Crime Family



Theo Valentino the 2nd

Former leader of the Valentino Crime Family



Neo Valentino

Current leader of the Donnikalka Crime Family



Theo Valentino the 3rd

Current Underboss of the Valentino Crime Family



Matteo Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Romeo Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Luca Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Alessandro Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Lorenzo Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Enzo Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Dante Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Orlando Valentino

Member of the Valentino Crime Family

The Valentino Crime Family



Holly Valentino

Wife of T Valentino, Leader of the Valentino Crime Family



Angelica Valentino

Wife of Leo Valentino, Leader of the Donatella Crime Family



Maddie Valentino

Wife of Theo Valentino, Underboss of the Valentino Crime Family



Savannah Valentino

Wife of Matteo Valentino, Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Olivia Valentino

Wife of Romeo Valentino, Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Katy Valentino

Wife of Luca Valentino, Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Liliana Valentino

Daughter of Theo Valentino, Underboss of the Valentino Crime Family



Matilda Valentino

Daughter of Romeo Valentino, Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Aurora Valentino

Daughter of Marco Valentino, Member of the Valentino Crime Family



Izzy Valentino-Petrov

Daughter of Neo Valentino, Leader of the Donatella Crime Family



Mabella Valentino-Petrov

Daughter of Roy Valentino and Mikhail Petrov, Partner of the Petrov Crime Family

Chapter One

Holly
Valentino

A mother will never stop worrying. The day I became a mother, my whole world changed. It wasn't just me and T anymore. We were now responsible for keeping a tiny human alive.

A baby boy who depended on me to meet all his needs. And I loved every minute of it. Soon, that one baby turned into four. Four sons who resemble my husband and me, a mixture of our qualities. Four amazing men I couldn't

be more proud to call mine.

Our little family of six has grown exponentially with the addition of my daughters-in-law and eight grandchildren.

The family I've created with T is everything to me. I wouldn't change a single moment of our lives. Well, maybe those few days when I thought he was dead back in the beginning—I could live without ever experiencing that.

A thought that brings me back to the present moment. The news I've just received isn't good. It's going to change my whole family, and I'm really not sure how to tell my husband. I've never kept anything from him before but this... it's going to destroy not just us, but everyone around us as well.

Nothing is ever going to be the same again.

I still have time, though. And I want to enjoy a family holiday before I bring our world crashing down around us. I want to make some lasting memories for us all.

The door to the library opens and my eldest son walks in. Just the sight of him right now brings tears to my eyes. Theo is an exact clone of his father in every way possible. Looks, personality, *perception*...

"Ma, what's wrong?" he asks, his steps quickening when he observes me wiping the tear from my cheek.

"Nothing. It's the book," I lie, closing the cover and flicking my eyes up to meet his gaze.

"You sure? Did the twins do something stupid again? I can go beat some sense into them if you need." He gives me that devilish smirk all the boys seem to have mastered.

"No, and don't beat up your brothers, Theo," I scold him.

Those twins he's talking about are my youngest two, Romeo and Luca. They've always been the more troublesome of my four children. Even with this in mind, I worry most about Theo. Which is ironic, considering he's never given me a reason to worry. He's always been the responsible one. Clear-headed. But he has his father's propensity for going in guns blazing without a care in the world if he thinks his family is in danger.

He also has the weight of the world—this world—on his shoulders. He's set to take his father's position as Don when T retires. It's not something I would have chosen for my children. Being raised within a mafia family. But behind the ugliness this line of work has to offer, there is even more beauty. I not only married the love of my life. T is also my best friend. There isn't a day that I don't thank God for giving him to me. And to love him is to love

every part of him, even the parts that others would find terrifying.

He does his best to keep me out of the business, but that hasn't trickled down to our children. We discussed it as they were growing up and decided to let each of them choose their own path, choose if they were going to join the "family business" or go off on their own adventures. We decided we would support them, no matter what they chose. Theo, he has never once shied away from working with his father. He lives and breathes the Valentino name, relentless in everything he does.

The other three have various pursuits outside of the family; however; each also took the oath, and although I might not be aware of everything they do, I'm also not naïve or stupid. I am well aware that my sons are just as ruthless as their father.

Matteo became a criminal defense attorney; he loves his job but I know the career choice has more to do with who his family is than anything else. Like everything he does, though, he puts his all into it and is known as the best defense attorney in the country. My middle son is merciless in the way he fights for his client's freedom.

Romeo was a child prodigy; he could have skipped a lot of years in school with his brains, but he refused to leave his twin behind. My boy is currently the mayor of New York. He tends to distance himself as much as possible from the illegitimate side of our family business. Although he's been dubbed soulless, mostly by those who don't know him, those of us who do are able to look beyond his dark eyes. They're able to see the good inside him that very few are privy to witness.

Then there's his twin, Luca, my athletic child. He had his heart set on playing professional football. During the very first game of what was set to be a promising career, he was shot saving a pop singer from the bullet with her name on it. Luca is my most reckless son, always has been, and I don't think that will ever change. After his short-lived football career ended so suddenly, he decided to change course and started a record label with his now wife—that same singer—who is one of the country's biggest recording artists. That talent has trickled down to their children too.

I've been lucky enough to watch all of my boys grow up into men. I've seen them get married, been there when they've become fathers. I've watched my grandchildren grow into the young adults and teens they are now.

"Something else is wrong," Theo says, kneeling in front of me and shaking me from my thoughts.

“Nothing’s wrong, baby. I was just thinking we haven’t had a family holiday for a while. I’m going to talk to your father about visiting the estate in Italy for a month. I want all of you to come.”

“A month, Ma? That’s a long time to be away,” Theo counters.

“Theo, we only get to experience today once. Tomorrow will always be a new day. I need a month with my family, all of you, in Italy. I want the memories.”

“What’s going on?” he presses, his brows knit with concern.

“Nothing. I just... we’re getting older, Theo. Your father and I are getting older and we aren’t always going to be around. I don’t want to waste time we might not have later,” I tell him.

“That’s morbid, Ma, and you’re not that old. Pops maybe, but not you.” He smiles.

I laugh. “Thanks. Make sure your brothers work out their schedules. I want you all there, the grandkids too.”

“All of them? Can’t we leave Matteo’s kids behind? They’re going to be nothing but trouble—trouble that I’m going to end up having to bail them out of.” Theo laughs.

“Don’t be an ass. They’re not that bad.”

“Last week, we had to pay a hundred grand in damages to a club because those idiots started a fucking fight.”

“Lorenzo and Enzo started a fight? Are they okay?” I ask. This is the first I’m hearing about it.

“They’re fine, and it wasn’t just the two of them. From what I heard, Aurora started it. Lorenzo and Enzo just ended it.”

I smile. Aurora is Matteo and Savvy’s youngest child. She’s as feisty as they get, but in this world, that’s a good thing.

“Don’t smile like that. Aurora is more reckless than Luca ever was. I swear if I didn’t know she was Matteo’s kid, I’d mistake her for Luca’s,” Theo huffs.

“She’s fine, and I’m sure she had a good reason for whatever she did.”

“Way to admit who your favorite grandchild is,” Theo says.

“Nonsense. I don’t have a favorite,” I assure him.

Being a grandmother is everything. I love every single one of my grandchildren equally. They all have very different personalities. Aurora is just the one who happens to take no shit. But she did grow up with two older, overbearing brothers. There really is no other way she could have turned out.

“Where’s your father?” I ask Theo.

“I just left him in his office. I’m heading home.” He leans down and kisses my cheek.

“Okay. Say hi to Maddie and the kids for me,” I tell him. “I love you.”

“Love you too, Ma,” he says before walking out the door.

I swallow the lump in my throat, push to my feet, and head towards the kitchen for a drink. I need to clear my thoughts before I go and tell T we’re going on an extended holiday.

Chapter Two

Theo
Valentino

Ever get that feeling that something isn't right but you can't quite put your finger on what it is? Yeah, as I walk out of my parents' house, I can't help but think life as we know it is about to change.

I don't know why or what is happening, but my mother wasn't herself. I know my mom. I know when she's angry, sad, happy... Today she was... I don't know what she was, but she wasn't herself.

And this fucking all-in family trip to Italy? Don't get me wrong, we go on family vacations, but they're usually over Christmas. It's the middle of the year; it's summer in Europe. You know what that means? It's fucking hot.

I jump into the car and call Matteo.

“Hey,” he answers.

“Hey, have you been to see Ma recently?” I ask him.

“No, why? What’s wrong?” His voice changes from that carefree tone of his to something deeper, which means he wants me to tell him what I’m thinking.

“I don’t know. Something was... different. Strange. Wrong. Anyway, she wants us all to take a month off and go to Italy,” I say.

“All of us, a whole month? When?”

“Now, I think.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to work. I’ve got shit to do,” he says.

“Ma wants a family vacation. Said some shit about getting old and not being around forever.”

“That’s morbid.”

“That’s what I told her. That being said, we have to make this happen. She also wants your three little devils in tow.”

“My little devils are perfect. Don’t be jealous because your offspring isn’t as great as mine, Theo. It isn’t a good look on you.”

“My offspring didn’t cost us a hundred grand in damages last week, Matteo. I’m not bailing them out of an Italian jail,” I remind him.

“Considering I’m the lawyer here, it’ll be me bailing them out. Which I won’t have to do because no cops over there are stupid enough to put a Valentino behind bars to begin with.” He laughs.

“Did Aurora ever end up saying why she stabbed that guy in the first place?” I ask him.

“Nope, they’re all tightlipped about it. Bastards are too fucking loyal to each other,” Matteo says.

“Tell Liv about the vacation. She can make sure Romeo finds the time off,” I say.

Romeo’s wife Livvy and Matteo run the law firm together. Romeo never stops working. It’s like he thinks he’ll lose brain cells if he takes a fucking break.

“Will do. You gonna call Luc?” Matteo asks me.

“Yeah, I’ll hit him up now.”

“Okay, see you Sunday,” he says. I disconnect the call and dial Luca. He doesn’t answer so I leave him a message.

Twenty minutes later, I pull into my driveway and enter the code on the

gates. I park the car in the garage and make my way through the house. The front hall leads to the kitchen, where I grab a bottle of water out of the fridge and continue in search of my wife. What I find in the living room isn't Maddy, though. I pull the gun out of the holster on my chest and aim it at the fucker's head.

"You have three seconds to get the fuck off my daughter before I splatter your brains all over the fucking carpet. Which would be a shame because my wife really likes these carpets," I say, clicking the safety off.

"Ah, Daddy, what the hell?" Liliana shrieks.

"One..." I start counting, and the little shit scrambles to his feet.

"Um, Mr. Valentino, s-s-sorry. I didn't know you were home," he says, while holding his palms in the air.

I pull my phone out of my pocket with my free hand and hit a name in my contacts. "Matteo, I'm gonna need a clean-up crew at my house," I tell my brother.

"What for?"

"Just caught some guy groping my daughter on my fucking sofa," I grunt in response.

"Be right there," Matteo says before hanging up.

"Okay, stop." Liliana stands in front of me, takes the gun out of my hands, and turns back to the guy. "Sorry, Travis, you have to go. Now," she says.

"Okay, I'll call you," he replies.

"Don't bother," I tell him as he practically runs to the front door.

"Oh my god! Mom!" Liliana screams at the top of her lungs, and my wife comes rushing into the room.

"What? What happened?" she asks.

"Dad just threatened to shoot Travis. Tell him to stop doing that."

"Really, Theo? She's twenty-five years old," Maddie scolds me.

"I don't care if she's fucking fifty. I'm not coming home to watch a dipshit grope her on our sofa."

"Fine, I'll move out," Liliana threatens.

"You're not moving out," I growl.

"Try to stop me." She stomps off down the hall like she's done so many times over the years with similar threats.

"Pack your bags, princess. We're going to Italy for a month—and, no, Travis isn't invited," I yell after my daughter. It's not the first time I've

pulled a gun on one of her boyfriends. He's lasted three months, though, which is the longest out of any of them.

"You really need to stop. She's an adult. You know what I was doing at twenty-five? You." Maddie smirks.

"That's different," I tell her.

"How?"

"You're not my daughter. Although I'll let you call me *Daddy* if you want to." I run my eyes up and down her body.

"Maybe, but first go talk to your actual daughter before she does pack up and move out." Maddie lifts an arm and points down the hall.

I groan and remove my jacket. "Why couldn't she just like girls? Life would be so much easier if she just liked girls," I mumble to myself. Grabbing Maddie's face in my hands, I bring my lips down on hers. "I'll be right back," I tell her before pulling away with a sigh.

Chapter Three

T
Valentino

I watch my wife make my mother's pasta sauce recipe while doing my best to go along with the whole *everything is fine* persona I've been forced to adopt.

Holly has no idea that I know. When she came to me the other day, telling me about a family trip to Italy for a month, I knew something was off with her. It didn't take much investigating to find out what that something was.

What I can't understand is why she's keeping it from me and when exactly she plans on telling me. I already have a team of people looking for a solution. Anything to make sure my family isn't torn apart.

For now, I'll wait until my wife decides to open up. Still, it's fucking hard to sit here and pretend that I'm okay, that I'm not finally paying the price for the endless sins I've committed. I haven't taken our life together for granted for one fucking day, knowing I was on borrowed time. That a man like me would never truly get to keep everything that I have.

The perfect wife, four amazing sons—well, most of the time they're amazing—and eight grandchildren.

"Dolcezza, come here a sec," I call out to Holly.

She turns the stove down before maneuvering around the counter and stepping up to me. "What's up?" she asks, wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

"How is it possible that you get more beautiful every fucking day?" I question her, honestly wondering how after all these years together, she still manages to make my heart skip a beat.

"T, if this is your way of trying to get into my panties, now really isn't a good time. Everyone will be in soon," she says.

"Well, it wasn't but now that you've mentioned it, I'd very much love to get into those panties." I smirk, which has my wife throwing her head back and laughing. "No, dolcezza, I think it's time. I'm going to hand the business over to Theo," I tell her.

Holly gasps, her hands covering her mouth. "Why? Why now?"

"He's ready, and I've been doing this shit a really fucking long time. I'm tired. I want to enjoy the years we have left together. Retirement with you was always the end goal, dolcezza. We can do anything we want, go anywhere we want," I tell her.

"I have everything I've ever wanted right here. Because you've already given it to me, T," she says before adding, "Do you really think he's ready?"

"That kid was born ready, dolcezza."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"I'll tell them tonight." I cup her face in mine and fuse my lips against hers.

"Let's at least try to get through dinner first," Holly says, stepping back from my embrace.

"Deal."

"Oh, what did Aurora do last week at the club?" she calls out as she makes her way to the stove.

"What do you mean?"

“Theo said they had to pay some club a hundred grand in damages because Matteo’s children decided to destroy it in a fight—apparently Aurora started it.”

“Of course, she did. I swear that girl is too much like her father. I really wish she would have gotten Savvy’s personality instead,” I grunt. “This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“What? You mean to tell me the all-knowing mafia Don doesn’t know something?” Holly smirks.

“Make no mistake, dolcezza. I would have found out eventually. I always do when it concerns this family.” I push to my feet and walk out before I say something she’s not ready to hear.

I LOOK around the dining table that has had to grow in size over the years. My children and grandchildren are all talking at the same time, each one trying to speak louder than whoever they’re conversing—or *arguing*—with.

“Just once, I’d like to have a dinner that doesn’t involve a screaming match.” My voice rises over all the noise, and everyone’s eyes land on me.

“Sorry, Nonno.” My granddaughter is the first to speak up.

“It wasn’t you, Tilly. It was the rest of them,” I tell her with a wink.

“It’s never Tilly,” Enzo huffs while trying to hide his eye roll.

“Right, well, dinner was fantastic as always, dolcezza. Theo, Matteo, Romeo, Luca... and Neo, my office. Now.” I stand and deposit my napkin on my plate. Before I walk out of the door, I turn back to the table. “If your parents’ names are Matteo and Savannah, don’t leave this house until we’ve spoken.”

Lorenzo, Enzo, and Aurora groan in unison as I exit the room.

SITTING BEHIND MY DESK, I wait for the last of my sons to arrive. Romeo. “Shut the door,” I instruct him as he enters.

“What’s going on?” Theo asks me.

“I trust you’ve all made arrangements to take the required time off for your mother’s trip to Italy?” I direct a hand at the four of them.

Neo stands silently in the corner, his back against the wall and his hands in his pockets, while all four of my boys nod their agreement—well, I guess they're not exactly boys anymore. Haven't been for a long fucking time.

"Good. I want you all on your best behavior over there. Your mother is looking forward to this trip, and if any of you ruin it for her, I will shoot you myself—ya hear me?" I give them my best *don't fuck it up* look.

"What's really going on?" Theo questions, his eyes narrowed as if I'll give something away before I'm good and ready.

"Nothing. Your mother wants a family vacation and we're going to fucking give her one," I tell him.

"Okay." He nods his head. I can tell he doesn't believe me, but thankfully he drops it for now.

"I've decided to retire. I'll be handing over the reins to Theo, officially, during our stay." I look at my oldest son, checking for his reaction. Other than the shock that's evident on his face—at least to me it is—he doesn't seem fazed. Though I take note of how his shoulders have straightened. "You are ready for this, Theo," I tell him.

"Why are you retiring? You're not that old," he says.

"Because I can." I shrug.

"Ah, not it." Matteo raises a hand in the air.

"*Not it* for what?" I ask him with a brow raised in question.

"I'm not moving up to his position," Matteo says, pointing to his older brother.

I glare at him. I was anticipating this. I've always known Matteo wasn't going to be the one stepping up. Don't get me wrong, he does more than enough for this family, but I know the strain it would put on his marriage if he took the title of underboss. It took Matteo a long time to get his wife on board with his lifestyle. Savvy doesn't judge it; she fears it. Her biggest fear is losing her husband or one of her children. And I get that. It's my biggest fear too. The difference is I don't allow my fears to dictate my life.

"I would never ask you to do something you didn't truly want to do or that I thought you weren't capable of handling," I tell him. "Any of you." I look at the other three to reiterate my point.

"We know that, Pops," Theo replies.

"I'll do it," Luca says.

"You'll do what?" I ask him.

"Underboss." He shrugs. "We both know that Romeo can't very well take

it on, with him being the soulless mayor and all. And Savvy will remove Matteo's balls if he takes the job, so that leaves me."

I blink at him. "Is this something you actually want, Luca?" I ask.

"As long as this one doesn't die before his own kid can take over, I'm cool with it. I don't want to be top dog—that's for fucking sure," Luca says while gesturing a hand to Theo.

"Okay, it's settled," I tell them before adding, "This doesn't leave the family."

"Got it." Romeo stands and is the first to leave the room, closely followed by Luca and Matteo.

My eldest hangs around. I can see the questions on his mind. "Not now, Theo," I tell him. He nods and walks out.

Neo shuts the door again and heads over to the bar. He pours us each a glass of whiskey and hands the first to me. "Here's to the end of an era."

I clink my glass with his. "To making it this long," I say. It's honestly a miracle we're both still alive. There have been so many close calls over the years.

Chapter Four

Lorenzo
Valentino

I look to my siblings, Enzo and Aurora. To anyone else, it would appear as though they didn't have a care in the world. I see it though, the stress of being called into our grandfather's office. When that grandfather is the Don of one of the five reigning mob families in New York, his office isn't where you go to get candies and gifts. It's where you go to get your ass chewed out... or worse.

Not that he'd ever actually cause us any real harm. Deep down, he's a big soft teddy bear who loves and adores his family. But right now, he is every bit the mafia boss the criminal underworld knows him to be. He doesn't say a

word as all three of us stand in front of the large mahogany desk. He just stares, from one to the other.

Enzo's little finger twitches at his side. It's his tell and I know Nonno sees it too. Aurora wears a better mask though. The only sign of her growing anxiety is the way her right foot points inward ever so slightly. Other than that, you'd think it was just another walk in the park for my sister.

"Nonno, it was my fault. They didn't do anything except jump in after the fact, to help me," I say, trying to get my siblings out of this mess.

Nonno looks to me, and a small smile forms on his lips. "Nice try, Lorenzo. I admire your willingness to take the blame, but I already know what went down in that club and cost the family a hundred grand—which, by the way, I've deducted from all of your inheritances," he says, though I don't think the punishment hits as hard as what he hoped.

Because, honestly, a hundred grand is pocket change for our family. That being said, it was never the money he was worried about in the first place. It's the family's reputation, how we look to outsiders.

"Nonno, it was a misunderstanding—that's all," I try again. As much of a pain in the ass as my siblings are, they will always have my full loyalty. No matter who we're up against, or if they're in the right or wrong.

"Explain it to me then." Nonno pauses to glance at Aurora. "Tell me why you thought it was a good idea to hit a biker over the head with a bottle of Dom?"

"It wasn't her fault," I cut in.

"I wasn't talking to you, Lorenzo. So, unless you want to be removed from the room, I suggest you shut the fuck up and let your sister explain herself," Nonno grunts in my direction but he never removes his gaze from Aurora.

I close my mouth and look to my sister. She smiles at me and I swear I want to shield her from the whole world. Aurora is barely eighteen. She had no reason to even be in that bar, let alone drinking champagne.

"First, Nonno, he wasn't a biker. He was a *wannabe*. And, second, he said something about Enzo that I didn't like so I taught him what happens when you try to badmouth a Valentino." She ends her speech on a grin. It's also a total lie, one I know our grandfather doesn't buy. But I'm not about to call her out.

"What did he say?" Nonno questions her.

"Huh?" Aurora asks, more than likely trying to buy herself more time to

come up with an explanation.

“What did he say about Enzo?”

“Oh, he said that Enzo was a pussy, and that if my brother wasn’t a Valentino, he’d take him out.” Aurora shrugs.

“Why didn’t you just let Enzo deal with it, then? Last I checked, he was your big brother and you’re barely eighteen. Do you have any idea of the danger you put yourself into?” Nonno says, and we get to the real reason why he’s pissed.

My grandparents have eight grandchildren. Three of them are girls. Girls Nonno treats like princesses made out of glass. Liliana, Matilda, and Aurora. And then you have us boys: me and Enzo, Alessandro who is Zio Theo’s son, Dante who belongs to Zio Romeo, and Orlando the spawn of Zio Luca. Nonna says that our grandfather favors the girls because he always wanted a daughter and got stuck with four boys to raise instead. Which is why he enjoys having granddaughters so much.

Heaven help anyone who touches a hair on their heads. All five of us boys had it drilled into us growing up that it was our job to protect the girls always. Never let anyone get close enough to hurt them. That was a given, though. Aurora is and always will be my baby sister. There is nothing in this world I wouldn’t do for her. Being the eldest male grandchild comes with a lot of responsibility—yes, there are six of us—but really if any of the grandkids get into shit, it’s me they always call to bail them out.

“I’m sorry, Nonno. It won’t happen again,” Aurora says, although no one in this room believes that one bit. My sister has a way of finding trouble, and she’s a scrappy little fighter too. The number of full-on brawls she gets into at school is concerning, really. I swear she likes to throw a fist more than Enzo and I ever did.

“Good. See that it doesn’t. When we’re in Italy, I expect you all to be on your best behavior. Your grandmother wants a relaxing family vacation. And that’s exactly what she’s going to get. Got it?” Nonno tells us more than asks.

“Yep,” all three of us say at once.

“Good. Now get out of here and stay out of trouble.”

We don’t hang around for any more lectures and hurry out of the room. After saying our goodbyes to our grandmother, I drive Aurora home.

“Aren’t you guys coming in?” she asks when I pull up to our parents’ house and don’t cut the engine.

“No, I have shit to do. Sorry, sis.” I smile at her.

Aurora squints her eyes at me. “You two are going out, aren’t you? This is so not fair.”

“Aurora, get your ass in that house and stay there,” I tell her.

“Fine, but when I’m in college, I’m going to make up for all this missed partying,” she says while sliding across the seat and reaching for the handle.

“That’s funny.” I laugh.

“What is?” she asks.

“That you think you’re going to college without soldiers who will report back to Dad,” I remind her.

“Argh, I hate you.” She opens the back door of the car and climbs out.

“Love you,” I reply through my open window.

“You too,” she says, blowing me a kiss and walking up the stairs.

I wait until my sister is inside with the door closed behind her before I continue down the driveway. Ever since we came home from Australia a couple of weeks ago, Aurora has been feistier. I have no idea why, but I do plan to make it my business to find out.

FORTY MINUTES LATER, Enzo and I are sitting in a bar nursing a glass of whiskey each. I keep checking my phone to see if I have any incoming messages. I don’t. I shouldn’t be surprised, because ever since we returned from Melbourne, I haven’t heard from her.

Kyla McKinley, the girl who will more than likely be the death of me. And not because her father is a raging psychopath either. It’ll be because she drove me to the edge of insanity herself. I’m tempted to get on a jet, fly back, and make her talk to me.

“Whatever happened in Australia, I think it’s time you let it go,” Enzo says.

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

“Right, I know something happened with you and Kyla. If I were you, I’d pretend it didn’t and move the fuck on. I mean, seriously, you do not want to mess with that girl. Have you seen her father?” Enzo asks with a shiver.

“I’m not scared of Dominic McKinley,” I tell him.

“I’ll be sure to mention that in your eulogy.”

“Shut up.”

“So you admit something happened?”

“No, I don’t.” I might have *kissed and told* about other hookups, but not Kyla. She’s different, always has been.

“Okay, so why the sudden bout of celibacy? You haven’t picked anyone up in two weeks. That’s like a lifetime for you.”

“Maybe I’m tired of the same type of chicks,” I say, gesturing a hand around the bar.

“It’s a warm hole to sink into for the night. No one ever said you had to marry them.”

I shake my head. Two weeks ago, I probably would have agreed with my brother. Now, I look around and not a single one of

Chapter Five

Romeo
Valentino

*M*y phone vibrates relentlessly on the desk. I've been ignoring it for at least ten minutes, but now the noise is getting on my last nerve. I've been trying to read through emails, attempting to get ahead so I can actually be away from the office for a month.

How my mother expects us all to just put our lives on pause and trek off to Italy is beyond me. But it's Ma, and there really isn't anything I wouldn't do for the woman. I'll just do it while complaining and groaning the whole time.

I give in and pick up the phone, immediately wishing I hadn't. Swiping

my finger across the screen, I open up the group message chat I have with my brothers, scrolling up to see what I've missed.

LUCA:

@everyone WTF is going on? Italy? Are we really all just going along like everything's fine? Also, Pops retiring?

MATTEO:

@Luca Yes, we're going along with it. Ma wants a vacation. The least we can do is give her one.

THEO:

@Matteo She doesn't see this thread. No need to be a kiss ass. And @Luca I agree. Something's up.

LUCA:

@Theo How do you not already know?

MATTEO:

@Luca Because he's too busy ordering new suits for when he takes over for the old man.

LUCA:

@Matteo Shit, I didn't think this through. I don't have to wear suits now, do I? Should I work on my Theo impersonation?

MATTEO:

@Luca Yes, and probably a good idea. That walk with the stick up the ass thing ain't easy to pull off.

THEO:

@everyone Fuck off. @Luca Buy some fucking suits.

LUCA:

@Theo So, does this whole underboss thing come with a pay raise? I'm gonna need it if I have to buy suits.

ME:

@everyone Some of us have real jobs and are trying to work. Shut the fuck up.

LUCA:

@Romeo Wondered where you were at. How is New York gonna survive a month without your mayoral guidance?

ME:

@Luca Mature. But I shouldn't expect much more. I did suck out all the brain cells in the womb.

MATTEO:

@everyone We should get @Luca bulletproof suits made. We all know he's not going to last five minutes as underboss before he catches another bullet.

ME:

@Matteo Good idea. He's gonna need it.

I turn the volume down on my phone and throw it back on my desk. This trip is going to be one major fucking headache. I return my attention to my computer screen and open the next email. I think I get through five more before the door to my office swings open. I reach under the table for the pistol I have strapped there, then bring my hand back up when I see my sixteen-year-old son waltzing in.

"Pops, how're things?" Dante says casually as he plops himself down on the white leather sofa that's off to one side of the room.

I look at the clock that hangs directly above his head. It reads one thirty in the afternoon. "Dante, shouldn't you be at school right now?" I ask him.

"Should be," he says.

I wait for him to continue, to explain why he's in my office right now, instead of at the school I pay thousands of dollars a year for him to attend. "And why aren't you there?"

"Okay, but first, promise me you won't tell Mom," he says. "She'll freak the fuck out and get all lawyery and shit."

This has my eyebrows rising to my hairline. I might keep certain things from my wife, like most of the business my family engages in on a daily basis. Don't get me wrong, she *knows*. We just don't discuss the finer details of shit. What I don't keep from her is anything that concerns our children.

Okay, well, I might not have told her about that time I found our son balls-deep in some girl in our fucking pool house a few months ago. There are some things a mother just really doesn't need to imagine. Also Livvy still thinks Dante is her sweet, innocent baby boy. I don't want to be the one to tell her how very *not* innocent our son is.

"Seriously, Dad, she will go down to the school and threaten to sue them or something."

"Dante, what happened? You can either give me your full version, or I can call up Principal George and get his version now," I tell him.

With a huff and an eye roll, my son sits up straighter. "Okay, I wasn't actually doing anything malicious, but I might have accidentally on purpose hacked into the school's network systems and, in the process, took down all

their firewalls.”

I blink. Yes, my son is a tech genius. What did you expect when Livvy and I combined forces and created him? My wife is the only person I know who’s smarter than I am. It’s no surprise our children inherited our academic abilities. If only they would use them for good, instead of evil...

“You hacked into the school’s network systems? Why the fuck would you do that?” I ask him.

“Josie wouldn’t tell me where she lived, so I figured I’d just look in the admin files and find out for myself,” he says.

“You couldn’t just follow her home after school one day like a normal fucking stalker?” I ask him.

“I didn’t think of that. That’s a good one, Pops,” he says with a confirmatory nod.

“You’re not talking your way out of this. What are we looking at? Suspension? How many days?”

“Expelled.” He winces.

“You’re not being expelled,” I tell him. “I’ll sort it out.”

“Are you going to tell Mom?” he asks.

“No.” I wait for him to relax, get comfortable, before adding, “You are.”

“What? Pops, I can’t. She’ll freak,” he tells me, like I don’t already know this.

I smile. “You just got expelled from school, Dante. Of course, she’s going to freak the fuck out. What’d you think would happen?”

“Well, I didn’t think I’d get caught, obviously.” He rolls his damn eyes again—one more time and I’m gonna slap him upside the head and hope they get stuck there.

“Obviously. Either you need to get better at hacking without leaving a trace or give up on it altogether,” I say. *I know*. I shouldn’t be encouraging him to do shit like that. But, in my world, there are a lot worse things a kid could be doing.

“I get better,” he tells me.

“Dante, this Josie girl. She the one from the pool house?” I ask him with a questioning brow.

“No, she’s new. But she doesn’t want to talk to me. Which is fucking weird. Every other chick in that school wants to talk to me.” He shrugs.

I shake my head and groan. “You’re a Valentino. Believe it or not, some girls don’t want to deal with what that name represents,” I remind him.

“Hmm, maybe, but it’s not like I asked her to marry me or some shit. I only asked her for one date,” he says.

“Maybe she already has a boyfriend.”

“Nope, she’s different, shy. I think I just need to get her out of her shell and then she’ll see that I’m actually a catch.”

“You’re sixteen, Dante. You have plenty of years left of dealing with girls turning you down. Get used to it. It happens.”

“Did it happen to you?” he asks me.

“My name is literally Romeo. No girl could resist that.” I smirk, silently thanking my mom for the choice. It really was a chick magnet back in the day.

“Gross. Forget I asked.”

“Go home, Dante. I’ll sort shit out with the school,” I tell him, waving a hand towards the door.

“Okay.” He gets up, slings his bag over his shoulder, and walks out.

I pick up my phone and call Matteo. Dante is right. Livvy is going to freak the fuck out when she finds out about this. I need a lawyer who can keep a level head when I go down to the school.

“Romeo, you all of a sudden not too busy for your brothers?” Matteo asks, and I ignore the comment.

“Where are you?”

“In the office. Why?”

“I need you to meet me at New York Prep, and I need you to not tell Livvy where you’re going.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Dante just got expelled for hacking into the school’s network system to find a girl’s fucking address.”

“He couldn’t just follow her home like a normal stalker would?” Matteo asks.

“That’s exactly what I said,” I groan.

“Okay, I’ll be there in twenty,” my brother says. “I can’t believe that school thought they could actually expel a Valentino.” He laughs into the phone.

“Well, they’re about to find out their mistake,” I tell him and hang up.

“OKAY, here’s what we’re going to do. We have to take the kids out for a month for this Italy trip anyway, which the school does not know about yet. So we counter their expulsion with a one-month suspension. Then, after they agree to that, we tell them the rest of the kids will be out for the month too,” Matteo says as we walk into the school’s admin building. A new fucking state-of-the-art building our family paid for, mind you.

“Sounds good.”

“Just let me do the talking,” Matteo says and I give him the side-eye.

It’s my son they expelled. I’m not going to just stand here like a fucking chump. “I’m here to see Principal George.” I smile at the reception staff.

There are two older ladies sitting behind the front desk. They look at each other before they look back at me. “Mr. Valentino, we weren’t expecting you? Did you have an appointment?” one of them asks in a quiet, timid voice.

“Do I need one?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Ah, no, I guess not,” she says. “Hold on a sec. I’ll let him know you’re here.” She glances from me to Matteo. “Both of you.” She swallows.

“George, Mr. Valentino is here to see you,” she says through the phone, one hand cupping the receiver as if it can keep me from overhearing her. “Okay.” When she sets the phone back down on the base, she looks up at me again. “You can go on through,” she says, pointing to the large wooden door to the left of the reception desk.

I don’t bother knocking. Opening the door, I stroll into the principal’s office. I look around at the luxury finishes. “Nice office,” I say, my words followed by a low whistle. “Must have cost a pretty penny.”

“Mr. Valentino, I assume you’re here about Dante,” George says while attempting to ignore my comment.

“I’m here to find out why you think you can expel my son, George?” I ask him.

The principal’s face pales. “Please, have a seat.” He motions to the chairs in front of his desk.

“Actually, this won’t take long. You know just as well as we do you can’t expel Dante. But we agree that the kid does deserve to understand the severity of his actions. We’re offering a one-month suspension,” Matteo says.

“One month?” the principal parrots. “Okay, fine, one month it is.” He sighs like he actually has a choice here.

“Glad we could come to a resolution,” Matteo says before adding, “Oh, and while we have your attention, it’s a good time to tell you that all the

currently enrolled Valentino children will be away for a month too.”

Without waiting for a reply, we walk out of his office and back out to the parking lot.

“Thanks,” I tell Matteo. If it weren’t for him being here, I probably would have lost my shit worse than my wife.

“Anytime, bro,” Matteo says, clapping a heavy hand on my shoulder.

We’re ready to jump into our respective cars when our attention is drawn to the other side of the lot, where a crowd of students is collectively screaming the word *fight*.

“Fucking hell,” Matteo curses under his breath as soon as we get a glimpse of who’s throwing fists in the center of that crowd.

“This trip to Italy can’t come soon enough,” I mumble, before my brother and I make our way over to Aurora, Dante, and Orlando to put an end to whatever shit they’ve gotten themselves into this time.

Chapter Six

Juca
Valentino

“*Y*our son is in shit again,” I tell Katy, walking into the in-home studio we have in the basement of our house.

“Why is he *my son* whenever he’s in trouble, but *your son* whenever he does anything great?” she asks me with a raised brow.

“I don’t make the rules, babe. It’s just how it works.” I lean down and capture her lips with mine. It only takes a minute before I’m pushing my tongue through the seam and exploring every inch of her mouth.

“Mmm,” Katy moans before she pulls away from the kiss. I pout, which only makes her laugh. “What has Orlando done now?” She sighs.

“Romeo and Matteo had to pull him off some kid at school this afternoon. He broke the kid’s nose and cracked a rib. Apparently, he was in a brawl with Aurora and Dante too.” I shake my head and rake a frustrated hand through my hair.

“What were they all fighting over?” she asks me.

One thing I’ll give my wife is that she’s not squeamish, which is great for a boy mom. Especially when that boy has Valentino blood running through his veins. Orlando gets himself into a lot of fights, usually having something to do with Aurora—he’s fiercely protective of his cousin.

“No idea. Romeo’s bringing him home now,” I tell her.

Katy glances at her watch. “That means you have at least fifteen minutes to help me relax before we have to deal with *your* delinquent child.”

“Yeah? And what do you have in mind?” I ask her.

Katy pushes to her feet, reaches underneath her dress, and pulls her panties down. “Well, I’m not wearing any underwear, Luca. I think you can use that imagination of yours and come up with something,” she says, sitting back down on her office chair and spreading her thighs apart.

“Mmm.” I lick my lips. “I’m going to make you sing, baby,” I say, dropping to my knees in front of her. I love hearing my wife sing, but I love hearing her screams of pleasure even more, which I tell her is the type of music she makes just for me.

“If you think you can,” she counters.

Before she can get the last word out of her mouth, my hands pull her legs open wider and my face is buried between those delicious fucking thighs of hers. My tongue slides up her slit, circling around her clit a few times before I slide it back down to her hole and push it inside.

Katy’s hands tangle in my hair. “Shit, yes,” she says, her hips lifting slightly off the chair while pushing her pussy harder into my mouth.

I glide my tongue back up to her clit and slip two fingers into her hole, sliding them in and out as I suck on her hard little bud.

“Fuck, Luca, right there,” she screams out. Seconds later, her hands rip at the strands of my hair, her thighs tighten around my head, and her juices are coating my face and hand.

I continue licking her right through her orgasm. When I feel her body relax, I look up at her face. “We still have ten minutes,” I tell her. Rising to my full height, I undo my belt and then my slacks, freeing my cock from my boxers. “Stand up, bend over that bench, and stick your ass out for me.”

She does exactly that, lifting her dress as her head turns, and she looks over her shoulder at me while biting down on her lower lip. “Eight minutes, Luca,” she says.

I line up my cock with her entrance and slam into her. “I’ll make it quick,” I tell her. When you have kids, you enjoy the occasional quickie whenever you can get it. I pump into her hard and fast. I reach a hand around her waist and find her clit, pinching it between my fingers. “I want you to come again for me, babe. Come all over my cock.”

“Fuck,” she curses under her breath as I continue to fuck her. I can feel her pussy clenching around my cock.

My balls tighten and tingles run up my spine. “Come now,” I say, pinching her clit harder. She does as she’s told, screaming so that her voice echoes off the studio walls, my name repeated over and over as her whole body shakes. I hold her up as I empty myself inside her. “Fuck me, I think we still have two minutes,” I huff out between panted breaths.

“Perfect timing. Thank you,” she says, standing up on shaky legs before she bends over, picks up her panties, and walks into the adjoining bathroom.

“I think we should leave for Italy a little early,” I call out through the bathroom door.

A moment later, Katy appears on the other side. “Why?” she asks me.

I haven’t broken the news to her that I volunteered to be my brother’s underboss yet. “I want to spend some time with you and Orlando,” I say.

“What’s going on, Luca? Why are we really going to Italy?” she asks.

“I don’t know. But Pops is handing down the baton, so to speak. Theo’s going to be the boss,” I tell her.

“So something *is* going on,” she says more to herself than to me.

“Something is definitely up with my parents. I don’t know what, though,” I admit, before adding, “And I’m going to be Theo’s underboss.”

“You’re doing what now?” She stops smoothing out her dress to pin me with a glare.

“Basically, Theo is taking over for Dad, and I’m taking over for Theo.” I shrug, like it’s not as big of a deal as it really is.

“Luca, why? Is that something you want to do?”

“I volunteered,” I tell her.

Katy appears to consider my words for a moment. “Okay, well, I guess we should go early then. Just the three of us, before everyone else gets there and chaos ensues,” she says with a definitive nod.

“You’re not mad?” I ask her.

“I’m not mad. What I am is fucking terrified, Luca. But this is your life, your family. I’m not going to try to change your mind. If this is something you really want to do, then I’ll support you however I can,” she tells me.

“You are the best fucking wife, you know that?” I say.

“I do.” She smiles up at me. “Just keep it that way, please. I want to stay a wife and not become a fucking widow. Do that and we won’t have a problem.”

“I’m not so easy to kill, babe.” I smirk.

We walk upstairs just as Romeo is pushing through the front door with Dante and Orlando in tow. The boys are only a few months apart in age.

“What the hell were you two fighting about now?” Katy beats me to the interrogation.

Orlando looks to Dante, who remains tight-lipped. Neither says a damn word.

“Seriously? Did you at least win?” she asks them.

I look at my wife and lift a brow. “Katy, babe, you really think a Valentino is gonna lose a fight?” I remind her, then turn back to the boys.

“You did win, right?”

“Zio Romeo pulled me off the asshole before I could really teach him a lesson,” Orlando grumbles.

“Orlando, language,” Katy scolds him. “What were you doing fighting anyway?”

“He deserved it, Mom,” Orlando says. “He snitched on Dante, which got him expelled. So Aurora approached him after school about it, and he called her a name I won’t repeat,” Orlando grinds out the last part.

“And then Aurora hit him. She’s the one who broke his nose,” Dante says with a grin.

“He was about to hit her back, and I wasn’t gonna let that happen,” Orlando says.

Fuck, how do you punish your kid for sticking up for his family? I know we’re not supposed to support fighting and all that shit, but he’s not wrong. That asshole kid deserved to get his ass kicked, from the sounds of it.

“Right. Okay.” Katy nods her head. “Orlando, go and pack a bag. We’re going to Italy early,” she tells him.

When he disappears up the stairs, headed to his room, Romeo instructs Dante to go wait in the car. “Why are you going early?” my twin asks me.

“Because we can?” I shrug. “You figured out what’s going on yet? With Ma and Pops?”

“No.” He shakes his head.

“You’re supposed to be the smart one, Romeo. Figure it the hell out,” I tell him.

“My kid got himself expelled from school today. I had shit to do first,” he groans.

“What’d he do?”

“Hacked the school’s network system to access admin files. Looking for a girl’s address.”

“Why didn’t he just follow her home if he wanted to know so badly?” This question comes from Katy.

“That’s what I said!” Romeo throws his hands up to emphasize his point.

I look at my wife. “Sometimes I think you should be the mobster in this marriage,” I tell her.

“Well, I would make a better one. I know how to not get shot.” She laughs.

“Burn, bro.” Romeo laughs before turning on his heel and heading towards the foyer. “Right, well, I’ll see you all in Italy,” he says, walking out the front door.

Chapter Seven

Holly
Valentino

“What do you mean they’re not conclusive?” I ask the doctor.
“Sorry, Mrs. Valentino, but we can’t find any indication as to why you’re experiencing the symptoms you’ve described.”

“Well, there has to be a reason, Doc, and the most likely one is what we’ve already discussed.”

“I know your mother’s history, and I’m aware you’ve undergone the available genetic testing. But, Mrs. Valentino, your brain scans appear normal. Your blood tests are all coming back within healthy range. It could be stress. Yes, your symptoms could definitely be related to stress and

exhaustion,” he says, eyeing my chart for a second time.

I shake my head. That’s not what’s happening. I know the confusion I’m feeling, the memory loss I’m experiencing. This is exactly how it started with my mother. I’m not stressed, tired maybe, but that’s not what this is. Maybe I need to get a second opinion.

“Honestly, Mrs. Valentino,” he continues but I barely hear him. “If there were anything that gave me the slightest indication you were headed down that road, I would tell you, immediately start you on a treatment plan, but there isn’t. I suggest trying to take it easy for a bit. Trying to relax.”

I nod my head. I think I *will* get a second opinion.

I know that something is happening to my brain, and if I’m right, I want—*need* to start treatment right away. I have to figure out a way to save my children from witnessing my deterioration from the mother they know, to a woman who they barely recognize, to one who barely recognizes *them*. I’ll never forget the first time I went to visit my mother and she didn’t know who I was.

Alzheimer’s, that’s what I have. I know it. I just need to find a doctor who can do the right tests and figure it out too.

I leave the doctor’s office and make the drive home. It passes in a blur, and by the time I arrive, I don’t even remember how I made it here. My mind is all over the damn place. Before I get out of the car, I call my sister.

“Rye, how are you?” I ask her.

“Good, you?” Reilly says, sounding distracted. I probably called her at a bad time.

“Good. We’re all going to spend a month in Italy. It’d be nice if you could come for a few days—you and the rest of the family of course.”

“To Italy? Ah, I’ll have to get back to you on that, Holly...” She mumbles something under her breath before talking into the phone again. “Shit, I gotta go. I’ll call you back later,” she says and quickly disconnects the call.

Well, that was odd. But then I remind myself that she and her husband Bray have a lot going on with their ever-expanding chain of gyms. I tuck my phone away and slide out of the car.

Walking through the house a few moments later, I find T standing in the kitchen. He’s leaning up against the counter, his ankles crossed and his hands in his pockets. He has that look on his face, the one that tells me he’s been waiting for me.

“Dolcezza, we need to talk,” he says.

“About what?” I peer up at him, doing my best to appear calm.

“You, and the reason you’re hiding doctors’ appointments from me,” he says.

Shit, I should have known he’d find out. Nothing gets past this man. “It’s nothing. If I had something to tell you, I would. You know that,” I tell him with a dismissive wave of a hand.

“Dolcezza, if you’re going to the doctor to get a shit-ton of tests done, then it’s not nothing.” He reaches out an arm and lifts my chin with a thumb, forcing me to look at him.

“I was just being precautious. That’s all.”

“Bullshit. When did we start lying to each other, Holly?” he asks me, and the question tugs at my heartstrings. I don’t want to lie to my husband. But that’s not what this is. This is me figuring out how to protect my family before I lose that ability too.

“T, I’m fine. The doctor couldn’t find anything wrong anyway,” I tell him because it’s the truth. There’s no reason for him to worry until there is something for him to worry about. “He said I need to relax, which is exactly why we’re going to Italy.”

“What were you expecting him to find?” T tilts his head as he examines me, looking for God only knows what. Likely any change in my demeanor that will give me away. This man knows me better than I know myself sometimes, and it is both endearing and infuriating depending on the circumstances.

“I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t turning out like my mother. I took the genetic test that told me I carry the gene for Alzheimer’s.” I don’t know why I’m bothering to tell him this. He already knows. It’s clear by the lack of shock on his face.

“I agree with the doctor. You need to relax, and you don’t have Alzheimer’s, Holly.”

“Then why do I feel so foggy? Why do I constantly feel like I’m forgetting something and I have no idea what that something is?”

“Dolcezza, if I thought for one second that you were showing symptoms, I’d be the first to airlift you to the most knowledgeable specialist in the world, demanding the best possible treatment. Fuck, I just made a five million dollar donation to Alzheimer’s research last week.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I did. I will do everything in my power to find a way to either slow down the disease or stop it altogether long before it touches my family,” he says.

“Some things are out of even your power, T. This isn’t something you can just fix.”

“I know that. Of course, I know that. But if—and that’s a big fucking if, Holly—if it does happen, we will deal with it together,” he says, pulling me into his arms.

“I don’t want to forget. I love our life, T, all of it. And I’m terrified I’m going to forget you, forget the kids, the grandkids,” I admit the fear that’s taken hold of me these last couple of weeks.

“Dolcezza, I’m never going to leave your side, even if you don’t know who I am. I will be there every day, reminding you how fucking loved you are, making you fall in love with me all over again,” he tells me, and I have no doubt he means every word.

“How did I get you?” I ask, trying to hold back the tears. The only thing worse than the pain I feel in my chest is the agony I see on my husband’s face whenever he witnesses me cry.

“You sat in my chair, at Helena’s café,” he reminds me.

I laugh. Because, God, that seems like a lifetime ago.

“I called Rye and invited them to Italy too. She said she’d get back to me,” I say.

“Neo and Angelica are going to be there, and Izzy and Mikhail are coming for a week.”

“Did you speak to your father?” I ask.

“I did,” my husband says.

It took a while for T to acknowledge Al as his father. But now they have a good relationship. Although my husband refuses to take the Donatello name, saying he was raised a Valentino and will die one too. He has a lot of respect for the man who raised him like his own. I wish I had the chance to meet the Don I’ve heard so much about over the years, but he was killed not long after I met T.

“And did he say we can use the estate?”

“Why do you want to use the Donatello estate instead of the Valentino estate?” T presses me.

“It’s bigger, and there’re a lot of us.” I shrug.

“We can use it.”

“Great. I have to start packing,” I tell him, stepping out of his arms.

“Or we could uninvite everyone and just go ourselves. You could walk around naked all day.”

“In front of all your soldiers?” I fire back with a questioning brow.

“What? No, I’d make them turn around, Holly,” he grunts, like that much should be obvious.

The front door bangs open, interrupting my reply, and T pulls a pistol out of the holster on his chest and walks out to the foyer. I follow behind him, only to find our granddaughter standing there, staring back at us.

“Nonno, I need a gun and Dad won’t give me one,” Tilly says, her hands planted firmly on her hips.

T tucks his sidearm away before glaring at her. “What do you need a gun for, Tilly?” he asks.

“If Romeo won’t give her one, he has a good reason, T,” I remind my husband.

“No, he just thinks that I’m a girl and can’t take care of my own business, Nonna,” Tilly huffs.

“What business?” I question her.

“I can’t tell you that.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“Tilly, what’s going on? If you want me to strap you up, I need to know why,” T says.

She chews on her lower lip. “He cheated on me, and I want to blow his fucking dick off so he can never use it again,” she says.

“Who is *he*?” T growls.

“Okay, T, I’ve got this,” I interject, glaring at my husband before stepping in front of him. “Tilly, come with me.” I take my granddaughter’s hand and lead her into the living room, where I sit her down. “You know you can’t just go and shoot someone because they cheated on you, right?” I tell her.

“The hell she can’t,” my husband grunts from behind me.

“T, you’re not helping,” I hiss at him.

“What? Anyone who makes her look like that deserves more than a blown-off dick. What’s his name, Tilly?” T asks again.

“Tilly, you’re upset and not thinking rationally. Trust me, it hurts now but it’s going to be okay. You’re not going to kill someone because they are unworthy of you. If that were the case, there wouldn’t be any men left on this planet.”

This makes her laugh. “Nonna, I thought he was the one, and then I found him with my friend Sasha.”

“Well, first of all, Sasha isn’t your friend if she did that. Second, he’s not the one, never was. Trust me, baby, when you find the one, you’ll know for sure.”

“I really liked him.”

“What’s his name, Tilly?” T asks for a third time. He’s still standing in the doorway. I can feel his eyes boring into my back as he plans this boy’s demise.

“It doesn’t matter. Nonna is right. I’m just upset,” Tilly says. “Sorry for barging in here like this.”

“You can always barge in here, Tilly,” T assures her.

“On the plus side, now you’re single and we’re going to Italy. Do you know how many gorgeous Italian men you’ll meet there?” I tell my granddaughter with a grin.

“None, that’s how many,” T grinds out.

“Heaps,” I correct him.

“Thanks, Nonna. You’re the best,” Tilly says, biting on her nails. “I gotta apologize to Dad. I might have cursed him out a bit too harshly.”

Chapter Eight

Theo
Valentino

“*B*ambolina, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you’d be this upset.” I pull my wife against my chest, my arms circling around her back, holding her tight. Afraid if I don’t, this is going to be the thing that finally has her walking away from me.

I feel like I’ve been waiting the last twenty-odd years for the moment she finally realizes I’m not good enough for her. Not that I’d ever let her go, but she could try, and that’d fucking break me.

“I’m not upset, Theo,” she says.

“You’re crying, bambolina. You know how much I fucking hate to see

you cry,” I tell her.

Tears from my wife or daughter, or any of my sisters or nieces... they're my one weakness. I can't stand seeing them. I want to dry their faces and slaughter whatever or whoever put those tears there in the first place. In this instance, it's me and I don't know how to feel about that.

I just told Maddie about my father's decision to retire, and the fact that I'm going to be instated as boss in his stead. I wasn't sure how she'd take it. I mean, we both knew this day would come eventually, but my pops is still young, more fit than most made men. He could lead this family for another twenty years if he wanted to.

“I'm just happy for you, Theo. You've worked your ass off your whole life for this moment. This is what you've been striving towards, and now you're getting it. I'm proud of you,” Maddie says.

“Thank you, but I can only do this if you're one hundred percent on board, bambolina. I don't want you to resent me for it later,” I tell her.

I don't know how I'd tell my old man I can't take the position I've been training for my whole life if my wife really doesn't want me to do it. But I'd find a way, and he'd have to understand. I'm sure he would have done the same thing for my mother. There isn't anything he wouldn't do for her.

“I want this for you. I know how much you want it too, Theo,” Maddie says. “And there is nothing that could make me resent you. I love you.”

“Thank you.” I lean down and capture her lips with mine.

“Get a room,” Liliana and Alessandro both pretend to gag as they walk into the room.

“Good idea. Bambolina, let's go. We happen to have a room in this house,” I tell her.

“Wait... Why are you both here?” Maddie asks our two offspring.

“We live here,” Alessandro says in that smart-ass tone of his, and I have the sudden urge to slap the kid upside the head.

“Yes, but it's Friday night and you're both here instead of out. Why? What's going on?”

“I need to pack for Italy,” Alessandro replies, trying to appear nonchalant. It's not working.

“Travis has a game tonight. I was gonna go but decided to leave him hanging.” Liliana shrugs.

Travis, Liliana's current boyfriend, is an NHL player. Probably why I haven't been able to scare him off yet, not that I've given it my all. Fucking

athletes are cocky little shits, and I have to tread carefully to avoid pissing off my wife.

“Can I have your ticket? I’ll go to the game,” Alessandro asks his sister.

“No.”

“What’s the point of having your sister date a hockey player if I can’t even get the good seats?” he grumbles.

“We have our own fucking box. You don’t need your sister to date the players,” I remind him.

“Yeah, but I’d rather be down near the action, front row.” My son crosses his arms over his chest in a pout reminiscent of his toddler years.

I glance to my wife. “Tag. You’re it,” I tell her.

“Nope, not it. They’re adults. They can fend for themselves. I have a hot date in my bedroom with a certain soon-to-be boss.” Maddie winks in my direction before attempting to tug me down the hall.

“Wait... Soon-to-be boss? What happened to Nonno? Is he okay?” Liliana asks, and I can see the concern written all over her face. These kids adore their grandfather. He’s tough on them, expects a lot, but he’s also their greatest advocates. He would do anything for any one of his grandchildren.

“He’s fine. He’s just retiring,” I tell her. “But that news does not leave this family.”

“Oh my god, you’re taking over as boss? Great. This is going to ruin my dating life. It was bad enough with you being the underboss, but now? No guy is gonna want to come near me, let alone date me,” she huffs.

“Huh, look at that, bambolina? Perks of the job already,” I muse.

“I’m moving to Canada.” Liliana stalks off down the hall before slamming her bedroom door.

“You could try,” I yell after her.

“Congrats, Pops. You deserve this job,” Alessandro says, then follows his sister’s path out of the room.

“Thanks, son,” I tell him, though I doubt he’s listening anymore. I turn to Maddie. “Well, now, what’s this I hear about a hot date in the bedroom?”

“Meet me there in ten minutes. Don’t be late,” she says with a grin.

On cue, ten minutes later, I walk into my bedroom and find my wife sprawled out on the bed, completely naked. I pause, letting my eyes take in all of her beauty. “Fuck, bambolina, you’re so fucking gorgeous,” I tell her.

“You’re not so bad yourself, Theo. Though you’d be better if you were naked.”

I remove my jacket, folding it in half before laying it over one of the chairs. I then undo the cufflinks on my wrists. They were a Christmas gift from Maddie ten years ago. I've worn them every day since. They are embossed with the Valentino family crest. Placing the cufflinks on the table next to the bed, I slowly undo the buttons of my shirt. Letting my eyes roam up and down my wife's body as I do.

"Come on, Theo, you can move faster than that."

"I can, but what's the rush? I have the perfect view right now. I want to enjoy it." I crane my neck to one side to take her in from a different angle.

Maddie moves, positioning herself across the bed and putting her pussy front and center to where I'm standing. Spreading her legs wide open, she slides her fingers through her glistening folds. "I need you, Theo, please," she says, sinking the first digit into her wet hole.

She removes it, sits up on her knees, and then pushes that finger into my mouth. I greedily suck it in, taking my time savoring the taste of her until I lick that finger clean of her juices. Then I close my eyes and moan around the tip.

Fuck the buttons.

I tear the shirt off and throw it to the ground. Then I make quick work of stepping out of my shoes and undoing my pants, pulling them down with my boxers in one swoop. Seconds later, I'm shoving my wife back onto the bed and covering her body with mine.

"Fuck, bambolina, you have no idea how badly I need to be inside you right now."

"Well, maybe you should show me then," she teases.

I lift her legs, placing them on my shoulders, line up my cock with her entrance, and thrust inside her. "Fuck, you're wet. Is that all for me?"

"Always, it's always you, Theo," she moans as I slide out, leaving just the tip before I slam back into her again.

Picking up the pace, I get into a rhythm, fast and hard, as I fuck her. Her body presses into the mattress and her head turns from side to side as her orgasm rises to the surface.

"That's it. Give it to me. Your orgasm is mine and I fucking want it," I tell her. Fucking her even harder, right through her climax and into the next.

My wife is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Watching her lose herself to the pleasure *I give her* fucking turns me on like nothing else. And it's not long before I'm joining her and letting go.

“Mmm, that was exactly what I needed,” Maddie hums while catching her breath.

“You are exactly what I need,” I say. After a few minutes of us silently lying here, on our bed, I turn to Maddie. “Have you spoken to my mother lately?”

“Not since dinner the other night. Why?”

“I think something’s wrong and she won’t tell me what it is,” I say.

“You worry way too much, Theo, which isn’t a bad quality. It shows how much you love your family. But you need to remember that your parents don’t keep secrets from you. If there’s something to tell, I’m sure they’ll tell you when the time is right.”

“What if it’s bad? What if one of them is sick? I mean, it’s odd that Pops is announcing his retirement now, out of nowhere.”

“They’re not going to live forever, Theo. It’s life. Everyone dies. You just need to make the most of all the todays we have with the ones we love. And it’s not odd. Your father is a smart man. He probably realizes that you deserve this, and he deserves to spend more time at home with your mom.”

“How did you get so wise?”

“Mmm, I’ve spent almost a lifetime being married to you, and you are wise far beyond your years, Theo Valentino.” She pushes up on an elbow and kisses me on the cheek. And for a moment, everything is right with the world again.

Chapter Nine

T
Valentino

I look at the reports from the doctor's office again. They're all saying that Holly is completely healthy, her brain functioning as it should be. I know my wife, though, and she's worried. If she says she's been feeling foggy and that she has a sense that she's forgetting something, then I believe her. That being said, I don't think she has what her mother had. It has to be something else. I'm really hoping this trip away will be the best thing for her. I pull out my phone and send a group message to my sons.

ME:

Someone broke Tilly's heart. I want their heart on a fucking silver platter. Find out who it is.

LUCA:

WTF. When did she even start dating?

MATTEO:

I'll be happy to rip it out and deliver it to her.

ROMEO:

Tilly is not heartbroken over the idiot. Her pride is hurt. There's a difference. And no one is killing anyone. This is a life lesson that will hopefully teach her that boys are not worth the trouble.

ME:

Romeo, what's his name?

ROMEO:

No idea, Pops.

LUCA:

I'm in Italy. Sorry. You'll have to sort this one out without me.

ME:

Luca, why are you already in Italy? We're not supposed to be there until next week.

ROMEO:

Because he's pussy-whipped.

LUCA:

What he said, and I'm not even mad about it. Katy wanted to come early.

I throw my phone down and remove myself from the message thread. Those boys will not stop. They'll be messaging back and forth for hours now.

I glance back down at my wife's medical files. I can't figure out what's going on with her, but I fucking hate that she's scared. I just want to make everything better for her, and until I know what I'm dealing with, I can't. I'm also fucking petrified of losing her. I remember how quickly Holly's mom deteriorated. I saw the devastation on my wife's face when her own mother didn't know who she was. I don't ever want to look at Holly and have her stare back at me like I'm a stranger.

I shake my head. She doesn't have it. I know that, but now that she's put the thought into my mind, I can't help but wonder if it's a matter of *when* and not *if* she will meet the same fate.

I pick up the phone and call Neo. “What’s up, boss?” he answers.

I haven’t been Neo’s boss for years now. The fact that he still calls me that makes me laugh. He knows it pisses me off. I should be the one calling him *boss*, considering he took over the Donatello side of things and oversees all the mafia families. Which technically means he’s everyone’s boss.

“Where are you?” I ask him.

“Home.”

“Meet me for a drink,” I say.

“Okay,” he replies, and then I disconnect the call. I don’t need to tell him where to go. We’ve been meeting up at the same bar since Helena closed down her café.

I pick up my keys and wallet and head out of my office. I walk through the house and find Holly in the library. It’s her favorite room in the whole estate, and this estate has a lot of fucking rooms. “Dolcezza, I’m heading out to meet Neo. Won’t be long,” I tell her, leaning down and kissing her forehead.

“Okay, have fun. Not the kind that makes you return to me covered in blood, though,” she says while giving me a glare that tells me she’s serious.

“I’ll do my best,” I say with a half smirk.

“WHY DO you look like someone murdered your cat?” Neo’s deep voice greets me, his body filling the seat next to mine at the bar.

“I don’t have a cat,” I deadpan.

“It’s a figure of speech, T. What’s going on?”

“I think something’s wrong with Holly,” I admit aloud for the first time.

“Like what kind of something?” he asks, concern marring his features.

“I don’t know. She thinks she’s developing the same thing her mother had. I don’t see it, but she went to the doctor, Neo, and then tried to hide her appointments from me.”

“She seemed fine the other day when I was around,” he says. “Is that what this whole *let’s go to Italy for a month* thing is about?”

“She’s scared she’s going to forget everyone.”

“Well, you *are* pretty forgettable,” he counters with a grin. “What do the doctors say?”

“That she’s fine. That nothing’s wrong with her.” I pick up my whiskey, staring out over the bar top as I swirl the contents around the glass.

“Okay, so let’s go with that then.” He shrugs before pushing back in his seat, like it really is that easy.

“She still thinks she’s forgetting things. She told me her brain’s foggy and she has this constant feeling that she’s missing something,” I tell him.

“Have you called Reilly? Sure Holly’s not just picking up on whatever Reilly is putting out? They do have that weird twin thing going on. We see it all the time with Luca and Romeo,” Neo reminds me.

As he says the words, a lightbulb goes off in my head. Why the fuck didn’t I think of that? It has to be something to do with Reilly. And then that feeling in the pit of my stomach hits me all at once. You know the one where your stomach drops?

Yeah, that fucking feeling.

Fuck. If it’s her twin sister, if my wife has to watch her twin sister fade like she did her mother, well, I’m not sure she could handle that. Which means I couldn’t handle it either. Because I fear that instead of watching Reilly slowly succumb to a disease that eats away at her mind, I’ll be watching it happen to both of them.

“I can’t lose her, Neo.”

“T, you’re not losing her. Even if she does develop Alzheimer’s, it’s not like it’s going to happen overnight. And there will be signs. You know that woman better than anything else. You’d know if something were going on with her.”

“You’re right. But, fuck, what if it is Reilly?”

“Then that’s a whole other ball of shit that’s going to suck. But Holly has all of us to lean on, for whatever she needs.”

“Thanks,” I tell him while clapping a hand over his shoulder.

“Anytime. Now where is this drink I was promised,” he asks me, eyeing the whiskey in my hand.

I down the remainder of my glass and wave at the bartender. Moments later, he places two more whiskeys in front of us. I’m just about to lift the glass to my lips when I hear the unmistakable voice of one of my grandchildren.

“Fucking hell, you sure do know how to breed ’em, T,” Neo says as our shared gazes land on my granddaughter.

Fucking Aurora. This girl is going to be what finally gives me a heart

attack.

“She’s fucking eighteen. How the fuck does she keep getting into these places?” I groan, as I watch her standing there with her hands on her hips and her attitude on full display. She’s yelling at someone. I can’t see who it is because her body is blocking whoever is sitting in the booth in front of her.

“She looks like her mother and has the last name Valentino—that’s how,” Neo tells me.

Pushing to my feet, I quickly throw back my drink and slam the empty glass on the bar top. “I’m going to have to take her home,” I say.

“Wait! Let me get the popcorn first. I want to watch the look on her face when she realizes you’re here.” He laughs.

As I’m making my way over to my granddaughter, whoever she was talking to decides to stand up, forcing Aurora to take a few steps back. Some fucking cocksucker, who also appears to be too young to be in a bar, towers over her. His hand comes out, but before he can make contact with her face, which is exactly what he was aiming to do, I grab his wrist. Bending it back until I hear the snap of the fucking bone breaking. The fucking asshole screams as he drops to the ground while clutching his arm to his chest.

“Aurora. Car. Now,” I tell her, holding my palm out for her to go in front of me.

“What the fuck, man? You broke my fucking wrist,” the guy on the floor cries out.

I crouch down so I’m face to face with him. “That won’t be the only fucking thing I break if I ever see you near my granddaughter again,” I tell him. Then, rising back to my full height, I straighten my jacket and follow Aurora out of the bar. Neo lifts his glass at me as we pass.

He was the fucking smart one between the two of us. He and his wife only have Izzy to worry about. One child who only produced two grandchildren. Not the fucking circus I’ve somehow managed to find myself at the center of.

I climb into the waiting SUV after Aurora has already slid into her seat. I don’t say anything. I know if I wait her out, she’ll talk. It only takes five minutes.

“Can we not tell my parents about this?” she huffs.

“What were you doing in that bar, Aurora?” I ask her.

“I was handling something. I didn’t need you to step in, by the way.”

“That fucker was about to hit you,” I tell her.

“I know. I wanted him to,” she says.

“You what? Why the fuck would you want a guy to hit you?”

“Because then I would have been justified in stabbing him. Self-defense. If they hit first, I’m just a helpless little girl who was scared and defended herself with the first thing I could find. And I really wanted to fucking stab the asshole.”

“Why? What’d he do that made you want to stab him?” I ask her. I actually can’t fault her logic. I don’t fucking agree with it, and if the fucker did manage to hit her, he wouldn’t just have a broken wrist. He’d have a broken neck and a shallow fucking grave.

“He hurt someone I know, cheated on her,” Aurora says.

“Who?”

“I can’t say. I’ve been sworn to secrecy. And you wouldn’t want me to break my word, now would you, Nonno? A Valentino is only as good as their word,” she reminds me.

Fuck, this girl is good.

“Fine. Don’t tell me.” I’ll find out anyway. I send a message to Neo.

ME:

Find out who that asshole is: name, address, and who he’s dating... or was dating.

NEO:

On it, boss.

I roll my eyes at the title and tuck my phone into my pocket again. Ten minutes later, my driver pulls up to Matteo and Savannah’s house.

“I got it from here. Thanks for the ride, Nonno.” Aurora leans over and kisses my cheek.

“Nice try, sweetheart. I’m coming in,” I tell her.

“Argh, they’re going to ground me for life,” she groans.

“Good. They need to,” I say, leading Aurora up the front steps before opening the door to the house. “Matteo, Savvy, I’m returning one of your demons,” I yell out.

“In the kitchen,” Savvy yells back. I walk in that direction and find Savvy and Lorenzo seated at the table.

Chapter Ten

Matteo
Valentino

I walk into my house, through the garage door that leads into the kitchen, only to find utter fucking chaos waiting for me inside. Really, I should be used to it by now. I swear all my children inherited the best parts of me and my wife. As a result, they're all strong fucking headed.

"What the fuck is going on?" I ask, raising my voice above the screaming coming from Aurora and Lorenzo. Savvy and my dad are both standing off to one side, just watching the two siblings go at it.

"Your daughter was trying to provoke some asshole to hit her in a bar, so she could stab him and make it look like self-defense," my dad says, lifting

one eyebrow at me in unspoken question.

I smile briefly. *Smart kid*. And then his words sink in...

“Someone hit her?” I storm up to my daughter. I turn her face in my direction, inspecting every inch of her skin. There’s not a mark on her. Unfortunately, Aurora looks just like her mother. Fucking beautiful. Which means not only does she look older than her eighteen years, she also attracts the attention of fucking guys everywhere. “What were you doing at a bar? We talked about this,” I ask her, letting go of her face now that I’m satisfied that she hasn’t actually been hit.

“I broke the guy’s wrist before he made contact,” Pops says.

“Nice one.” I nod at him before turning back to my daughter. “Aurora, what were you doing at a bar?”

“All right, this is on you to handle.” My dad points to me while muttering under his breath, “I’m too old for this shit.” He rakes an exhausted hand through his hair, then gestures to Aurora and Lorenzo. “Rein your shit in, you two. If you fuck up this Italy trip for your grandmother, there will be hell to pay. Hear me?”

I smile. It’s the same way he used to threaten me and my brothers when we were kids. Never really worked back then either. He might be the ruthless Don to everyone else. But to us, he’s just Dad and Granddad.

I wait for Pops to walk out of the door. Savvy and I have a different method of parenting, one that really doesn’t seem to be working too well at the moment. We’ve never given our children strict rules, wanting them to learn from their own mistakes and think for themselves.

“Aurora, I’m waiting for an answer.” My glare lands on my daughter.

“I wanted to hurt him, because he hurt one of my friends,” she says.

“Which friend?” Lorenzo asks her.

“I can’t say. I swore I wouldn’t tell. Please, just... I was trying to make him hurt—that’s all,” Aurora says with those doe eyes of hers.

“I get why you did it, but you need to stop putting yourself in these situations, Aurora. You’re eighteen. You shouldn’t even be in any bars,” I remind her.

“I was only there because I knew *he* would be. It wasn’t like I was drinking,” she says.

“Again, you’re eighteen. You shouldn’t be drinking at all anywhere.” I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at her.

“I’ll be the legal drinking age in Italy,” Aurora says with a smirk that tells

me she knows she's being a smart-ass.

"I can leave you home," I counter.

"Nope, Nonna wants all of us there," she says.

"Aurora, I get why you would want to hurt someone who hurt your friend, but two wrongs do not make a right," Savvy chimes in.

This is the one thing my wife and I disagree on. Two wrongs can most certainly make a right in my world. I won't say that in front of the kids, though. We do not undermine each other when it comes to parenting, a united front and all that.

"Ma, an eye for an eye," Aurora says.

"Still doesn't make it right. I don't want you leaving this house until we go to Italy." My wife's voice has sobered to that no-nonsense tone, the one that tells us all there is no counterargument worth making.

"That's a whole week away." Aurora pouts.

"Sucks to be you," Lorenzo sings in his sister's direction. "I'm out. I got shit to do." He leans in and kisses Savvy on the cheek, and then me.

"Wait! Where's your brother?" I call out before he makes it to the door.

"No idea. Probably warming some nameless chick's bed." Lorenzo laughs.

"OMG, Matteo, I blame you." Savvy throws her hands up in the air.

"Me? What'd I do?" I ask her.

"Can I leave now?" Aurora whines.

"To your room, yes," I remind my daughter.

"Ugh, I hate my life," she yells as she stomps her heels on my fucking marble floors.

"This is your fault, you know," my wife continues as soon as Aurora is out of earshot. "They are carbon copies of just how you were at their ages."

"Ah, no, I was not that bad." At least I don't think I was? I scratch my head. It feels like it was a lifetime ago, honestly.

"Matteo, you've been my best friend since the age of six. I know exactly what you were getting up to," Savvy says.

"I did shit to pass the time until you came to your senses and agreed to marry me." I smirk. "By the way, you are looking mighty fine today, Mrs. Valentino," I tell her, moving my eyes up and down her body.

"Stop distracting me with sex," Savvy huffs. "It's how we ended up with three kids."

"Those kids are amazing. They're going to do great things." I step

forward, locking my sights on the woman who is my everything.

“They will. But I just hope they don’t kill us from worry in the process. Your father was right. Aurora needs to rein it in, Matteo,” Savvy says, peering up at me when I take another step closer.

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Good, because I have no idea what to say to her. She can’t keep getting into fights. She’s going to start something she can’t finish one day.”

I take note of the concern on my wife’s face as I tug her to my chest. “I taught that girl how to fight. She will always be able to finish them,” I tell Savvy. To which, she rolls her eyes at me.

“Matteo, I’m serious. She might act tough and all, but what if she does actually kill someone one day? I’m not sure she could live with that kind of guilt.”

“I’ll go talk to her, but I want you naked and in our bed when I finish.” I grin. It’s an incentive for both of us and Savvy knows it.

“I’ll see what I can do.” She winks, and it takes everything in me to release my wife and go handle my daughter.

I walk up the stairs, knocking on Aurora’s door before turning the handle. I find her sitting on her bed, tears running down her face.

Oh, fuck. Nope. I can’t do the tears. My chest fucking hurts when I see my little girl cry—my heart literally feels like it’s being ripped in two.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I ask her.

“Nothing,” she says, wiping at her face.

I sit next to her on the bed and wrap an arm around her shoulder, pulling her into my chest. “Something is wrong or you wouldn’t be crying and breaking my heart right now,” I tell her.

“Sorry, Dad,” she says.

“What happened?”

Aurora sits up, wipes at her face again, and looks me dead in the eye. “I keep fucking up, even though I’m just trying to do the right thing,” she says.

“You know, not everyone’s problems are yours to fix.”

“It was Tilly. But you can’t tell anyone, Dad. I promised her I wouldn’t say who he was.”

“What was Tilly?” I attempt to clarify.

“The guy at the bar. He cheated on Tilly and she was crying. I just wanted to hurt him like he hurt her, but worse...” Aurora’s top lip curls when she says the last part, and I see her mother’s fire staring back at me.

“And that’s admirable of you. But don’t tell your mom I said that. I’ll deny it,” I say, and Aurora laughs. “Baby, I get why you did it, but what would have happened if he hurt you? If he hit you?”

“I would have stabbed him in his dick,” she replies with all seriousness.

“Did Tilly know about your little revenge plan?” I ask her.

“No.”

“Sometimes, when people cry on our shoulders, that’s all they want from us, Aurora. A shoulder to cry on and an ear to listen.”

“You know, everyone says Zio Romeo is the smart one, but I think it’s you, Dad. You’re way smarter.” She smiles up at me.

“And you’re still grounded.” I kiss her on the forehead.

“Argh, can’t we just go to Italy tomorrow? Zio Luca is already there. Dante’s been sending me pictures,” she says.

“We’re leaving Friday. Pack light. The jet can only hold so much weight,” I tell her, kissing her forehead a second time before I push to my feet. “You going to be okay?”

“Yep, thanks, Dad.”

“Not sure I did anything, but you’re welcome.”

“You don’t have to do anything in particular. I’m just thankful you’re my dad,” she says.

“Don’t tell your brothers, but you’ve always been my favorite.” I wink.

“Oh, I know.” She smirks.

By the time I leave her room, Aurora’s face is dry and it doesn’t look like the tears will return. I walk into my own bedroom and find Savvy exactly where I wanted her. On our bed, except she isn’t naked.

“Why aren’t you naked?” I ask aloud.

“Come here. Check this out. I’m looking at fabrics for the Italy house,” she says.

I turn my head back towards the door. Maybe Aurora still needs me. I’d much rather deal with my devil spawn than be forced to look at fabric swatches.

Chapter Eleven

Holly
Valentino

“Do we have to be on the same flight with them?” T asks me for the tenth time as the car pulls up to our private hangar.

“Yes, they’re your children and grandchildren, T,” I tell him, and he groans.

“They’re headaches is what they are.” Then he steps out of the car and does his little check of the area before he walks around and opens my door. It’s a habit of his—one I indulge him with because listening to the lectures about safety isn’t worth it. I’m also used to it by now.

“They could have taken another jet. Fuck, I could have bought them their

own, Holly,” he grumbles.

I shake my head and laugh. As much as he might complain, my husband loves our family. And I do agree with him. Right now, our grandchildren *are* headaches. It was easier when they were little. They weren’t getting into half as much trouble back then. I actually think they get into more trouble than their parents ever did. I know my sons were no angels, but I don’t remember having nearly as many phone calls when my boys were young. Well, with the exception of Luca getting shot a few times and Romeo ending up in jail.

That all seems like a lifetime ago, though.

We walk up to the jet. Matteo and Savvy are already here, along with Lorenzo, Enzo, and Aurora. “Hey, everyone excited?” I ask them.

“So excited, Nonna. Can’t wait to spend a whole month in Italy,” my granddaughter says.

“I can’t tell if that was sarcasm or not, Aurora, but I’ll take it.” I smile.

“Here, Nonna, I’ll get you a drink,” Lorenzo offers. Standing up, he walks to the back of the plane where the galley kitchen is kept, while I lower myself onto the seat across from Savvy and Matteo. Savvy has a folder full of fabric and color samples open on her lap.

“Couldn’t stop working?” I ask her.

“Oh, this isn’t for a client. It’s for us,” she says. “You know that house we bought in Italy?”

“Yeah, you’re redoing it?”

“Yep, Lucy is going to come over and manage most of the reno for me, though,” Savvy tells me.

“Oh, that’s nice. Is she bringing the family?” I ask as Lorenzo appears in front of us with two glasses of champagne, handing one to me and one to his mother.

“I think so. She said something about Dom and Kyla coming along too,” Savvy says.

“Kyla’s going to be in Italy?” Lorenzo chimes in.

“Not for you, she isn’t,” Matteo says, as T laughs and shakes his head.

“I think so,” Savvy replies.

“Great,” Lorenzo grunts. He walks away, choosing a seat in the back of the plane.

“Anyone know where Romeo is?” T asks.

“Right here, Pops. Sorry we’re late. It was Matilda’s fault,” he says with a heaved breath, clearly having rushed up the jet stairs.

“Oh, shit, he full-named her. She must be in trouble.” This comes from Enzo, who’s seated next to his brother.

“It was not my fault, Nonno. Daddy wouldn’t let me bring all the things I needed,” Tilly huffs.

“She packed ten fucking suitcases,” Romeo grunts, and Tilly stomps her foot in protest.

“It’s a whole month! I need stuff!”

“Don’t worry, Tilly, I’ll buy you whatever you need once we’re there,” T tells her.

“Thanks, Nonno. I knew you’d understand,” she says before moving to sit next to Aurora.

“Whatever gets this plane up in the air and us to Italy without all the yelling,” T mumbles to himself.

“I’m sorry we’re late,” Livvy adds a moment later.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. Come sit here.” I pat the seat next to mine.

Out of all my daughters-in-law, Livvy is the shy one, the most withdrawn. But she’s also the one I can discuss books with and not bore her to death. Don’t get me wrong, I love Savannah just as much. She has always been like a daughter to me and has a special place in my heart. I watched her grow up alongside Matteo. Their love is on a whole other level. I just have different kinds of relationships with each of the girls.

“Mr. Valentino, we’re set for takeoff in ten minutes,” the pilot announces as he steps out of the cockpit to address my husband.

“Thanks, Milo.” T nods at him.

Romeo fills the seat next to Savvy, in front of Livvy, while Dante walks across the aisle to the back of the plane and plops down next to Lorenzo and Enzo with a laptop in hand. I don’t think I see that kid go many places without that computer.

I WAKE with a start and find myself lying on the bed. This jet has one bedroom in the back, though I don’t remember coming in here. As soon as I sit upright on the mattress, that feeling washes over me. How did I get here? Do I not remember getting up and coming to bed?

I shake my head. *Think, Holly.*

I recall sitting and chatting with Livvy, and then feeling tired. But I don't remember actually getting up...

The door opens. I see T entering the room and I can't help the tears that come spilling down my cheeks. "What the fuck?" he grunts. "Dolcezza, what's wrong?"

"I can't remember, T," I tell him.

"You can't remember what?" he asks, scooping me up and holding me against his chest.

"I can't remember coming in here to lie down. It's started, hasn't it?"

"Oh, dolcezza, no. You fell asleep in your seat. I picked you up and brought you back here to rest. You don't remember because you were sleeping."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I would never lie to you, dolcezza," he says.

"I know. I'm sorry. I just woke up and panicked."

"Have you spoken to your sister?" he asks me.

"Not since I called her the other day. She was meant to call me back but hasn't yet."

"Do you think that maybe the confusion you've been feeling has something to do with her?"

"I didn't think of that... but maybe. Though I'm sure she'd tell me if something were wrong, wouldn't she?"

"Have you told her how you're feeling?"

"No, I didn't want to worry her," I say. T raises an eyebrow at me in question. "Okay, I get your point. I'll call her again when we land."

"Whatever it is, we'll figure it out. Together," T tells me while wiping his thumb under each of my eyes. "I'm going to get you some water. Wait here."

I know I can't go out there looking like I've just been crying. Everyone will insist on knowing why, and the last thing I want to do is start this trip on a negative note.

A moment later, T walks back into the room with a bottle of water and a plate of fruit. Closing the door behind him, he sits next to me on the bed and switches on the television. "What do you want to watch?" he asks me.

"Mmm, you pick. I don't know. Maybe a rom-com?"

T silently scrolls through the menu and lands on one of my favorite movies, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. It's an oldie but a goodie. I settle into his side

and get comfortable as I send up a silent prayer that I will always remember this moment and every other moment I've ever shared with this man. I love my husband. I couldn't imagine not knowing who he is, not remembering this amazing life he's given me.

Then my mind drifts to my sister. *Could it be her?*

I don't want it to be her. I can't lose her any more than I can lose myself. But T's right in bringing up the possibility. Reilly did seem strange the last time I spoke to her. Usually my twin would jump at the chance to come to Italy with us. This time, though, it was like she wanted to say no but didn't know how to tell me.

Chapter Twelve

Lorenzo
Valentina

I pull my phone out and check it for the millionth time. She still hasn't responded. I can see that she's read my message, which means she's just ignoring me.

ME:

You're coming to Italy???

That's all I sent, a simple question. Then again, she's been ignoring most of my messages over the last few weeks, ever since I left Australia. We were there to celebrate my birthday. I might have given her more than she

bargained for that night. But she wanted it, just as much as I did.

I want to send her another message. I want to know why she's trying to force distance between us all of a sudden. We've always been close. As soon as we got our first phones as kids, we messaged each other constantly. I refuse to believe that one night has fucked up our entire friendship. I won't allow it. Lucky for her, I'm fucking patient. I'll wait her out. If my mom has her facts right, Kyla McKinley will be in Italy. And not only will she be there, but she'll also be staying at our house. She won't be able to hide from me then.

I watch my nonno open the door to the bedroom where my grandmother is sleeping, while his words have me out of my seat and heading for the door. I don't think anyone else heard him, but I sure as fuck did. If something is wrong with Nonna, I want to know what it is. I press my ear to the closed door, not giving a damn about who sees me snooping, and can just make out the exchange on the other side of the wall.

"I can't remember, T," my grandmother says.

"You can't remember what?" Nonno replies.

"I can't remember coming in here to lie down. It's started, hasn't it?" she asks him.

My mind is whirling. What the fuck is going on? I pull out my phone and send a message to my dad. Thank god for the Wi-Fi on this jet.

ME:

Pops, meet me in the kitchen. Alone.

I watch as he looks down at his phone, then his head lifts and he makes eye contact with me. I nod to the kitchen and turn around.

"What's up?" he asks, popping up beside me a moment later.

"What's wrong with Nonna?" I question him.

My father's brows draw down, and then I see the worry creeping across his face. My father is usually really good at masking his expressions, just like my grandfather and all of my uncles. It's part of the life. Right now, though, he's not hiding it.

"What do you mean?"

"I just overheard her, in the bedroom, talking to Nonno. She was crying. She said something about not remembering and mentioned that it's started. What's started, Pops?"

My dad's face falls, like something has finally clicked into place, and

he's bothered by whatever it is he sees. "I don't know, Lorenzo. I'm sure it's nothing. She probably had a nightmare or something. You kids haven't exactly been easy on the family lately. Especially your sister," he tells me.

I don't believe him, but I'll drop it for now. "I'll keep a closer eye on Aurora, keep her out of trouble." I nod to reiterate my point.

Dad sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "That's not your job, Lorenzo. It's mine. Maybe I've been spending too much time at the office? I might talk to Livvy about hiring another attorney and cutting back on my hours."

"It's not because you work, Pops. It's because she's stubborn and wants to grow up before her time. She usually has good intentions. She's a good kid at heart. She just has a lot to learn," I tell him.

"I know she does and is. She reminds me a lot of Izzy. She was just as crazy at Aurora's age."

Izzy is my dad's cousin, our second cousin, and she's still *just as crazy* if you ask me. "Well, she turned out all right." I shrug.

"She married a fucking Russian, Lorenzo. She could have turned out better," Dad grunts. Although I know he and Mikhail, Izzy's husband, are friends now, there was no love lost between them at the start.

"Okay, but if there *was* something going on with Nonna, you'd tell me, right?"

"If there were anything to tell you, I would. You overheard an exchange that could be anything, Lorenzo. Ma's fine," he assures me before adding, "She has to be."

My phone dings with an incoming message. I'm quick to pull the device out of my pocket. It could be Kyla finally replying to my text.

Fucking hell, she has me acting like a goddamn schoolgirl waiting for the jock to pay her some attention. I'm used to those roles being reversed. This is bullshit.

When I read her message, though, fuck... My knuckles turn white as I grip the phone.

KYLA:

I am coming with Mom and my new BF... Are you going to be at the house or your grandparents' estate?

BF? What the fuck?

I see fucking red. Who does she think she is, bringing a boyfriend to my

house? Weeks after what we did. If it were anyone else, I wouldn't care. I wouldn't give a shit who a girl fucked after me. But not Kyla. She's different. She's always been different.

My dad looks at the message I'm still staring at on my screen. "Oh, fuck," he curses under his breath. And then his hand lands on my shoulder. "Son, do not do anything stupid. For the love of God, find a nice Italian girl or something. This... is a mess you don't want showing up on your doorstep," he says, pointing to the text.

"I'm going to fucking slit his throat and drop the fucker's corpse at her feet. Maybe then she'll think twice about trying to parade her boyfriends around right in front of my fucking face," I grind out so hard I can nearly taste blood in my mouth.

"No, that is exactly what you're *not* going to do," Pops says, a finger aimed in my direction.

"What if it were Ma? Would you have let her bring other guys around you?" I ask him.

"I did, for many years. Your mother and I both dated other people while I was waiting for her to get on board with the idea of us being together," he tells me.

"So, how did you not kill 'em all? And how'd you get her to finally give in to being with you?"

"I didn't kill 'em because I knew it would upset her, and the last thing I ever wanted to do was upset your mother. And you already know how we ended up together. We've never hid that story from you kids. I took her to Vegas. We got drunk and got married." He smiles proudly.

"So, I should take Kyla to Vegas, then?" I say while trying to figure out a way to do just that. I mean, she can't have some boyfriend hanging around if she's married to me, now, can she?

"No, you should find yourself a girl without a crazy psychopath for a father."

"Dominic McKinley isn't a psychopath," I'm quick to counter, then add, "Well, maybe he is, but you can't hold that against his kids. They're not like him."

Kyla certainly isn't. She's the sweetest girl I know. Although, right now, I admit I want to wrap my hands around her pretty little neck and squeeze.

A fucking boyfriend!

Chapter Thirteen

Theo
Valentino

“*F*uck, it’s hot here,” Alessandro curses as we exit the jet.
I slap him over the back of the head. “Language,” I warn him.
“What’d I say?” he questions.
“You know what you said, son,” I tell him.
“And you do know I’m twenty-three, not *three*?” he fires back.
“Alessandro, you will never be too old for me to put you on your ass. Have some goddamn fucking respect for your mother and stop cursing in front of her.” I shoot a glare in his direction.
His eyes widen. “Sorry, Ma,” he apologizes to Maddie.

“It’s fine. Theo, can we get in the car now? It is freaking hot out here,” my wife says.

“I’m sweating my tits off. God, this summer is going to be hell,” Liliana, my not so graceful daughter, announces for all the world to hear.

I look at Maddie. “How the fuck did we produce such heathens?” I ask her.

“They get it from your side of the family.” She smirks.

“Probably. They sure as fuck don’t get it from you. You’re fucking perfect,” I say, holding the car door open for her.

“Gross, and why is it you can curse but I can’t?” Alessandro huffs.

“I’m not her son.” I smile.

Once we’re all in the back of the car, I reach for Maddie’s hand. We took a separate jet. The last thing I wanted was to spend hours stuck in the air with everyone else, especially with a whole month of their bullshit ahead of us.

“What are we going to do for a month?” Liliana asks, as if reading my mind.

“Spend time with your grandmother,” I tell her. “It’s what she wants.”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll take her shopping and to lunch. Oh, Ma, we could take her to that gallery we found last year,” Liliana suggests.

“That’s a good idea. Let’s do that,” Maddie agrees.

I look at my daughter. I couldn’t be prouder of my children, even if they are *heathens* at times. Right now, though, Liliana is showing just how sweet she is. She’s caring, loyal, and has a heart of gold. If only her choice in men were better... or nonexistent...

“Travis is going to try to visit. They have an off weekend in a couple of weeks,” she says, ruining the whole sweet image of her I just had in my head.

Yeah, nonexistent would be great right now.

“He wasn’t invited,” I grunt.

Maddie scowls at me. “Yes, he was. If Liliana wants Travis to visit, then he will and you will refrain from threatening to shoot him.”

“Fine, I won’t shoot him. I won’t have to. Alessandro can do it for me—he’s twenty-three in case you haven’t heard,” I say, eyeing my son with a raised brow.

“Sure, but nowhere important. I need him to win the Cup, Pops.” He shrugs. Alessandro is a huge hockey fan, and my daughter’s current boyfriend just happens to be an NHL player.

“You know, you could just go and get a girlfriend, so you have your own

life to worry about, instead of interfering in mine,” Liliana tells her brother.

“Why the f... *freak* would I want a girlfriend when I can have a new pus—shit, a new woman every night?” Alessandro says, trying his best to censor himself before I have to.

Good on him, because I was getting ready to slap him again.

“He gets that from you,” Maddie tells me.

“Me? If I recall correctly, I spent weeks following your ass around, trying to get you to give me the time of day.”

“More accurately, you stalked me, and then decided I was yours,” my wife tries to remind me.

“Well, was I wrong?” I smirk.

“No, you weren’t. Still, before you met me, you were just like he is now,” Maddie says.

“No, I wasn’t,” I insist, but she’s not wrong. I really was.

The car pulls into the Donatello estate a few minutes later, and we all pile out. “I’m going to find a room before everyone else gets here,” Liliana declares as she disappears into the house.

This property is huge. The house itself has twenty bedrooms. It’s a former palace that has been in the Donatello family for generations. So I’m honestly not sure what my daughter’s rush is. There is no bad choice when it comes to guest rooms.

Then again, maybe Liliana has a point...

I take Maddie’s hand and tug her towards the entrance. “Come on, I want that room in the west, away from everyone else,” I say, leading my wife in the direction of the bedroom I always choose when I visit.

“When’s the ceremony?” Maddie asks as soon as we enter the room. She means the handover between my father and me, the one where I officially take over the Valentino family and he steps down. Even thinking about it feels otherworldly, if I’m honest.

“I’m not sure. It’ll be this month sometime, over at the Valentino estate,” I tell her.

“And this is a men only event, right? Made men only?”

“Yes,” I tell her.

“Can you record it for me so I can watch?” she asks.

I tilt my head at my wife. “Are you going to tell me you’re wearing a wire next? What the fuck, Maddie? Record it? Really?” I’m not sure whether I should laugh or test her sanity.

“It was worth a shot. I just want to see you in your moment,” she says with that smile that somehow lights up a room. And I find myself melting instantly.

“It’s really nothing all that special, bambolina. It’s just a promotion.”

“A promotion from crown prince to crown *king*. That’s a big deal, Theo.”

“If I’m king, that makes you the queen, *mia regina*,” I say.

“I’m anything you want me to be.” She peers up at me through her fluttering lashes.

“Anything, huh?” I ask, pulling back to look her up and down.

“Anything,” she repeats.

“Well, now, that’s something I can have fun with.” I wrap an arm around her back and tug her up against me. Just as my mouth lands on hers, the bedroom door bursts open. I shove Maddie behind me, ready to draw my nine from my back, when Matteo and Romeo walk in.

“We need to talk,” Matteo says, then looks to my wife. “Sorry, Maddie.”

“Right, well, I guess the whole gang’s here. I’m going to go see Savvy and Livvy.” Maddie steps around me.

I wait for her to leave the room before I look at my brothers. “Really? If this whole month is going to be nothing but a cock-block fest, I’m going home and taking my wife with me. You guys can keep the kids, though.”

“What the fuck is going on with the offspring lately? It’s like they’ve all lost their damn minds.” Romeo shakes his head. Clearly, my brother feels my pain.

“Liliana is dating a fucking NHL player,” I tell them. I mean, that’s explanation enough. *A fucking NHL player*. Might as well get my shovel ready. Those professional athletes are all a bunch of fuck boys. Just ask my brother, Luca. He used to be one.

“Oh, yeah, Travis. She introduced me to him at one of the games I attended with her,” Matteo says. “He’s actually pretty good on the ice.”

“He’s a fucking asshole is what he is,” I grumble.

“He’s actually not,” Matteo fires back, though I’m not sure why he’s defending the fucker.

“Is there a reason you’re busting in here?” I ask, changing the subject because *fuck him*.

“Yes, something is wrong with Ma,” Matteo says, getting my attention.

“What do you mean?”

“Lorenzo overheard her and Pops on the plane. They were discussing

something about her not being able to remember things,” Matteo tells me.

“Do you think she has Alzheimer’s like Nan had?” Romeo asks.

“No.” I quickly shut down that idea. “Lorenzo might have misheard them. Ma is fine. She hasn’t been acting like Nan did. I would have noticed.”

“What if it’s just the start? We saw Nan towards the end. We didn’t see her much when it first started,” Romeo reminds me.

“Fuck. Really? You think that’s what this whole trip is about? Why Pops is suddenly retiring? Fuck.” I run my hands through my hair.

I cannot lose my mother. I’m not ready. I know I will eventually. I know how life works. I’m not naïve to it. But not yet. I walk over to the bar and pour a glass of Cinque De Bellis. It’s the best fucking whiskey money can buy, and I just happen to know the owners—they’re business associates. I made sure to have a shit-ton delivered to the estate before I arrived.

“She said she wanted the memories,” Romeo says, his eyes flicking to the ground before he looks back up at me. “Fuck. We can’t lose her like Nan. That was fucked up. She didn’t even know who we were.”

“I know.”

The door opens and Luca walks in. “Why do you all look like someone just died?” he asks.

I can’t help the rage that overcomes me. “Fuck!” I scream out, throwing the empty crystal glass against the wall and watching it shatter to the ground.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Luca looks to Romeo. “No.” He shakes his head. They have that weird twin thing going on. They have full-on conversations without ever having to say a word.

“Lorenzo overheard a conversation between Ma and Pops on the plane about her not remembering things,” Romeo explains aloud.

“Ma is fine. I just saw her. She was fine,” Luca repeats.

“We think it’s just starting. I don’t know. Maybe some of the symptoms and signs are there, and they’re just not telling us yet,” I say.

“Like Nan?” Luca asks, and I nod. “No. She can’t. I mean, we can’t. I can’t. No. Just no,” Luca says. “We’ll find a way to fix it. Romeo, you’re the smart one. Use that brain you’re always bragging about and find a fucking cure.”

“I’m not a miracle worker. Fuck, I’m a mayor. I’m not even a doctor, Luc,” Romeo huffs.

“You should have gone to med school,” Luca tells him. “We need to hire people, get them to come up with a new medication or something.” Luca

looks around the room. He's pacing now.

Something clicks as I watch him walk back and forth. I remember the transaction I saw come out of the family trusts a few weeks ago. I dig my laptop out of my bag and log into the account.

"Look at this. Pops made a five million dollar donation to Alzheimer's research. I saw the transaction but didn't think anything of it. They're always donating to some charity or another," I say, staring at the screen.

"If this is happening, then we need to make sure this is the best fucking month our mother has ever had. If they're not telling us, it's because she doesn't want us to know. So we have to carry on like we don't know shit," Matteo says.

"I agree," I tell him.

"Yep," the twins say at the same time.

"We also need to make sure the kids don't cause fucking havoc and get them all to spend as much time with Ma as possible," Romeo adds.

I don't cry. I'm not a fucking crier, but right now, the thought of losing my mom... I want to break down and let it out. I won't though. Instead, I straighten my shoulders and hold it all fucking inside. Like I always do.

Chapter Fourteen

*Juca
Valentino*

I refuse to believe that anything is wrong with my ma. Call it denial. Call it whatever you want. But I'm not ready to lose her, for her to not be here. My mother is the backbone of this whole fucking family. Without her, we're all just going to crumble.

Pops might be the boss, but he's going to be lost without Ma. I don't think I've ever known them to even spend a single night apart. Fuck, he's going to lose his shit if this is true... How he's managing to keep it together in front of us all so far is a miracle.

Maybe whatever Lorenzo overheard isn't what we're all jumping to

conclusions about. It could be totally unrelated and just a huge misunderstanding. But we can't exactly go up to our parents and say: *Hey, so, does Ma have Alzheimer's?*

I walk out to the patio. My mother is sitting on a pool lounge, reading a book and sipping a cocktail. Pops is next to her, his MacBook open on his lap.

"I thought this was a vacation, Pops. You working?" I ask him.

"It's a working vacation," he grunts.

"Right... So, Ma, Orlando produced his first song. Wanna hear it?" I ask her. She's always loved hearing my son sing. He has a great voice, a talent he inherited from his mother.

"When did he record it? I didn't know he was recording a song. Did I?" she asks me and then looks at Pops with a worried expression on her face.

"No, we didn't know. Play the song, Luca," Pops says. Picking up my mother's hand, he kisses the back of her wrist.

"He didn't want to tell anyone until it was live. But, well, now it's out in the world, so everyone is going to hear it," I say, pulling the song up on my phone and pressing play. As my mom listens to Orlando sing, tears form in her eyes. "Why are you sad?" I ask her.

"It's his first song, Luca. I'm not sad. I'm happy for him," she tells me.

"Oh, right. Okay. I thought we could do breakfast tomorrow, at that little café down the road—the one you like. Just the two of us?"

Her face lights up. "Sure, I'd love that."

"It's a date." I smile. "Seven thirty sharp, don't be late," I tell her before pushing to my feet and swiping up my phone from the lounge.

"It's a date," she repeats. When I walk away, I hear her whisper to Pops, "Make sure I don't forget breakfast, T."

Fuck. Why would she need him to remind her of something happening as soon as tomorrow morning? The more I think about it, the more it looks like there *is* something going on.

I walk back into the house, my mind whirling with the possibility that my mother will end up just like Nan did. I can't do it. Anyone but her.

I can't lose my mom, I tell myself. I tell the world. I tell anyone who will listen.

I walk into the bedroom Katy and I claimed when we first arrived and close the door. I make it to the bathroom before I collapse onto the ground. My chest heaves as I try to force air into my lungs. Fuck, I know what's

happening, but I can't stop it. I haven't had a panic attack since I was a kid. What the fuck? I grab at my hair as pure dread takes over my whole body.

My phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket with a shaky hand. I see Romeo's name on the screen. I slide the green bar across to answer the call, though I can't find the words to speak.

"Luc? You in your room?" he asks me.

"B... bathroom," I get out.

"On my way. Fucking breathe, Luc," he says. I hear his heavy footsteps coming down the hall. He's running. Moments later, the bathroom door swings open. "Fuck," Romeo curses before shutting the door and locking it.

We never told anyone about these little episodes when we were kids. They started when we were fourteen. I haven't had one since we were eighteen. For four years, Romeo kept this secret. He'd always know when I was having an attack, and he'd always find me and manage to calm me down.

"Luc, breathe with me. It's okay," he says. "I'm right here." Romeo sits in front of me on the bathroom floor. His hands grip each side of my face, forcing my eyes to meet his. "It's going to be okay. I've got you."

"I can't..." I grit out before heaving in a lungful of air.

"You can," Romeo says. "Breathe in. Breathe out."

I try to follow his instructions. I attempt to breathe in and out when he tells me to. I'm not sure how long we sit like this, but eventually, my breathing returns to normal.

Romeo doesn't let go of me, though. His hand wraps around the back of my neck, and his forehead rests on mine. "We're good. We're going to be okay," he says.

"Sorry," I whisper. I'm too old for this shit. I shouldn't be his problem anymore. He has a wife, a family, a career to worry about.

"Don't be." He straightens up. "Want to talk about it?" he asks me.

"It's Ma. I invited her to breakfast tomorrow, and as I was walking away, I heard her ask Pops to not let her forget about it. I don't know. I just... lost it," I say.

"Shit." He looks at me. "It's been a long time since this has happened to us," he says.

The thing about Romeo is... it's always *us*. It's never been something that happens to *me*. He's always said *us*. *We* have panic attacks. *We* will get through it together. *We* are going to be okay.

"Yeah, it has," I admit.

“I’m going to tell Livvy we are switching rooms, moving down to this side of the house,” he says.

“You don’t need to do that,” I tell him.

“I want to. Do you know how far I had to run just now? I’m moving rooms. Besides, if I don’t, I might strangle Dante before the month’s out. That kid is moping around like we’ve severed one of his limbs.”

“When we were his age, we were far from love sick.”

“Right? He’s sixteen. He should be fucking around, not stuck on one girl,” Romeo says.

“Maybe don’t let your wife hear you say that.” I laugh.

“I don’t have a death wish,” Romeo tells me. “Come on, let’s get a drink.” He pushes to his feet and holds out a hand for me.

This is how we do this. We pretend that the whole ordeal didn’t happen, until it happens again. I really fucking hope this was a once-off. I mean, how the hell do I hide this shit from my wife?

“You gonna talk to Katy about it?” Romeo asks, reading my fucking mind.

“No,” I tell him.

“Okay.” He nods, and I know he won’t tell anyone either.

Chapter Fifteen

Romeo
Valentino

*M*y heart breaks every time I've had to watch my brother have a panic attack. It hasn't happened for years, not since we were eighteen. I knew, though. As soon as it started, my chest tightened, a feeling of dread came over me, and I knew it was Luca.

I ran to him, talked him through it, just like I used to do when we were kids. Now, I'm too fucking scared to leave his side. I know he doesn't want anyone else to know. He hates that he has these attacks, and I can feel the worry radiating off him. He's terrified of having another one in front of people. Well, people who aren't me.

I messaged Livvy and told her we had to move rooms. She didn't question it and had staff take our things to the empty room next to Luca's. Not even my wife knows about Luca's panic attacks, and she pretty much knows all there is to know about me and my twin. She had to live with us in college, because I couldn't live without her or my brother. She was a champ, though, and never once complained about having to share her space with two college guys. She never made my twin feel like he was a burden. She understands that he is as much a part of me as any of my limbs.

We're currently sitting at the dinner table. Everyone is here. All four of us brothers are hyperaware of our mother. Each of us listening to every word she speaks, looking for a sign, anything to give us any indication that she's not okay.

"Ma, I was thinking I'd crash your breakfast date with Luc in the morning," I tell her.

"Oh, okay, sure, honey." She smiles at me.

"Why have one when you can have two, right?" I laugh.

"Exactly!" Ma says. Being a twin herself, she also understands the bond Luca and I share, better than anyone else.

"If they get breakfast with you, Ma, I want lunch," Matteo chimes in.

"I'll take dinner," Theo adds.

"What's going on? Why are you all wanting to eat with me?" Mom asks us, her eyes narrowing in on each of our faces.

The four of us share a glance. "Ma, I thought you brought us here to spend time with you. This is us *spending time with you*," I tell her.

"Right," she says. "Okay, fill up my calendar with food dates. But if I get fat, I'm blaming you boys."

"You're beautiful, Ma, and you could never be fat," Matteo says.

"Smooth, kiss ass." I throw a bean across the table at him.

Ma looks over to Pops. "Did we wake up in an alternate universe? Are you sure these are our children?" she asks him.

"No, but let's not question it, dolcezza. I like these ones better than the old versions," Pops tells her.

"Nonna, I thought we could go shopping, and maybe to that gallery Mom and I found. I think you'll like it," Liliana says.

"Oh, sure, sweetheart. That sounds like a plan." Ma smiles at her.

"Nonna, you and I should go to that wine bar down the street. You know, since I can legally drink here and all." Aurora grins while eyeing her father

from across the table.

“No,” Luca and I say at the same time.

“Not a fucking chance, Aurora,” Matteo says over us.

“Not happening,” Theo adds.

“What? But Nonna wants to go, don’t you, Nonna?” Aurora looks over at her grandmother with those big fucking puppy-dog eyes she has. The ones that usually get her whatever she wants.

“Sure do. It’ll be fun. Besides, you four were all drinking at eighteen whenever we traveled overseas.” Mom points to me and then my three brothers.

“We weren’t her, Ma. She’ll find a way to get into trouble,” Matteo says, throwing a hand out towards his daughter.

“Oh, so I was right. It *will* be fun then. Tilly and Liliana can come along.” Ma grins.

“This is going to end in disaster,” I say. “Maybe Livvy should go too. She’s the sensible one out of all of you.”

Maddie laughs and then tries to cover it with a cough. “Sure, she is,” she says.

“She is,” I fire back. My wife is an angel.

“Romeo, what was your wife doing at three this afternoon?” Maddie asks me.

“I don’t know. Some of us don’t keep trackers on our wives,” I remind her.

“Oh, I was pouring shots for everyone,” Livvy says from beside me.

“Who’s everyone, Livvy?” I ask her.

“You know, everyone.” She shrugs before listing each of the names on her fingers. “Savvy, Maddie, Katy, Tilly, Liliana, Aurora.” She says the last name a little quieter than the rest.

“You gave her shots? She’s eighteen,” I tell my wife like she doesn’t already know.

“And it’s legal here, Romeo,” Livvy counters.

“I don’t care if the Pope himself pours it for her. She’s just a kid. She shouldn’t be drinking,” Matteo adds.

“Her mother was there,” Savvy interjects, raising a hand.

“You know, there are plenty worse things she could be doing than drinking with her aunts,” Katy says.

“Not helping,” I tell her.

“It’s true. You should have seen me at eighteen,” she says.

“The whole world saw you at eighteen, Katy. You were a fucking pop star, remember?” I remind my sister-in-law.

“Yeah, but you didn’t see everything that went on behind the scenes, the parties, the groupies. Oh, the groupies...” Katy grins wistfully.

“Seriously?” Luca asks his wife, and all the women at the table break out into fits of laughter.

“How many shots did they have?” I ask Luca.

“No idea.” He shakes his head.

“Hey, Dad, can we go to Rome next week? *Gelato*?” Tilly asks me from the other end of the table.

“Sure can, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Can I go to Rome?” Dante follows his sister’s lead.

“What for?” I question him.

He shrugs. “No reason,” he says.

“Well, when you have a reason to go there, let me know.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Oh, Lucy will be here next week with Kyla, and I think she’s bringing a friend,” Savvy announces, likely looking to change the subject.

“A friend,” Lorenzo grunts.

“Lorenzo, jealousy is not a good look on you, dude,” I tell my nephew.

“I’m not jealous, Zio Romeo,” he replies.

Could have fooled me. The kid has murder written all over his face.

“Don’t worry, Lorenzo, I’ll help you bury the body.” *This* comes from Orlando—the one I’d least expect to pipe up.

“Thanks, coz. Appreciate the support,” Lorenzo says while glaring at Enzo and Dante.

“I’ll help with the killing,” Aurora offers.

“No you fucking won’t,” Matteo growls.

“Okay, jeez, it was just a joke.” Aurora holds up her hands in surrender.

“Mostly,” she whispers under her breath.

Once the shitshow that is every one of our family dinners is over, I head back to my room with Livvy in tow. I pull out my phone from my pocket and send Luca a quick message.

ME:

You good?

LUCA:

Yes.

I set my phone on the bedside table, peering up to see my wife glaring back at me. “I think you all should ease up on Aurora, Romeo. She’s a good girl,” Livvy says.

“She reminds me of Izzy,” I tell her.

“Izzy? Your cousin, who’s a freaking amazing, loving, loyal person. Probably one of the best friends to have in your corner. That Izzy? The one family member who will never hesitate to come and help out with whatever you need? *That Izzy?*” Livvy asks me.

“Well, when you put it like that, it makes my argument sound stupid. But, yes, that Izzy,” I say.

“Aurora is a Valentino. She’s going to be okay. And you do know the more you boys push her down, the more she’s going to just rebel and fight back harder.”

“Tilly never did,” I counter.

“Tilly is a different child, and I’m sure there are plenty of things Tilly has done that you wouldn’t approve of if you knew she did them.”

“Take that back. My daughter is fucking perfect, Livvy. She has all of your good parts in her.”

My wife shakes her head and disappears into the bathroom. I refuse to believe my daughter has done anything I wouldn’t approve of. Like I said, that girl is perfect... just like her mother.

Chapter Sixteen

Lorenzo
Valentino

They weren't supposed to be here until next week. Lucy McKinley, my mom's business partner and friend, just pulled up in the driveway. She's not alone though. I'm standing on the balcony, watching all the bodies pile out of the car. If I knew ahead of time, this would have been a great spot to position my sniper scope... even better to take a shot. There's no way I'd miss the bastard from this distance.

I came to the house to plant some cameras and microphones around. I want to know who this new boyfriend of Kyla's is, what he's like, his weaknesses...

Her father, Dominic, comes into view first, followed by her mother and then the woman herself, Kyla McKinley, the object of my obsession. I hold my breath, waiting to get a glimpse of the asshole who is number one on my shit list. Except there's no guy, just another girl. About the same age as Kyla. No one else, no boyfriend.

Did she say she was bringing him to piss me off? *To put me off?*

I have no idea but I'm going to find out.

Turning around, I pack up the rest of my tech and throw it all into my bag. I then walk into the closet, climb up to the ceiling, move the discreet panel aside, and throw my bag up there before covering it again and jumping back down. Dusting off my clothes, I walk out of the bedroom and down the stairs, getting to the bottom step at the same time the door opens and the McKinleys and their plus-one walk inside.

"Oh my gosh, Lorenzo, you scared me," Lucy says. "I didn't know you were going to be here."

Kyla's "psychotic father" glares at me. If looks could actually kill, I think I'd be fed to his pigs right about now. I refuse to let him intimidate me, though. I'm fucking Lorenzo Valentino. I do not back down. Ever.

"Mrs. McKinley, Ma sent me over to make sure everything was in order. I've checked in with security and had the staff stock the fridge and pantries for you." I smile as I hug my mother's friend.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that, Lorenzo, but we appreciate it," Lucy says, looking around the foyer.

My parents bought this old estate a few months ago. They wanted us to own some property in Italy, rather than always having to use the various family-owned residences. Personally, I would have built a new, state-of-the-art vacation home. This one is old and seems like it's one strong wind storm away from falling down.

"Okay, since you're here, how about a tour?" Lucy asks me.

"Ah, sure." I glance from her to Kyla, who is doing a great job of looking everywhere but at me.

"Oh, this is Cassie, Kyla's friend." Lucy introduces me to the girl who doesn't seem to have an issue with staring right at me.

"Nice to meet you," I say to Cassie. Kyla still won't look at me. Okay, that's fine. "Here, let me show you all around." I guide the McKinleys through the house, pointing out various rooms and important features. "Enzo and I will be using the pool house on and off over the next few weeks too," I

tell Lucy at the end of the tour.

“Oh, that’s good. It’ll be nice to have you around. We can catch up properly,” she says.

“Sure.” I nod my agreement, then turn to Dominic. “Mr. McKinley, Pops said to tell you to help yourself to any of the bottom-shelf liquor,” I tell him, pointing to the fully stocked bar.

Dominic heads in that direction. “Lorenzo, get your phone out,” he tells me. I draw my phone from my pocket, watching as Dominic grabs a bottle of whiskey from the top shelf. “Take a picture of this and send it to your father. Tell him I said thanks.” He then proceeds to pour himself a very large glass.

“Dominic, really? This isn’t our house,” Lucy groans.

“Dad, you’re embarrassing me,” Kyla huffs, covering her face with her hands.

“Okay, say cheese. He’s going to hate this.” I laugh while snapping a photo of Dominic drinking the good stuff. I send it to my father, and the little read notification comes up almost instantly. “Oh, he saw it. I’d expect a visit from him in about thirty minutes,” I tell Dominic.

“Oh my god, stop encouraging his craziness, Lorenzo,” Kyla says.

My head snaps in her direction. Tilting it to one side, I glare at her. I might want to capture those pouty fucking lips in mine, but I also still want to wrap my hands around her neck and squeeze. “Kyla, if our fathers want to engage in a war, then who are we to get between their fun?” I ask her.

“You would think war is fun.” She rolls her eyes and walks out of the kitchen, where we are presently standing after I ended the tour a few moments ago.

“Well, it sure as fuck ain’t boring,” I yell after her. Then look to her mother. “Sorry,” I apologize for my momentary outburst.

Kyla just brings the worst out of me. I have a hard time controlling my impulses whenever she’s in the same room, something I both love and hate about that girl.

Lucy smiles wide at me. “Don’t be.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you all to get settled in. Let the staff know if you need anything, or call me,” I tell them.

“Will do. Thanks again, Lorenzo,” Lucy says.

I walk out to my car, not expecting to find Kyla leaning against it, her arms crossed and her jaw set tight. I parked on the side of the house, out of view of the main entrance. So how did she even know it was here?

“Kyla?” I question.

“Lorenzo,” she replies.

I look around. There’s no one in sight. I step forward, caging her body between me and the car. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

“What boyfriend?” she asks, her eyebrows drawn down in apparent confusion.

“The one you told me about via fucking text. The same one you said you were bringing to Italy.”

Kyla smirks. “I said I was bringing my new BF. As in, *best friend*. But it’s cute that you were jealous. You know, if I did bring a boyfriend, it wouldn’t be any of your business,” she tells me.

“That’s where you’re wrong. It would be entirely my business. You made it my business when you gave yourself to me,” I remind her.

“I gave you my virginity, not my entire person,” she counters.

“You are mine, Kyla. You don’t want to test the lengths I’m prepared to go to in order to make sure you stay that way.”

“I’m not anyone’s, Lorenzo, especially not yours,” Kyla hisses.

“Really?” I look down at the way her chest rises and falls with each of her quickened breaths. I can see her pulse accelerating in her neck, and there’s a light flush creeping up her cheeks. “Tell me, Kyla, have you let anyone else touch you since I did?” I ask her, running my fingertips along the curve of her throat. “Do you really think anyone can touch you like I can?” I let my fingers trail down her arm, over her hands.

“Don’t,” she says.

“Don’t what?” I ask, sliding my hand under the hem of her skirt. “Don’t discover just how wet you are for me? I bet if I keep going, I’ll find your pussy dripping for me, won’t I, Kyla?”

“No, it’ll be as dry as the Sahara Desert,” she tells me.

I smile. “You’re fucking breathtaking, babe, even when you lie to me.” I bring my lips down onto hers, pushing my tongue inside when she gasps. My hand slides higher up her skirt.

Fuck, I should stop. Her parents are right inside. I shouldn’t be doing this out in the open, where anyone can see us. Not because I care if people know. I just don’t want to share her. Not when she looks like this, like a fucking angel sent to me from the sex gods.

My hand grazes over her panties. Pulling them aside, I slide my fingers right up the center of her wet lips. She’s fucking drenched, just like I thought

she'd be. I push my tongue farther into her mouth. Then, out of nowhere, I feel her knee connect with my fucking thigh. I'm sure she was aiming for my balls.

Thank fuck she's got shitty fucking aim.

Her hands land on my chest and she shoves me back, her head shaking from side to side. "No, I can't. We can't. Just. No, Lorenzo," she says before running off towards the house.

What the fuck just happened? Fuck! I open my car door and jump in, my cock fucking hard as a rock. Then I pull out my phone.

ME:

This isn't over, Kyla. You need to fucking talk to me. What the fuck was that?

Throwing the device onto the seat next to me, I start the ignition, pull out of the spot, and make my way down the driveway. I'm trying to think of what I did, what I said that freaked her out. That sent her running from me. I get that she's not as experienced as I am, but I also know she's not a fucking virgin. Not anymore. Because she gave that card over to me. At my birthday party. I knew caving in to my temptation wouldn't end well. Because now that I've had her once, she's all I fucking want.

I weave in and out of the crazy-as-fuck traffic, my eyes flicking to the side when my phone lights up on the seat next to me. I see her name flash across the screen. She's calling me. I grab my cell and swipe over to answer it.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," she says.

"You didn't," I tell her.

"Lorenzo, I..."

Kyla's words cut out when I hear the screeching of tires. I look up at the road and spin the wheel but it's too late. I drop the phone as the vehicle in front of me hits me head-on. The sound of metal scraping metal echoes throughout the car's interior. And then I hear her voice. She's screaming out my name.

Chapter Seventeen

Matteo
Valentino

I hold on to my wife as she sobs in my arms. I've never seen Savvy in so much pain, and I was with her when her mother died. She never cried like this. "It's going to be okay," I tell her. "He's going to be okay."

I am barely holding it together myself. The only reason I'm not falling apart right now is because of her, because of my other two children who are sitting on the hard plastic chairs across from me, each with silent tears running down their faces.

Lucy and Kyla McKinley are seated next to Savvy. Kyla was the one who called me. She was in hysterics. So much so that it took a minute to figure out

what was going on. When I did, I had Romeo hack into the GPS on Lorenzo's car to find out exactly where he was. By the time we got there, the paramedics had my son on a gurney and were putting him into the ambulance. He's been back with doctors for the last half hour.

"He's going to be okay. He's a Valentino. He's going to be fine," I say again. I'm not sure who I'm telling.

Theo walks over, interrupting my mantra. He was talking to the woman at the nurses' station. "The doctor will be out soon. He's okay. He has a couple of broken bones, a few cuts and bruises but no major damage," Theo says.

I peer up at my brother, thankful for him taking charge and getting the information. I wanted to break down the fucking doors to get back there, but Theo told me to sit with my wife and that he'd handle it.

Savvy jumps up and throws her arms around my brother. "Thank you," she sobs against his shoulder. Theo wraps his arms around her and hugs her tight.

"He's going to be okay, Savvy," he tells her.

"I just... I can't imagine..." She hiccups.

I reach out and pull her into my chest before addressing Theo myself.

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me," he says. This is what my brother does. He fixes shit. This is why he's going to make one hell of a Don.

The doors swing open and a doctor walks out. I guide Savvy in that direction. "How is he, Doc?" I ask the older man.

"He's awake, in a fair bit of pain but refusing to take anything for it. He's trying to discharge himself," the doctor says.

"Like fuck he is. He's not leaving this hospital yet. Where is he?" I glance over the doctor's shoulder as if I can narrow down the room number just by looking for it.

"Follow me. I'd like to keep him overnight, just to be sure there's no hidden internal damage, but everything besides the broken ribs appears to be superficial," the doctor tells us.

"Dad, can we come?" Aurora asks me, and I nod.

"Come on."

"We should limit the number of visitors to his room," the doctor says.

"They're not visitors. They're his fucking family," I tell him. "Now, lead the way, Doc." I'm not in the mood to be told *no* right now.

We follow the doctor into the room, where we find Lorenzo sitting up on

the bed, his legs hanging off one side. He's arguing with the nurse. "I'm not staying," he says.

"Yes, you are. Now, lay your ass down, Lorenzo, and let the nurse do her job," Savvy tells him, using her no-nonsense mom voice.

"Ma, I have to go. I have to..." He shuts his mouth and flares his nostrils.

"She's in the waiting room. Lie down," I say, already knowing why he wants to leave. He looks to me and then finally plops back down on the bed, wincing with the action.

"Shit, you need some pain meds," Savvy says, holding his palm with one hand while the other runs through the hair at his forehead.

"I'm good, Ma, promise. It's just a few scratches," he tells her.

"And broken ribs," Aurora adds.

"What the fuck were you doing? Do you have any idea how worried everyone was?" Enzo grunts.

"Enzo, now is not the time," I scold my other son.

"Now is the time. He wasn't the one who had to watch Mom sob on your shoulder, because we thought the worst had happened." Enzo sits on the chair in the opposite corner of the room.

"I'm sorry." Lorenzo looks up at Savvy. "I didn't see the car."

"It's okay. It's not your fault," Savvy tells him.

Me? I want to both hug and strangle him for making his mother so fucking upset. I never want to see my wife like that again.

"Take some pain meds, Lorenzo. It'll help," I say.

"I need my phone. Did anyone find my phone?" he asks, ignoring my comment altogether.

"It's probably in the mangled car. You know, Nonno is going to be pissed when he finds out you totaled one of his Ferraris," Aurora says, then adds, "This is way worse than anything I've ever done. But I am glad you are going to live to see another day."

"Aurora, Enzo, go and tell Zio Theo to let the rest of the family know your brother's fine," I tell them. Once they leave the room, I turn back to Lorenzo. "What happened?"

"I didn't see the car. I was looking at my phone."

"That's why you crashed?" Savvy slaps his shoulder, causing Lorenzo to wince again.

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking," he says.

"I told you this girl was going to be the end of you. You should have

listened to me,” I remind him.

“It’s not her fault.”

“Who? What girl?” Savvy asks.

“No one,” Lorenzo says.

I look at my son, my expression telling him what I don’t say aloud. *Really? Are you really going to try to keep hiding it?* The girl is in the waiting room, looking fucking distraught as all hell.

Lorenzo shakes his head. “Kyla. I was talking to Kyla,” he says.

“Kyla? As in, Kyla McKinley. That Kyla?” Savvy questions with a smile.

“Yes.”

“Oh...” she hums. “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m good, Ma, promise,” he tells her again.

“Okay, I’ll be right back,” Savvy announces.

I look at my wife. Has she lost her goddamn mind? She’s actually walking out of this room. I thought I’d have to drag her out when it was time to leave.

I glance at my son before turning on my heel to follow her. “Savvy, where are you going?”

“I’m going to let Kyla come and see him,” she says.

“That’s not a good idea,” I tell her.

“It’s the best idea, Tao.” She smiles, and after having her sobbing in my arms, I’m not about to do anything to wipe that smile off her face.

I push back through the door to Lorenzo’s room. “Okay, how bad is the pain?” I ask him now that everyone is gone.

“It hurts like a fucking bitch,” he says.

“Looks it.” I nod. The nurse leaves the room quietly, allowing us some privacy. “That was some fucking scary shit, Lorenzo. Not just for your mother, but for all of us.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Pops.” He stares down at his lap.

“Don’t ever do anything that will put that look on your mother’s face again,” I warn him.

“I won’t.”

“Yet you’re dead set on making yourself pig food.” I smirk.

“She’s different,” he says.

“She better be worth it,” I tell him.

“She is.” He finally looks up at me again, with a stupid-ass grin on his face.

“I love you. I’m really fucking glad I don’t have to pick out your coffin this week,” I admit.

“Love you too, Pops,” he says.

There’s a small knock on the door and then Kyla walks in. She glances from me to Lorenzo. “I’ll be back. I’m gonna go see your uncle and call your grandparents,” I tell my son.

“Wait... You didn’t tell Nonna, did you?” he asks me.

“Romeo did.”

“She doesn’t need this kind of shit on her shoulders. Let me call her so she doesn’t feel like she has to come down here.” Lorenzo holds out his hand for my phone.

I dig my cell out of my pocket and pass it to him, listening as he has a very quick conversation with my parents, assuring them that he’s fine and will be home soon. “Okay, I’ll be back,” I say. “Kyla, make sure this one doesn’t get out of that bed.” I gesture to my son.

“Uh, sure. I’ll... um... okay.” She nods, her eyes dropping to the floor.

I sigh and shake my head at the disaster that is going to be these two kids as I walk out the door. Fuck, I hope that boy knows what he’s doing. Kyla McKinley is not the kind of girl you mess around with when you’re looking for a good time. She’s the kind you put a ring on or run for your fucking life, hoping her father doesn’t catch you.

Chapter Eighteen

Lorenzo
Valentino

A silence falls over the room when my dad and the nurse leave. Kyla is doing that thing where she looks everywhere but at me again. I watch her as she takes in every inch of the room, which must be interesting because she sure is taking her damn time.

“Kyla,” I say, getting her attention. When she does make eye contact with me, I wish she hadn’t. Hidden beneath those big fucking blue eyes of hers is nothing but pain, sadness, fear, and unshed fucking tears. “What’s wrong?” I try to sit up. I want to reach her, but a sharp pain rips right through my side as I move.

“*What’s wrong?* Seriously, Lorenzo? What’s wrong?” she asks me. “Lie down. Stop bloody moving,” she curses me out. But with that hot Australian accent of hers, I just find it cute as hell. “What’s wrong?” Now her voice is firmer.

Oh, good, she’s pissed.

“Lorenzo, I thought you were bloody dead. I thought you were gone forever, and I didn’t even get a chance to tell you...” She stops herself from saying more.

“Tell me what?” I ask her.

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter. Are you okay? Like you’re not hurt too badly, are you?” she asks.

“It matters to me. Tell me what you were going to say, Kyla?” I urge her again.

“That you’re a pain in my ass,” she huffs.

“You’ve told me that before, multiple times. I think I even have it in writing.” I laugh and then stop because it fucking hurts. “Try again.”

“That I love you,” she says in the softest of voices. I hear it, though. Those words can’t be mistaken for anything else.

I smile. “You love me?”

“It doesn’t matter. Forget I said it.” She shakes her head and looks away.

“Nope, I can’t do that. Kyla, come here.” I hook my finger, calling her closer. She peers up at me and shakes her head. “If you don’t come here, I will get up out of this bed and get you myself. It’ll probably hurt like a bitch, but I’ll do it,” I tell her.

With a sigh, she reluctantly crosses the room to stand next to my bed. I pick up her hand and thread my fingers through hers.

“I have always loved you, Kyla McKinley.”

Her eyes widen. “You have?”

“Always. I’ve just been waiting until you took the time to notice me,” I admit. My birthday party was that moment. Best fucking gift I’ve ever received.

“It’s impossible to not notice you, Lorenzo. But this? It won’t work. We won’t work,” she tells me.

“Why the fuck not?”

“Well, my father will probably kill you. And that could be an issue,” she says.

“I’m not afraid of your father, Kyla.”

“See? That’s a problem too. You’re a mafia prince, Lorenzo, and I’m just a girl from Melbourne. I don’t fit into your world.”

“First of all, you are not just a girl from Melbourne. You’re the heir to two billion-dollar empires, Kyla. You’re far from some average Joe Blow. And second, you fit just perfectly in my world, because you *are* my fucking world.”

“We slept together, Lorenzo, once. We’ve never even been on a date. You can’t be sure that you even like me. I mean, I could be annoying.”

“I’ve known you since you were born. I *know* you. And you are annoying as fuck, but that doesn’t make me love you any less.” I laugh when she glares in my direction. “You need to give us a chance, Kyla,” I tell her.

She chews on her bottom lip. I know she wants this as much as I do. She’s just afraid.

“Let me take you on a date. I’ll pick you up... Friday,” I say.

“Friday? Lorenzo, you’re in the hospital!”

“I’ll be out of here tonight. It’s just a few scratches. I’m fine,” I insist.

“And broken ribs,” she reminds me.

“*Internal* scratches.”

“Okay, Friday, but I’ll meet you. Do not come to the house, Lorenzo. My dad is blowing a casket as it is, because I was a little over the top when I thought you were dead,” she says.

“Over the top how?”

“I screamed bloody murder... I might have called your father, and I might have been a little upset.”

“So, you love me a lot then, huh?”

“You’re an idiot.” She laughs.

“Maybe, but I’m your idiot.” I wiggle my eyebrows up and down at her.

The door opens and Kyla drops my hand, taking a step back as my mother and father enter the room again. “I, ah, I have to go, but I’m glad you’re okay,” she says, then practically runs out the door.

“Is everything all right?” Mom asks me.

“Yep. Can I go home now?”

“Sure, if you can get up and walk,” Pops says.

I accept the challenge and slowly pull myself up, breathing through the pain. I’m not sitting in this fucking hospital all night. Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I brace myself on the rails. It takes a bit, but I manage to get there.

“Lorenzo, you should stay. You’re in pain,” Mom says.

“I’m fine,” I tell her. “See?” I clench my teeth into what I hope looks like a smile as I slowly rise to my feet. “Let’s go.”

“You gonna walk out in that? I can see your ass,” Dad says, pointing at the hospital gown I just now realize I’m wearing.

I look around the room. I don’t see the clothes I had on earlier today. “Seems like it. At least it’s a good ass to look at,” I tell him.

“Fucking hell. Wait here,” Mom growls and walks out of the room, returning a few minutes later with a bag. I take it from her hands and pull out a pair of sweats. “Need help?” she asks me.

“Ah, no, I’m good,” I tell her. I do not need my mother to help me get dressed.

“You do know I’m your mother, right?” she says, as if reading my mind.

Then she takes the sweats out of my hands and bends down. She lifts one of my feet off the ground, guiding it through the pant leg, and then repeats the process with the other side. She lifts them up, under the hospital gown until the band is at my waist.

“Thanks, Ma.” I nod, dropping the hospital gown to the floor as I pull out a shirt. It’s fucking painful but I manage to tug it over my head. Mom places a pair of slides in front of me. I slip my feet inside them as I pick up the bag. “Let’s go home. I fucking hate hospitals.”

“You and me both,” Mom says, taking hold of my arm. “You can lean on me if you need to.”

“I’m not putting my weight on you, Ma,” I tell her. She doesn’t let go of my arm though.

Chapter Nineteen

Holly
Valentino

I try to dial Reilly again, my call going to voicemail, and then I get a message from her.

REILLY:

I'm in a meeting. Call you back.

I don't know what's going on with my sister but she's been blowing me off for two weeks now. I'm about ready to get on the jet and fly to Sydney. T has it in my head that the fogginess I've been feeling is me picking up on something going on with Reilly, that it has nothing to do with my own brain.

I'm hoping it's not my sister, but with the way she's avoiding me, I'm starting to think my husband is right.

I don't text her back. Instead, I drop my phone into my purse. I'm heading to that wine bar that Aurora wanted to visit. Izzy and Mikhail just got into town, which means it's a full girls' trip. When I walk outside, I find my four daughters-in-law, three granddaughters, my sister-in-law Angelica, my niece Izzy, and her daughter Mabilia—although Mabilia isn't old enough to partake in wine yet.

T arranged for two sprinter vans to take us, each outfitted with a driver and a soldier. Then there's two additional SUVs, one in front and one in the back of the convoy. Personally, I think it's overkill, but T and Neo were not going to let us all leave without the extra security. I wouldn't be surprised if they've found a cozy little position somewhere onsite to watch us themselves.

I do my best to shake off that feeling of dread and smile as I hop into a car with my granddaughters, Angelica, and Mabilia. The other five opted to go in the second van. Aurora and Mabilia are thick as thieves, each girl finding herself in just as much trouble as the other. But when they're together, that's a whole different story.

"How's school been, Mabilia?" I ask. She doesn't attend the same school as the rest of the Valentino kids. She's in an all-girls school. Something her father insisted on and wouldn't back down about.

"Good," she says.

Angelica looks at me. "She just got expelled."

"Nonna, I did not get expelled. It's just a momentary lapse in the principal's judgment. Papa is going to fix it," Mabilia insists.

"Dante got expelled too, and then Dad and Zio Matteo went to Principal George and fixed it. He's on a one-month suspension. Which he was already going to be away from school for a month anyway," Aurora says.

"Dante was expelled. What for?" I ask.

"He hacked into the school admin files to find Josie's address. She wouldn't give it to him." My granddaughter shrugs.

"Who's Josie?" Liliana asks her.

"A new girl, real quiet type. Sticks to herself. Definitely not Valentino material," Aurora explains.

"My mom is the quiet type, and she fits in just fine," Tilly pipes up.

"I agree with Tilly. There's no fitting in with this family, Aurora. You just become a part of it," I tell her.

“Well, I don’t think she’s the girl for Dante. She upsets him more often than not,” Aurora says. My granddaughter is extremely protective of her cousins. Reminds me a lot of Izzy. She was always looking out for the boys, making sure they were okay.

“That’s what makes life interesting, Aurora. If you find someone who doesn’t provoke emotions in you, then they’re not your one. Trust me. Do you think Zio Neo doesn’t ever piss me off? I’ve almost killed that man a dozen times myself over the years.” Angelica laughs.

“I would never kill your grandfather, but that doesn’t mean we haven’t disagreed on any number of things,” I tell my granddaughter.

“Mom says if you can’t stab a guy, leave him for dead, and still have him chasing after you while declaring his love, then he’s not the one,” Mabilia chimes in.

Both Angelica and I chuckle at this. Of course, that’s what Izzy would teach her daughter. “I think your mother got lucky your father didn’t bleed out that night,” I tell Mabilia.

“My Papa isn’t killable.” Mabilia smiles proudly. She’s the biggest daddy’s girl I’ve ever seen, that one.

“From your lips to God’s ears,” Angelica says.

“How’s Little Neo?” I ask Angelica. I haven’t seen him since Izzy and Mikhail arrived. Little Neo is Mabilia’s younger brother and named after Angelica’s father.

“He’s the silent, broody type. So basically just like my brother.” She smirks.

“T is not silent.” I laugh. “Broody definitely, but not silent. That man doesn’t know when to shut up.”

The van pulls up to the front of the wine bar a few moments later. We all pile out of the car and are ushered inside the building by security. It’s not until we’re standing in the entryway that I realize T (or Neo or even Theo—really, it could have been any number of them) has booked out the whole place just for us.

“I thought this was the heaven of wine bars. Why’s it empty?” Aurora asks.

“Valentino men don’t know how to let go of control. That’s why,” I tell her.

“Oh, well, there’s still plenty of wine. Come on, Nonna, let’s taste all of them.” Aurora links her arm with mine as we follow the waitress to a long

table in the center of the room.

I take my seat and look over to each of the faces surrounding me. Most of the important women in my life are at this table. It'd be complete if my Australian family were here too. Thinking of my sister brings a sudden wave of sadness over me.

"Nonna, what's wrong?" Liliana whispers. She's seated to my immediate left.

"Nothing, sweetheart. I was just thinking about how nice this is. We don't do this enough," I tell her.

Her eyes move over my face. "Are you sure? You look really sad."

"I'm not sad. Tell me about this Travis guy I keep hearing your father complain about." This has Liliana's face lighting up.

Oh, she really likes this boy.

"He's so perfect, Nonna. You're going to love him. I should take you to one of his games when we're back in New York."

"Or you could just bring him to Sunday dinner," I suggest.

"And subject him to Dad and all my uncles and Nonno? No thanks. I'm trying to keep this one around, not scare him away. It's bad enough Dad puts a gun in his face every chance he gets."

"If he's the right person for you, he won't scare off so easily," I tell her.

"She's right, Liliana. Besides, if he's lasted this long, he's not going anywhere," Maddie says to her daughter.

"Well, he might be. He might be getting traded to Vancouver," Liliana says.

"Vancouver, as in Canada?" Maddie asks.

"Uh-huh, that's the one," Liliana confirms with a nod.

"Well, when you decide you're going with him, make sure there are at least five other men from our family to hold your father down and stop him from *actually* killing Travis," Maddie groans.

The sommelier appears and introduces himself, and then goes on to tell us about the first wine we will be tasting today. It's a deep red. I tune out the rest of his words when he starts talking about the history of the vineyard and the combination of flavors, but I do appreciate how good this wine is.

Chapter Twenty

Romeo
Valentino

Sometimes having the whole family together, in one house, isn't the dream my mother believes it to be. Over the years, our little family has grown. A fucking lot. Don't get me wrong, I love the shit out of all of them. But, fuck, can they get on my nerves. Which is why I'm using my daughter as my "get out of Valentino hell" card today.

Tilly loves Italy, and we have our own little tradition every time we visit. We stop for gelato in Rome. Just the two of us. This trip isn't any different.

"Tilly, the chopper's going to be ready in ten," I call through her open bedroom door.

“I’ll be fifteen minutes, Dad,” she yells back.

Everything is a negotiation with this girl. Always has been. I remember when she was little, and she’d argue her curfew down to the seconds.

“Ten. Come on, Tilly, I need to get the fuck out of this house for a few hours,” I counter. I hear a clang. Then, with a dramatic sigh, she walks out of her bathroom. “You look beautiful,” I tell her.

“You say that every day.” She rolls her eyes.

“That’s because every day it’s true. Come on, let’s escape these heathens for as long as we can.” I grab her hand and tug her out the door.

We land on a rooftop a short ride later and make our way down to a lot, where I have a car waiting for us. It only takes fifteen minutes to drive into the city, then another twenty to find a fucking parking spot. I swear Rome gets more and more crowded every time we visit.

“I hope you’re ready to eat your weight’s worth in gelato,” I tell Tilly, getting out of the car.

She meets me on the sidewalk. “I was born ready.” She beams up at me.

No matter how old she gets, I will always consider her my baby girl. And I’ll do anything to make sure I always get to see that fucking smile on her face.

We turn a corner and walk into the shop. “Buongiorno, Mr. Valentino, Miss Valentino,” the owner greets as soon as he sees us.

“Buongiorno, Luigi. How’s business?” I ask him.

“Good, good. Take a seat. I will bring you everything.” He waves a hand towards the glassed-in dining area.

Tilly says she likes this place because of how beautiful it is, not just because the gelato is the best in the city. I look around to try to see the world as she sees it. A bunch of colorful potted plants hang from baskets above our heads. A white cloth covers the table while red linen napkins and a little vase of flowers sit in the center.

True to his word, Luigi lays out bowls of every flavor a few minutes later.

“Thanks for bringing me here,” Tilly says around a mouthful of gelato.

“I will always bring you here, Till. Now tell me what’s going on in your life?”

“You mean you don’t already know everything, Dad? Are you slipping in your old age?” She raises an eyebrow at me.

“Humor me and pretend I don’t know a thing,” I tell her.

“I’ve been seeing someone new. It’s serious and I think I’m going to

move in with him,” she says. Her words come out so fast my head spins.

That, I did not see fucking coming. “No,” I tell her.

“What do you mean *no*? I’m not asking permission, Dad. If I love someone and I want to live with them, I will. You do know I’m twenty, not thirteen,” she says.

“I don’t like it. Just a few weeks ago, you were heartbroken over some idiot to the point you were asking me for a fucking gun, Tilly. So, *no*. If you don’t have a ring on your finger, you’re not living with some fucker who’s not ready to show you the respect you deserve,” I tell her.

“So, if I get a ring, you’ll be okay with it?”

“Not one single fucking bit.” I throw my spoon down into the bowl, my appetite suddenly gone.

How the fuck did I not know my daughter was seeing someone new? I thought we’d at least have a few months before we had to go through the boyfriend drama again.

Chapter Twenty-One

*Juca
Valentino*

I've been observing my parents closely for the past week. My father has always been my mother's shadow, but recently, it's been so much worse. He rarely leaves her side, and if he does, he continues to monitor her from a distance. Even the day all the girls went to the winery, Pops and Theo went along too and watched them. They claim it was for their protection. I think they're a bunch of paranoid fuckers who need to take a chill pill.

I don't care what anyone says. Something is definitely wrong with my mother, and I need to find out what it is. I inhale a deep breath. I'm fucking petrified of having another panic attack and having someone other than

Romeo find me like that. So I decide to go in search of my twin brother. I haven't seen him all morning. I don't find him but I do find the better part of him.

"Hey, Liv, where did that husband of yours disappear to?"

Livvy startles, jumping nearly three feet in the air at the sound of my voice. "Jesus, Luca, don't do that," she scolds me.

"Do what? Speak?" I ask her.

"Yes, try that for a change."

"So, where is he? I need to talk to him."

"He took Tilly out for gelato," she says, squinting her eyes at me. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just want to know what's going on with our parents. I mean, Pops is retiring. Am I the only one who thinks that's a little off?" I ask her. Livvy is the smartest person I know. Surely she's worked out that something is off by now.

"Yes, you are. Your father has worked extremely hard over the years. He deserves a break."

I consider her words for a moment. She's right. I know that, but I can't help feeling like something more is going on. "You're right," I say aloud. "It's not easy being the parents of the gods. I guess they do deserve a vacation for the next fifty years." I grin.

"Are you really trying to say your parents, Theo and Holly, are *the* Oceanus and Tethys?" Livvy asks me.

"Who?" I narrow my eyes at her in confusion.

With a sigh and an eye roll, Livvy stands from her chair. "Oceanus and Tethys, the offspring of Uranus and Gaia, were the primeval parents of the gods." At my blank expression, Livvy walks over to the shelf and picks up a book before opening it up to a page. She turns it around and shows me a picture of a fountain. "It's the Trevi Fountain in Rome. That..." She points to a stone dude in the middle. "...is Oceanus."

I've seen the fountain before. I know who it is.

"And you're comparing your parents to Oceanus and Tethys?"

"I said what I said, Liv." I shrug.

"You know Oceanus married his sister, right?" she says, laughing.

"Normal people don't have all this useless knowledge in their heads, Liv," I tell her and walk out of the room. I need to call Romeo. Someone has to know or be able to figure out what the fuck is going on around here.

I dial my twin's number and the call goes straight to voicemail. What the fuck? Instead of leaving a message, I send a group text to all my brothers.

LUCA:

@everyone Where the fuck are you, Romeo???

THEO:

@Luca Why not just ask him? What's the need for all of us to be involved?

MATTEO:

@Luca Use that creepy twin-mind shit you two have to locate him.

LUCA:

@Matteo I've tried. @Theo Because why not?

THEO:

@Luca When you find him, tell him I want to ask him something. IMPORTANT.

MATTEO:

@Theo Oh, the capitals are out, bro. What's so IMPORTANT???

THEO:

@Matteo I want to know if there's been research to prove that only one twin gets the full number of brain cells. I think @Romeo won the lottery, while poor @Luca got whatever was left over. Which clearly wasn't much.

MATTEO:

@Romeo I second this question. I want to know also.

LUCA:

@everyone I hate you all.

ROMEO:

@everyone I'm in Rome having gelato with Tilly. Stop fucking blowing up my phone with this useless shit.

MATTEO:

@Romeo Lorenzo is in Rome ATM too.

ROMEO:

@Matteo Why???

MATTEO:

@Romeo Trying to get himself killed by touching the daughter of a psychopath.

LUCA:

@Romeo Return my fucking calls. It's important.

ROMEO:

@Luca Is it life or death??? Because you Chatty Kathys all seem alive and well right now.

LUCA:

@Romeo It could be. Shit, could it be that???

THEO:

@Luca Stop being cryptic.

MATTEO:

@Luca Sharing is caring, little bro.

ROMEO HAS LEFT THE CHAT.

MATTEO:

@Luca Look what you went and did now. The smart twin left us with you...

LUCA:

@Matteo Sticks and stones...

Before I can add Romeo back into the group chat, my phone lights up with his name on the screen. "Hey."

"You good?" he asks me.

"I think so," I tell him.

"What's going on?"

"How long you going to be in Rome?" I say, instead of telling him that I'm obsessing over what's going on with Ma.

"Just for the day," Romeo replies. "If you need me to come back, I can."

"Nah, it's cool. Have a great day with Tilly," I say before adding, "I'll see you when you get back."

"Luca, if you need me, call. I'll answer," he says.

"Okay, I will," I tell him and hang up.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lorenzo
Valentino

*K*yla wanted to meet me at a café. I have no idea what she told her parents or her friend she was doing today. I really don't care either.

I then picked her up from that café and drove us to a private airport. I'd chartered a small plane to fly us the short trip to Rome. I personally don't give a shit who sees me with her, but she does. She doesn't want to deal with her father knowing about us yet. I've tried to tell her it's better to just rip the bandage off. But she's adamant that he doesn't need to know right now.

I'm not going to push her to do something she's not ready for. Besides,

with the way my family gossips, it isn't going to be long before our relationship is public knowledge. Which I know will be a blessing and a curse. Because the moment everyone knows about Kyla, she's going to be a target. As much as women are supposed to be off-limits in our world, you always get assholes who don't abide by those rules. There's always an enemy trying to get one up on us, trying to take over territory, make a name for themselves. Then, of course, there's a double threat of Kyla being a McKinley. She's the heiress to one of the world's wealthiest families.

My hand tightens around her, like it's somehow going to be enough to keep her tethered to me. Keep her safe. My eyes dart around the crowd, looking for any threat that might be lurking in the shadows as we make our way through the Coliseum. I've been here before and wasn't overly impressed back then, but witnessing Kyla's reaction to seeing this place for the first time is like nothing else. Her face is alight with excitement and awe as she takes in the architecture, stopping to read every sign that summarizes the history.

"This is truly amazing, Lorenzo. Like it shows just how insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things. Think of how many people have filled these walls," she says.

My brows draw down at her words. "Babe, there is not a single insignificant thing about you. You are very fucking significant, Kyla," I tell her.

She smiles, and it's not one of those fake, forced smiles I've seen her give to other people. But a real, genuinely happy smile. "When did you become such a sweet talker, L? If I would have known you could be like this, I would have let you into my panties a long time ago." She smirks.

"Kyla, you only just turned eighteen this year. I would never have touched you before that, no matter how much I wanted to."

"Well, gee, thanks," she says, turning away from me.

"It would have been wrong," I remind her.

"And now it's not?" she asks.

"No. Now, we're both consenting adults," I say. "Come on, let me show you down below." I lead her to the stairs that take us to the underground section of the Colosseum.

As soon as I find a secluded little spot, I pull her in, spin her around, nudge her back up against the brick wall, and slam my lips down onto hers. Her arms circle around my neck as she pushes up on her tiptoes and returns

my kiss with a hungry fever I want to feed.

I groan into her mouth, reach up a hand, and cup her cheek. “I fucking love you, Kyla McKinley.” I smile. “I have always loved you,” I tell her again.

“Mmm, you’re not so bad yourself, Lorenzo Valentino,” she says.

“You know what would sound better than Kyla McKinley?” I lift a brow in question.

“What?” she asks me.

“Kyla Valentino,” I tell her. “We should get married. You should marry me.”

“I should marry you?” she parrots. “Why?” Her arms drop from around my neck and she pushes on my chest, trying to create space between us.

“What do you mean *why*?”

“You’re telling me I should marry you, Lorenzo. I want to know why you think I *should* do that,” she says, putting a hell of a lot of extra emphasis on the word *should*.

“Because you and I are endgame, Kyla. You should marry me because I know that you feel this too. This feeling that overwhelms me. It’s all you. I don’t breathe right when you’re not around, and when you’re halfway across the fucking world, I feel like half of my soul is missing. I want you to be with me every day. I want to spend every day with you, talking to you, hanging out with you... and not just over text messages and phone calls. You are everything to me. So, yeah, I do think you *should* marry me, because I know you feel the same way. I can see it in the way you look at me.”

“I’m eighteen. I’m about to start university.” She shakes her head.

“There are plenty of good colleges in New York. I can get you into any school you want to attend—just say the word.”

“So, you *what*? Just expect me to up and move to New York to live with you? Leave my family, my sister, my friends... to go and be *what*? Your shiny new toy until you get bored and discard me?”

I blink at her. “You are not a shiny new toy, Kyla, and you know that. You don’t want to move to New York? Fine. I’ll come to Melbourne. I’ll buy us a home there.”

Her eyes widen in shock. “First of all, I don’t need you to buy me a house. And, second, you’d really move to Melbourne to be with me?”

“I would move to the pits of hell if that’s where you wanted to live,” I tell her.

“Okay,” she says with a smile.

“Okay?” I repeat.

“Okay, I’ll marry you,” she clarifies.

The grin that comes over my face is foreign. I don’t think I can recall a time I’ve ever been this happy. “Thank fuck,” I say, picking her up off the ground and spinning her around.

“Don’t get too excited. It’s going to be a short-lived marriage... *if* we even make it that far. My dad is going to kill you,” Kyla tells me, sounding very certain of her words. “So make sure you have life insurance and all that sorted.”

“Why? Can’t afford to give me a proper funeral yourself?” I counter with a smirk.

“It’s funny you think there would be a body to bury,” she says, and I laugh. “No, I’ll need the millions of dollars to spend on therapy after my heart breaks because you’re gone forever.”

“Babe, I’m not going anywhere. Your father doesn’t scare me,” I tell her before capturing her lips with mine.

“What does scare you?” she asks.

“You do,” I admit. She’s the only person in the world who could completely break me. I’m about to lean in and kiss her again when my phone vibrates in my pocket. Pulling it out, I see my Zio Romeo’s name light up the screen. “Yeah?”

“Where are you?” he questions me.

“The Coliseum. Why?”

“I need you to meet me in the ducts. Remember that spot your father and I showed you a few years back?” He’s referring to the door in a back street that leads to the underground aqueducts.

“Yeah, why?”

“Someone just fucking shot up the gelato shop. I was there with Tilly. I need you to get her out of this fucking city, Lorenzo.”

“What the fuck? Okay, be there in fifteen,” I tell him.

“Make it ten.” He cuts the call without waiting for a reply.

I look at Kyla. I know she could hear everything my uncle said. I really fucking hate pulling her into this side of the family, the ugly side, but I don’t have a fucking choice right now.

“I’m sorry. We have to go.” I lead her in the opposite direction, towards the closest exit.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Romeo
Valentino

I see the car lean into its brakes, and it's like everything happens in slow motion. The window rolls down and the barrel of a semi-automatic pokes out, aimed right at the fucking window Tilly and I are sitting in front of.

Throwing the little square table towards the glass, I jump on top of my daughter, causing her and her chair to fall to the ground right as the bullets penetrate the first pane. Tilly's shriek pierces through my ears and breaks my fucking heart.

I cover her body with mine as glass showers down on us. I make out the

screeching of the tires over the sound of everyone screaming. I look down at Tilly. She's not yelling anymore but her eyes are wide and the fear is evident on her face.

I don't know who the fuck just decided today was the perfect opportunity for a drive-by. But, whoever they are, their days are numbered. I haven't wanted to hunt down and end someone this much since I was in college and my sister-in-law was attacked.

I look down at Tilly. "You okay?" I ask, running my eyes over every part of her body that I can see. She nods her head but doesn't say anything. "All right, listen to me. You're okay, Matilda. We are going to stand up and head for the back door, ya hear me?" I tell her.

I remove one of the Glocks from the holster on my chest and shove it into her hands. I know she's capable of using it. I taught her to shoot myself. She's just never had a fucking reason to ever put those skills to the test until now. Before I get up, I retrieve my other pistol. Then I push to my feet and look around.

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath when I see Luigi on the ground, his chest riddled with bullet holes, his white shirt turning a deep red.

Pulling Tilly up, I tuck her into my side and turn her head against me as I lead her out the far end of the shop. There's a reason I selected this particular gelato store when I first started bringing my daughter here. The back door exits into an alleyway. One block down, there's a door in that same alley that takes you right underground into the aqueducts.

That's where I'm taking my daughter right now, until I can figure out what the fuck just happened. I need to get her out of this fucking city. I open the back door to the shop and look in both directions before I pull Tilly out behind me. Her hand is trembling in mine. I want to wrap this girl in fucking cotton wool and never let the world touch her. Though I've wanted to do that since the moment she was born and my wife insisted I couldn't.

"It's okay. We just need to make it another block."

"What's going on, Dad?" she asks me.

"I don't know, sweetheart, but you're okay. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. Come on." I walk quicker. I have no idea who shot up the shop. I don't even know if they were targeting me or Luigi. I'm not about to stick around and find out, though. I won't take chances with Tilly right next to me.

As soon as I get her into the underground ducts, I pull out my phone and

call Lorenzo. He's the closest one to us right now—that's what the tracker on his phone tells me anyway. It'll take at least an hour for any of my brothers to get here.

After explaining what happened and where we are, I sit down and pull Tilly next to me. "Lorenzo will be here in ten minutes. He's going to take you home to the estate," I tell her.

"What about you?" she asks me.

"I'll be back there later. I have some things to do here," I say cryptically.

"You mean you're going to go and find out who shot at us."

"I have a few things to do. I need to know that you and your mother and your brother are safe, at the estate," I tell her.

"How will I know that you're safe?"

"Sweetheart, I will be fine. Trust me." I try to give her a reassuring smile.

"Just so you know, if you're not okay, I'm going to move in with my new boyfriend you haven't met yet. And if you're dead, you won't be able to stop me from making stupid choices, so you have to be okay. Because who's gonna walk me down the aisle when I get married if you're not here for my wedding? I mean, I guess Zio Luca could. At least he'll look like you in the photos..." she rambles on.

"Tilly, stop." I grab hold of her hand. "I'm going to be okay, and you are not fucking moving in with any boyfriend. And when the time comes to walk you down the aisle, it'll be me—only me. But that's not happening for a really fucking long time," I tell her.

"Maybe. I could meet the love of my life tomorrow." She shrugs.

"Or you could stay home tomorrow and not go out," I'm quick to counter.

The door opens. I draw my gun and I see Tilly do the same with the one she's still holding. *Proud fucking dad moment, by the way.* Then Lorenzo walks in with a girl before quickly shoving her behind him. And not just any girl. A girl I recognize too fucking well. Kyla McKinley, Dom's daughter. Matteo was right. Lorenzo is trying to get himself killed.

I shake my head at my nephew while raising an eyebrow in silent question. "Catch you at a bad time?" I ask him.

"Don't say it," he warns me.

"Kyla, it's good to see you," I call out to the girl.

"Wait... Why are you two together?" Tilly points at her cousin and then at Kyla.

"Ah... I wanted to see some of the sights and Lorenzo offered to be my

tour guide,” Kyla says in way of explanation.

“I bet he did,” I murmur to myself.

“Okay, can we get this show on the road? What’s happening?” Lorenzo grunts.

“We have to get three buildings over, to get to the chopper, and I need you to make sure both of these girls get home,” I tell him.

“Okay. Let’s go.” Lorenzo waves an impatient arm, then turns his glare on me. “Who gave Tilly a gun?” He takes the Glock out of his cousin’s hand. “Do you even know how to use this thing?” he asks her, knowing full well she does.

“I can demonstrate on you if you want?” Tilly counters. “It’s not like you’re going to live much longer anyway. Talk about forbidden fruit, L.”

I block out the chatter of my daughter and nephew as I take hold of Tilly’s hand and lead them up through the underground tunnels. I manage to get them to the chopper without further incident. Which makes me think it was Luigi they were after, and I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Even if that is the case, I’m going to string the fuckers up by their goddamn balls for shooting at my daughter.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Theo
Valentino

I meet Lorenzo in the backyard as the chopper lands. He comes out gripping on to the hand of fucking Kyla McKinley.

Tilly storms up to me. “I really hope you’re heading to Rome right now to stop my dad from doing anything stupid,” she says.

“Stopping your father and his lookalike from doing stupid shit is my specialty. It’s what I’m good at, sweetheart,” I tell her, then grab her waist and pull her into my arms. “Don’t worry, Tilly. He’ll be fine. It’s his twin who doesn’t know how to dodge bullets.”

“Thank you.”

Matteo, Luca, Pops, and my Uncle Neo come out—all of them looking like they're ready for war. "Pops, you should stay with Ma and the girls," I tell him.

"You're not the boss yet, Theo. Why the fuck would I stay behind?"

"Because Ma needs you more than we do right now," I say. He squints his eyes at me. He knows I know something isn't right with my mother.

"You know, T, the boys have this. Come on, I'd much rather be kicking my feet up and drinking Cinque whiskey than running around in this fucking heat anyway," Zio Neo says.

"You sure?" My father looks to me.

"Pops, go. Take the girls inside," I tell him, and then turn to face my nephew. "Don't leave this house, and make sure all your cousins stay inside."

He nods his head and walks towards the door, still hand in hand with fucking Kyla McKinley. Dominic is not a person I want to have to deal with today, but I know I'm going to have to stop him from killing my nephew as soon as he finds out about this.

Once we're on the chopper, I turn to Matteo. "You know Dominic is not going to take that well," I say, gesturing a thumb over my shoulder towards the door Lorenzo and Kyla just walked through.

"I know. I told him. But he's fucking stubborn," Matteo says, then adds, "Must get that trait from his mother."

Luca and I both chuckle. "Sure, bro," Luca says.

We land on top of a building in Rome and make our way to where Romeo is waiting for us. He's standing across from the building that is now swarming with Italian coppers.

"What happened?" I ask him.

"Black SUV rolled up, shot the place up. I saw 'em coming and knocked Tilly to the ground," he says. "Luigi, the owner, wasn't so lucky."

"You think they were after him or you?"

"My money's on Luigi, but whoever it is will have to deal with me now," he says.

I look across the street and spot a detective I recognize. It's been years since I've seen him. "Matteo, come with me. You two wait here," I tell Romeo and Luca.

"You know, I think this whole boss thing is going to your head already, bro. You ain't got that ring yet," Matteo says, stepping up next to me as we cross the road.

Ignoring him, I walk up to the detective. I know he's on my grandfather's payroll. Fuck, most of the cops in this country are. "Giuseppe," I greet him.

"Fuck. Tell me this ain't Valentino shit here," he curses as he shakes my hand.

"No idea. I was hoping you could tell me. You got anything on the shooter?"

"Why?" Guiseppe asks me.

"Because my brother and my fucking niece were in that shop when some asshole decided to open fire. So, again, what do you know about it?" I tell him, my voice firm with the unveiled threat of what will happen if he tries to fuck me over on this.

Guiseppe looks around. Everyone is going about whatever business they're doing, not paying an ounce of attention to us. "Okay, the guy on the ground, name's Luigi. He owed a debt to the Gobbi family."

"Who the fuck is the Gobbi family?" I ask him.

"They're new in town, trying to climb up," he tells me.

"And where exactly would I find these Gobbis... if I were looking for them, that is?"

Guiseppe writes something down on his notepad and then tears off the page. "This is their home address. There're three of them and probably about twenty soldiers from what I've gathered."

"That's a small operation," I say more to myself.

"Like I said, they're *trying* to come up."

"Thanks." I tuck the paper into my pocket after memorizing the address.

Walking back across the road, I pull out my phone and message one of the capos we have here in Rome, telling him to be ready for us.

"If you want to keep your nose out of this, Romeo, I suggest you go back to the estate," I tell my brother. He does his best not to get mixed up in family business these days. Well, not the dirty work anyway. Backhanded deals are more his thing. Politicians are the most corrupt of us all.

"They shot at my daughter, Theo. I'm not sitting this one out," he says.

I think back to when Romeo found the fucker who attacked Livvy back when they were in college. That ended up with a missing body and Romeo behind bars for a few months. "Okay, but just so you know, I've got this. You don't have to come along," I remind him.

I might choose this lifestyle, thrive in it really. But I know the costs, and I will never force that on any of my brothers or nephews or even my own

fucking son—who, at this stage in his life, is dead set on following in my footsteps. I think Maddie has tried everything in her power to get him to choose a different path for himself. Nothing has deterred him. I haven't let him take the oath yet. Though I do think it's about time the next generation steps up.

By the time we were their age, we were already made men. Don't get me wrong, Lorenzo, Enzo, and Alessandro are all ready to swear their loyalty. It's us parents who have been holding them back. Their hands are already covered in blood. It's a dangerous thing to be a Valentino in this world. If you don't fight, you will get taken out. It's that simple.

We've done our best to make sure our children have the skills it takes to survive with the name they were given at birth. As my wife likes to remind me, you can't protect them all the time. I want to tell her that she's full of shit, but unfortunately she's not. Look at what happened today? I'd hate to think how that would have ended up if Romeo hadn't seen the car coming.

If he didn't react quickly enough...

We're fortunate in our family. Sure, we've suffered plenty of deaths within the ranks of the organization, but we've yet to bury a blood relative. Which is unusual to say the least. Pops says it's because we're smarter than the others. We think before we act, never go into anything without a strategy. Which is why, right now, we're headed to the home of a Donatello capo to formulate a foolproof plan on how we're going to take every fucking last one of these assholes out. They might not have been targeting my family, but they put them in harm's way, and that in itself deserves a consequence.

Unfortunately for the Gobbis, it won't be the kind you can come back from.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Holly
Valentina

“*W*hat’s happened? Where did the boys go? And why the bloody hell did you let them go off on their own?” I yell at my husband.

T’s lips tip up at one side ever so slightly. “Dolcezza, first of all, they’re not boys. Haven’t been for a long time now. They’re grown-ass men who don’t need their father to hold their hands anymore. And, second, why are you yelling?”

“I’m yelling because all of my sons are off doing God knows what, T. When they’re all gone together, something is wrong. What happened?” I ask, my voice rising even louder.

“Nonna, are you okay?” Dante walks out onto the back patio, where I just found T and Neo sitting around having a freaking whiskey tea party, while my sons are off doing something that will likely cause one of them to get injured. Or worse...

“Oh, I’m fine, Dante. Sorry. Your grandfather is just being an ass,” I tell my grandson.

“Where’d my dad go?” he questions us.

“Out,” T and Neo say at the same time.

Dante—who is the spitting image of Romeo at this age and, well, I guess Luca too, considering Romeo and Luca are identical twins—looks to me. “I’m sure, whatever they’re doing, they are fine, Nonna. I’ll make you tea,” he says and disappears into the house.

He is such a sweet soul, that child.

“See? Now you have the kids worried.” I scowl at T.

“No, I think that was your yelling, dolcezza. Trust me, the boys are fine,” he says.

“If they’re fine, then how about one of you tell me what they’re doing?” I look from T to Neo. Neither of them opens their mouths to talk.

“Oh, we were shot at while eating gelato. Dad is looking for whoever shot at us,” Tilly says from behind me.

I spin around. “You were shot at?” I ask, running my eyes up and down her body. There are a few scratches on her arms. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. Dad knocked me to the ground. It happened really fast,” she says.

“What do you mean you were shot at?” Dante turns to his sister, appearing in the doorway with a mug in his hands.

“It’s fine. We didn’t get hit,” Tilly says.

“Here, Nonna.” Dante hands me a cup of English breakfast tea.

“Grazi.” I thank him and take the mug. “Does your mother know?” I ask Tilly.

“No, I’m avoiding bringing it up until Dad gets home,” she says.

“Smart,” T tells her.

“How’d you get back here?” I know she went to Rome with her father this morning.

“Lorenzo was in Rome with Kyla. Dad made him come back on the chopper with me.”

“Lorenzo and Kyla?” I narrow my eyes in confusion.

“Yep. Didn’t see that one coming. So, when he dies, what happens to his part of the inheritance, Nonno? Does it get divided up between all of us, or can you just give it to the one you love the most?” Tilly asks T, and he laughs.

“He’s not dying, Tilly.” Pushing to his feet, T walks over to me and wraps an arm around my shoulders. Then he leans into my ear and whispers a phrase in Italian that I’ve come to know well. “I love you, Holly. Everything is going to be okay.”

They’re simple words but ones that he knows work on me. Because I have no reason to doubt my husband. I know some would call it blind faith. But T has never let me down in all our years of marriage. While the gesture may ease a little of the worry, it’s still there, in the back of my mind. My babies are out on those streets, and I’m not naïve enough to believe that whatever they’re doing is safe. No matter how much T says they’re fine, there is always an element of risk.

“Dante, why don’t you take your grandmother and find Orlando? Show her that version of his song you two came up with,” T says.

“Sure. Come on, Nonna, you’re going to love it,” Dante tells me.

I look back to T as he removes his arm from around my shoulders and kisses me on my forehead. “Tilly, come and tell me about how it was you who really saved your father and not the other way around,” he says to Tilly.

“Well, I would have if I were sitting in the other chair facing the traffic,” she says. “Except I probably would have saved everyone, Nonno.”

I watch as Tilly sits down next to her grandfather, indulging him in an exaggerated version of how she would have saved the day, before I follow Dante into the house. We find Orlando in one of the living rooms, his guitar in hand.

“Orlando, play Nonna that mix we made,” Dante tells him.

“Are you sure you want to hear it, Nonna?” Orlando asks.

“If it’s your song, sweetheart, I always want to hear it,” I say as I lower myself beside him on the sofa.

Before he hits play on his phone, his mother walks into the room. “Oh, are we doing a show and tell?” Katy asks excitedly.

“Nonna wants to hear the new version of the song.”

“Wait... When did you hear the old version?” Katy turns to me.

“Luca played it for me the other week,” I say.

Then it dawns on me that I haven’t felt strange at all today, no fogginess

or that odd sensation like I've forgotten something. I do, however, still have that dread in the pit of my stomach that insists something is wrong. I just don't know what. I'm putting it down to the boys not being here, and me not knowing what they're up to.

"Oh, he didn't mention it. Speaking of my husband, anyone know where he is?" Katy looks from me to the boys.

"He didn't tell you he was going to Rome?" I ask her.

"Rome? What's he doing in Rome?"

"Playing mafia," Orlando answers her question before I can.

I laugh at his vague description. "I'm surprised he didn't tell you," I say.

"He said he was going to meet Romeo, but he didn't say where," Katy clarifies. That makes sense. They've learned from their father how to provide information without giving away too much.

"Someone shot at Dad and Tilly in Rome. They're trying to find out who did it," Dante says. Both boys seem very unfazed by the events of today. Then again, it's not like this is the first time this has happened in our family.

"Are Tilly and Romeo okay?" Katy looks to the boys again.

"They're fine, but Tilly's too scared to tell Mom what happened. Because Mom will lock her down," Dante replies.

"Tell me what?" Livvy asks, walking into the room.

"Oh, shit, son! You've gone and done it now." Orlando punches Dante's arm.

"Mom, I just made Nonna tea. Want some?" Dante asks his mother.

"No, I want you to tell me what Tilly is too scared to say." Livvy uses her no-nonsense lawyer voice, the one I've seen her dish out in the courtroom on more than one occasion. There is something disarming about that tone that has even me wanting to confess, and I'm innocent in all this... as far as I know.

"Ah, yeah, about that. I can't. You need to ask her. Brotherly loyalty and all that," Dante says, making a run for the door.

"What ever happened to motherly loyalty?" Livvy yells after him, and then looks to me. "What happened?" she repeats.

"Tilly and Romeo were in a gelato shop when someone did a drive-by. They're both fine," I tell her quickly.

"Matilda Valentino, where are you?" Livvy yells as she walks out of the room.

I get it. It's never a good feeling hearing that your child was shot at. It's

even worse when your child gets hit though. I will never forget the two times Luca got shot. It felt like those bullets pierced my heart and embedded themselves in my soul.

Chapter Twenty-Six

*Juca
Valentino*

I look down at my phone and read the message from my wife.

KATY:

Whatever you're doing, do it safely. I'm too young to be a widow, and your son is too feral to be fatherless.

I smile and text her back.

ME:

Safe as a nun's virginity, babe. Be home soon.

KATY:

Your twin might not want to come home too soon. Livvy is on a warpath that would put the one you four are on to shame!

ME:

What's wrong with her?

Out of all of my sisters-in-law, Livvy's the one I worry about the most. I've seen her broken once before, and I do not ever want to see her like that again.

KATY:

She found out that Romeo and Tilly were shot at. She's not impressed. Going into real mama bear mode.

ME:

They're both fine.

Katy sends me back an eye roll emoji. I look across the table to Romeo and lift a single brow. "Your wife is pissed," I tell him.

"Oh, I know," he says, waving his phone at me. "You might need to hide me in your room when we get back, switch places for a bit. Ever wanted to be mayor? She's threatening extreme bodily harm."

I laugh and thank God I'm not dealing with an overly emotional wife right now. One of the things I love about Katy is how she's always calm, cool, and collected under pressure. Don't get me wrong, my wife will be biting her nails down to the beds with worry, but that will be the only external sign she'll give you.

Katy once told me that as much as she might want to blow up my phone and curse me out for getting into dangerous situations, she knows that putting that kind of extra stress on me won't help and that all it will do is distract me from the task at hand.

Katy will tell me after the fact, once I'm home. Whereas Livvy tells Romeo exactly what she's thinking, when she's thinking it, for how ever long she's thinking it. It took her a while to get to the place where she freely speaks her mind to anyone. But he did that. He lifted her up. Showed her that she can do and say whatever she wants and it's okay. She's also a fantastic defense attorney, better than Matteo even, so anyone who enters an argument with Livvy better come with an arsenal of knowledge on whatever they're looking to debate.

“When you two are done sipping tea and having your little chitchat, wanna put your phones away and come play with the big boys?” Matteo grunts at us.

“Heard from Savvy?” I ask him.

Matteo’s wife is going to string him up by his balls when we get back. Livvy might threaten to remove Romeo’s. Savvy, though? She’ll actually do it. The fact that Matteo does what he does for the family almost caused the two to never get together in the first place. His wife’s biggest fear was and *still is* losing Matteo or any one of their children.

“No, I don’t need to check in with my wife every minute,” he huffs.

“Well, Katy says Livvy is pissed. Like World War III level pissed. Which has me thinking if Liv is that pissed, I’d pay to see what Savvy is going to do to you when we get back from this little adventure.”

“How the fuck do they even know what we’re doing here?” Theo chimes in.

“No idea. I don’t think they do. But we’re all here, and they’re not stupid, Theo,” I tell him.

His response is a grunt as he shoves his hands into his pockets and looks back down at the blueprints we’ve been going over. We’re about to storm this house and eradicate everyone inside it. From what I’ve gathered about these fuckers, they’re doing everything and anything to build a name for themselves. How they’ve gone this long without coming to our attention, I have no idea, but they have it now. And the attention of the Valentino or the Donatello family is not something anyone wants.

“Okay, you two are going in here with these ten,” Theo commands the room whenever he speaks. It’s not the first time I’ve watched him lead a team for a job, but now that he’s taking over and I’m going to be stepping up under him, I really fucking hope the fucker stays alive. *His* is not a job I want.

“Got it,” Romeo and I both say at the same time.

“Matteo and I will enter here, with five. Three are going through this window and then another four through the side.” Theo indicates each spot on the map as he calls it out.

“Got it.” Everyone nods in agreement.

“Stick to the plan and don’t shoot each other,” Theo says. “Let’s roll out.”

Twenty minutes later, we pull up in front of an old Roman mansion. They might be up-and-comers but they sure as fuck ain’t short of a dollar, or in this case a euro. Romeo and I lead ten men to the entry point we were assigned.

From the very quick surveillance of the place we did, there should be fifteen guys inside. Three brothers and their small group of soldiers.

We don't know who shot up the gelato shop, and it doesn't matter. Because, when it comes to parasites like these, if you don't take 'em all out, they just keep popping back up.

We all have Theo's voice in our ears. On his count, everyone storms into the house. I have Romeo at my side and we move fluidly, like one unit. Each always knowing what the next step of the other is going to be. I have two guns raised when I turn the first corner. I find my target, pull the trigger, and my bullet lands right in the middle of his chest. I hear gunshots coming from all over the house, followed by our signal word as each room is checked and cleared out.

"Clear," Romeo yells as we step over the body I just dropped to the floor.

We enter the next room. It's completely empty, but the window's open. Walking over to the sill, I spot someone legging it across the grass. Then he's falling. One of our soldiers skirting the perimeter got him before the fucker got too far.

Not even five minutes later, we're all meeting up in the middle of the house. Everything is quiet.

"We lost three," Theo grits out.

It's never good to hear you've lost one or a few of your guys. I look at each of my brothers and thank God that it wasn't one of them. "There's one man unaccounted for," Romeo says.

"We'll find him," Matteo replies.

The unmistakable sound of a gun being shot rings out through the room. I look up the staircase, following the direction of the noise, and take aim. I get the fucking asshole in the leg. He points his gun at me and I fire off another three rounds. This time hitting him square in his chest. The gun drops from his hand, and then his body is toppling down the stairs. There's something cathartic about watching their bodies drop as the life drains from their eyes.

I return my attention to my brothers. Everyone is quiet, but I noticed that Matteo is clutching his arm and then I see the blood seeping through his fingers. His eyes flick down before landing back on me.

"I think you're right. There is definitely going to be World War III when we get home." He smiles.

I nod my head. This is not going to go over well with his wife. With any of our wives really. "Might as well torch this place and get it over with then."

“I want a final body count and be sure to ID them all. Then burn the place to the ground,” Theo says to one of the Valentino capos.

“You do know this stone isn’t going to *burn to the ground*, right?” Romeo says as we exit the building.

“Bulldoze the fucking thing then,” Theo grunts while holding his jacket over the bullet hole in Matteo’s arm.

“Stings a bit, don’t it?” I ask Matteo with a smirk.

“Like a fucking bitch,” he grinds out between clenched teeth.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Romeo called when the boys were on the way back to the chopper, informing me that I needed to bring in the doc. The words no father wants to hear when their children have been off on a job.

“I need you to distract Holly and Savvy,” I tell Neo.

“Why?”

“Matteo got hit, in the arm. Romeo says it looks clean,” I explain in a hushed voice.

“Got it.” Neo nods his head.

We’re in my cousin’s office. He and Angelica spend half the year at this

estate and the other half in New York. Holly pushes the door open, not bothering to knock. Not that she ever has.

“T, why is the doc here?” she asks me.

I look past her to see our on-call doctor with two trolleys of medical equipment behind him. I don’t ever lie to my wife, but that doesn’t mean I always tell her every little detail of what’s going on either.

“I called him,” I say before addressing the man in the hall. “Thanks for coming, Doc.”

“Shit, Holly, can you show me where that book in the library is? You know, that one you were talking to Angelica about? She said she wanted to read it and I want to get it for her.” Neo places his hand on my wife’s back, turning her around and guiding her out the door.

“Don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to distract me, Neo Valentino,” she chastises him, then aims her glare at me.

I know I’m going to pay for this later. But, right now, I need the doctor to be able to do his job without the distraction of a hysterical mother or wife. Because let’s face it, when Holly and Savvy find out that Matteo was shot, this house is going to hear a fair amount of screaming.

“Come in, Doc. You can set up in here. The boys are about ten minutes out,” I tell him.

“Sure, boss,” the doctor says as he starts emptying out his bags and laying out his supplies.

I open the glass door that leads to the backyard. It’ll be easier for the boys to bring Matteo in this way, rather than go through the house where God only knows who will see them.

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN that Holly wasn’t going to leave so easily. As soon as the four boys are walking towards the back of the office, my wife runs out to the yard. I can’t hear what she says but the looks on my sons’ faces tell me it’s nothing good. All I can do now is stand back and wait for the chaos headed my way.

When they make it into the office, Matteo is still assuring his mother that he’s fine and it’s just a scratch, which Holly isn’t having a bar of.

“Dolcezza, you need to let the doctor do his job. Come on.” I grab her

shoulders and try to move her away from where Theo and Luca have laid Matteo out on the makeshift surgical table the doc has set up on the desk.

Holly turns her glare on me for the second time today. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me he was shot, T.”

“He’s fine,” I assure her, my eyes skimming Matteo, who apart from the bullet hole in his arm, does in fact seem fine.

“Ma, I promise. I’m fine,” he repeats, for what I’m guessing is the millionth time.

The doctor removes Theo’s hand that was pressing down on the wound over the fabric of a suit coat. Then he uses the scissors to cut the material of Matteo’s shirt away.

“Someone hand me a drink.” Matteo looks at his brothers.

“I’ll get it,” Romeo says.

“What the hell happened?” Holly asks them.

“Ah, a bullet flew through the air and landed in Matteo’s arm,” Theo says, and then looks away when his mother aims that same glare she gave me on him.

Rule number one of being married to a fiery redhead: Don’t piss off the *fiery redhead*, especially when she’s in mama bear mode.

“He’s going to be okay, right, Doc? How does it look?” Holly turns her questions to the doctor.

Before he can respond, the door to the office opens and I curse under my breath when I see who is behind it. There’s only one thing worse than having my son’s wife in here right now and that’s having his daughter barge into the room.

“What the fuck happened? Dad? Oh my god! What happened?” Aurora screams as she rushes towards her father. She pushes Luca out of the way to get closer to him.

“Sweetheart, I’m fine, and lower your voice before your mother hears you,” Matteo tells her.

“Too late. What the hell, Tao? Who shot you? I’m going to fucking kill them myself!” Savvy yells as she pushes against Theo’s chest, turning all her rage on her husband’s brother. “You’re supposed to look out for him. How could you let him get shot!”

“Babe, Savannah, stop. I’m fine. It’s not his fault,” Matteo says.

“Not his fault? He’s supposed to make sure this doesn’t happen. Oh my god! Why is there so much blood?” she screams.

Of course, this only gets the attention of the rest of the household as Lorenzo and Enzo both run into the room, followed by Tilly and Kyla.

“Okay, everyone needs to get the fuck out now.” My voice rises over the noise of everyone else’s chaos, and all at once, they stop talking and look to me. “The doctor cannot get that bullet out of his arm if everyone’s in here causing a fuss. So stop with the hysterics and let the man do his job. Once Matteo is stitched up, you can all do whatever you want with him. Until then, either shut the hell up or get the hell out,” I tell them.

“I have one question first,” Aurora says. She’s the only one crazy enough to speak right now. I raise an eyebrow at her, indicating for her to continue. “Can I finally have a gun? Oh, and can I take the chopper to Rome?” she asks with all seriousness.

“That was two questions, Aurora, and the answer to both is a resounding *no*,” I tell her.

“What? Why not? Someone shot my dad. I’m going to find them and shoot their dicks off,” she says.

“You can’t, because the person who shot him is already dead, sweetheart,” Luca explains.

“Well...” Aurora starts to argue.

“Aurora Valentino, zip it,” Matteo warns her.

“Daddy, are you okay?” She turns to him.

“I’m fine, honestly. Now move out of the way so the doctor can work,” he says.

“Okay.” She nods, then looks over at the doctor. “If he dies, I’m going to keep you alive for weeks, using those instruments of yours to inflict the worst kind of pain you’ve ever experienced. And then, when you’re finally begging me to put you out of your misery, I’m going to refuse until there’s nothing left of you but incoherent pieces,” she says to the doctor.

“Oh, fucking hell, Aurora. Now is not the time.” Lorenzo grabs hold of his sister, picks her up, and moves her to the other side of the room. “Rein in the Little Miss Psycho routine for a hot minute,” he tells her.

I shake my head. Of course, one of my granddaughters had to go and be as crazy as my sister. I have never seen anyone torture a man as expertly as Angelica can. Although something tells me Aurora might just give my sister a run for her money.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Holly
Valentina

When I come out of the bathroom, I find T pacing up and down the bedroom. He stops and looks at me. “I’m sorry, and before you curse me out, I had every intention of telling you *after* he was stitched up.”

My hands shake. The phone drops from my grip, landing on the tiled floor with a loud crack. T takes two steps forward until he’s standing in front of me. The tears that I’ve been holding in since I answered that call ten minutes ago stream out like a broken faucet. Uncontrollable, falling down my face as I heave in breaths.

“Shit, Holly. What’s wrong? Matteo is okay,” T says, wrapping his arms

around me. Usually being in my husband's arms is enough to comfort me. But not even the great T Valentino can fix this. He can't change what's happening... what's already happened...

A cry pierces the silence of the room. It takes me a minute to realize it came from me. My body falls limp. T scoops me up and sits on the bed.

I hear a commotion, but I don't pick up my head, keeping it buried in his chest as my fingers curl around the fabric of his shirt. I scream, letting his chest muffle the sound.

"Holly, you need to talk to me. What happened?" T runs his hands through my hair and up and down my back.

I shake my head. I can't tell him. I can't say the words. If I do, it's real and I don't want it to be real. It can't be real. I just need to wake up. This day is not real. It's a nightmare, and I'm going to wake up at any moment now. I have to.

"Pops." Theo's voice breaks through my fog. "It's Zia Reilly," he says.

And then I absolutely lose it. I don't know what happens next. All I do know is that I'm clinging to my husband, begging him to fix it, even though we both know he can't.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Theo
Valentino

I pull out my phone and send a text to my brothers as I watch my dad struggle to calm my mother's hysterics. I don't know what else to do. I've never seen her like this. Ever.

ME:

@everyone It's not Mom. It's Zia Reilly. Alex just called and told me she has Alzheimer's. Ma is not handling the news well. Pops needs help.

Alex is our cousin's husband. He reached out to me as soon as he heard.

His wife is Reilly's daughter, Lily. I can only imagine how they are all handling the news...

Matteo:

@Theo Where are you?

ME:

@Matteo Ma and Pops's room. She's distraught. I don't know what to do.

Matteo:

@Theo On my way.

Romeo:

@Theo I'm coming too.

Luca:

@Theo I'm almost back to the house, about twenty minutes out.

I tuck my phone into my pocket. "Pops, what can I do?" I ask him. "I don't know," he says, looking up at me.

I've never heard my father say those words. He's the one person who always has the answers. Always finds a way to fix everything. To hear him say *I don't know* shows just how bad this situation really is.

I honestly think my mom would have handled it better if it were her and not her twin. She's that type of person, though. She'd rather see everyone around her healthy and happy, and take on the burden herself. My mother really is one in a million. And, right now, she needs us.

I just wish I had a fucking clue as to how to help her...

Chapter Thirty

T
Valentino

I've never felt more fucking useless in my life. Having my wife plead with me, while she cries out like she's experiencing the worst pain imaginable, shattered my fucking heart. A heart that only truly started beating for her. I haven't seen her this broken since we first met after she thought I'd died. I wanted to tell her that it would be okay, that I would fix this for her, that I'd always fix everything for her. I couldn't, though. Because some things really are out of my control.

When she finally fell asleep, I left her in bed with Theo and Romeo standing watch in the room. I needed a breather. I needed to find a place I

could fall apart without losing it in front of my family. Which is why I'm here, falling to my knees in front of an altar instead.

The old chapel in this house hasn't been used in years. I'm hoping that God still knows it's here, that he hears the prayers I'm about to send up. I haven't prayed since I was a kid, when my mother used to take me to church with her.

I make the sign of the cross over my body and whisper, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Closing my eyes, I inhale a deep breath before saying more. "I know that we're not friends, not really even associates at this point in my life. But my wife, she's a good person." I choke on my words. "I'm begging you to help her through this. Help her find a way to heal. I can't lose her, and I don't know how to get her through this. I need help."

I hear the door open, and then a small figure kneels beside me. I look across to Tilly, and she holds out a set of black rosary beads to me. "Maybe he'll hear us better if we pray together," she says. Then she takes hold of one of my hands. "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen," she says the words and then starts them over again. This time, I join her. "Please let my nonna be okay, God," she says when we're done.

I wrap my arms around my granddaughter, kissing her forehead. "She's going to be okay. We'll make sure of it," I tell her.

"Are you going to be okay, Nonno?" she asks me.

"Always."

We each push to our feet and leave the little chapel, hand in hand. "Come on, I'll make you a coffee," Tilly says.

"I should go check on your grandmother."

"Okay, I'll bring you tea then." She heads off in the direction of the kitchen. I don't know how I got so lucky to have such thoughtful grandchildren.

"Nonno, you okay?"

I turn to find Orlando looking at me from where he's leaning on a doorframe. He's the quiet one out of all of my grandchildren—that is, until he has a guitar in his hands.

"I'm okay," I tell him.

"You know, she's going to be okay. Nonna is one of the strongest women

I know. She's going to be okay," Orlando repeats.

"I know," I say, hoping like hell it's the truth. I clap a hand over his shoulder, then make my way back down the hall. When I walk into the bedroom, Holly is still asleep and Theo and Romeo are sitting on the sofa.

"She hasn't woken up," Romeo says.

"You okay, Pops?" Theo asks me.

No, I'm not. But I can't tell my sons that. I won't burden them with having to worry about me as well as their mother.

"I will be," I say instead. "Tilly is making tea. I think all the kids are out of sorts, not knowing what to do."

"I'll talk to them," Theo says.

"I'll come with." Romeo stands to follow his brother out of the room. He pauses at the door and looks to me. "Pops, she's going to be okay."

"I know," I say, once again praying that she will be. Although I'm not sure how she's going to handle this.

As soon as they are both gone, I shut the door and lie down next to my wife. Holly's eyes slowly open, and she smiles at me for a moment. And just like a switch went off, that smile is gone as quickly as it appeared. "It wasn't a dream, was it?" she asks me, her voice broken.

I reach out and brush the hair out of her face. "No, *dolcezza*, it wasn't."

"What am I going to do, T? I can't do this again. I can't lose my sister," she says.

"We're going to do this together. We are going to make sure she gets whatever help she needs, and we're going to be there for Bray and the girls," I tell her. "Together. Just like everything else, we do this together too."

"It should have been me." She chokes on a sob.

I shake my head. *No, it fucking shouldn't have been.* But I don't say that. "I love you," I say instead.

"I love you too."

"Bray, the girls, and Reilly are coming for a week," I tell her. Shortly after my wife fell asleep, I called my brother-in-law and told him that the sisters needed to be together right now. He agreed and said he'd sort it out.

"They're coming here?" Holly asks me.

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"I wish I could fix this for you, *dolcezza*. I really do. It breaks my fucking heart that you're hurting and I'm fucking terrified of not being enough..."

“Enough for what?” She looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

“Enough to keep you here. Enough to stop you from breaking into too many pieces,” I admit.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want you to feel like that,” she says. “You will always be enough, T. *Always*. Am I going to have days where my heart is breaking? Yes, but those days will be much more bearable because I know I have you.”

“Always,” I repeat.

Chapter Thirty-One

Lorenzo
Valentino

“Hey,” I answer Kyla’s call as I walk into my room and quickly close the door behind me.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asks.

“Nothing. Why?”

“Something is definitely wrong. I can tell,” she insists.

I haven’t seen her in a few days and it’s fucking killing me. All I want right now is for her to be here, in this bed, in my arms. “My grandmother found out her twin sister has Alzheimer’s, and she’s not handling the news too well. No one is. The whole house is depressed,” I tell her.

“I’m sorry. What can I do to help?”

“Talking to you is helping me,” I say.

“Do you think you could talk to me in person? Like if you were to come to the gates and tell the burly guy standing in front of me that I’m allowed inside?” she asks.

I jump to my feet. “You’re here?” I question, already walking back out of my bedroom.

“Uh-huh, I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it is. Hold on. Give me two minutes. I’m coming.” I hang up the phone and jog through the house until I get to the front door. I take the steps two at a time and then walk down the long driveway. I can see her. She’s waiting for me. The security around this place is fucking insane. But it’s here for a reason, and I can’t fault the guys for doing their jobs.

“Hey.” I nod at the soldier blocking the entrance.

“Mr. Valentino,” he greets me.

“She needs to be added to the list,” I tell him before adding, “She’s my fiancée.”

“Sir, sorry, I didn’t know,” he says while rubbing a hand over the back of his neck, likely fearing he’s missed a vital piece of intel.

“No worries. I’ll get someone to update the list.” I open the gate and Kyla walks ever so slowly towards me.

I take the three steps needed to close the distance before wrapping my arms around her back. I pick her up off the ground, slam my lips down on hers, and head towards the house. Kyla pulls away from me. “Put me down. I can walk.” She laughs.

“But I like carrying you.” I pout, as I set her onto her feet anyway.

“How’d you get away?”

“I told my mom I was going into town to buy gifts for Zara,” she says.

“Ah, using the little sister as a get-out-of-jail-free card. Smart.”

“She didn’t buy it at all. Told me to say hi to you as I was leaving.”

I laugh. “Okay, well, I guess the only person we really have to break this news to is your dad.”

“Yeah, that can wait,” Kyla says.

“Are you afraid of your father?” I ask her. I’ve never gotten that vibe from Kyla or her sister. Dominic McKinley worships the ground his daughters walk on.

“No.” Kyla laughs. “I’m afraid of what he’s going to do to you. Not me.”

“It’ll be fine. Besides, you’re going to be my wife. No one can argue with that.”

I somehow manage to get Kyla through the house and into my room without anyone stopping us. It must be some kind of a miracle, considering how many people are currently roaming around this estate at any given time.

“I missed you,” I tell her.

“It’s only been a few days, Lorenzo, and you’ve talked to me on each one of them.”

“It’s not the same as being able to touch you,” I counter.

“Oh, you want to touch me, do you?” Kyla takes a step back with a huge grin on her face.

“I always want to touch you,” I admit.

“Is that so?” Kyla smirks as she lifts the hem of her dress, really fucking slowly. I stand still, my eyes drinking in every inch of silky smooth skin she reveals. “Where do you want to touch me, Lorenzo?” she asks. “Here?” She points to her thigh, and I nod my head. “What about here?” She gestures to the curve of her neck.

“I want to run my lips all over you. I want to taste every single bit of you,” I tell her.

“Oh, so now touching isn’t enough? You want to taste me too?” She lifts her dress higher, revealing a pair of pink panties.

“Fuck yes, I want a taste.” I stare at her bare pussy through the lace of her underwear.

Kyla tugs her dress all the way over her head and then drops it to the floor. My eyes don’t know where to look first. I want to look everywhere. I tilt my head to the side and run my eyes up and down her body. Taking my time, appreciating the beauty that is Kyla McKinley soon-to-be Valentino.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.” I sigh.

“Thank you,” she says.

She’s wearing a pink lace bra that matches her panties. Reaching behind her back, she unclips the bra and then lets it fall to the ground. Her breasts—fuckable, pert breasts with rosy nipples that are begging for my mouth to suck them—hang free. Kyla moves to the bed and lies in the middle of it.

“So... did you want to just stare or are you actually going to taste me, Lorenzo?” she asks.

I lift my shirt over my head, discarding it on the floor. Then, toeing my shoes off, I climb onto the bed and cover her body with mine. “Oh, I’m not

just going to taste you, Kyla. I'm going to fucking feast on you. Get comfortable, babe, because you're going to be here for a while," I tell her, and slide down her body, stopping to capture her left breast in my mouth.

I suck at her nipple and circle my tongue around the peak. Kyla's body arches off the bed, and her legs try to clamp around me. I move my attention to the other side, sucking and nipping at her right breast while my hand tweaks her left. Her fingernails run through my hair as her head tips back. I look up at her, momentarily frozen by the beauty that is this girl. When she notices that I've stopped, Kyla opens her eyes and looks at me.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Your beauty takes my fucking breath away, Kyla McKinley soon-to-be Valentino," I say aloud this time.

"Soon-to-be Valentino?" She laughs.

"You already said yes. There are no take-backs," I tell her before kissing my way down her stomach. I reach the waistband of her underwear. Hooking my fingers underneath, I sit up and pull them down.

Spreading her legs open again, I settle between them while pinning her in place with my hands on her upper thighs. I don't waste any time. I slide my tongue up the center of her slit and then close my mouth over her clit and suck. I groan with the explosion of her taste on my tongue. Sucking harder, I flick against her sensitive little bud. Kyla's legs shake under the weight of my palms, and her hips lift as she pushes her pussy closer to my face. Sliding one of my hands up, I insert a finger. She's so fucking tight that I have to push in and out a few times before adding a second digit, while my tongue continues to play with her clit.

"Oh shit, Lorenzo, it's too much," she hisses.

I look up. "No, it's not. I fucking want it, Kyla. Let go and give it to me," I tell her before returning my attention to her sensitive spot.

"Fuck!" Kyla curses out. Her hands tug at my hair as her body bucks beneath me. Her orgasm detonates through her.

I continue to lick her slowly until I feel her muscles completely relax and melt into the mattress. Moving up her body, I find her neck and kiss my way over to her ear. "You good, babe?" I ask her.

"Uh-huh," she says. "That was... I don't know what that was, but it was amazing."

"You are amazing," I tell her, capturing her lips with mine.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Holly
Valentino

I'm nervous. My sister is almost here, and I can't wait to see her. But I'm also worried that I'm going to see her and completely fall apart again. I walk into the kitchen to make sure that Reilly's favorite cookies are out.

"Oh my gosh, Mrs. Valentino, I'm so sorry," Kyla says as soon as she sees me. Her face reddens and her hands attempt to push my grandson off her.

"Don't be. It's okay. I was young once too and fell to the charms of a Valentino. I know exactly what it's like," I tell her.

“Ew, gross, Nonna. How do I wash my ears out?” Lorenzo screws up his face and feigns a gagging noise.

“What’s gross is having to watch you make out with her all over the damn house. Get a room. Or better yet? Don’t, and stop making out with her altogether.” My granddaughter enters the kitchen with her usual flourish.

“Aurora, seriously?” Lorenzo scowls at his sister.

“What?” She shrugs her shoulders.

Kyla tries and fails to fade into the background, almost as if the poor girl is willing herself to disappear. She takes a step backwards. The tension between the three could be cut with a knife.

“What’s going on here?” I ask, pointing at Aurora and then Lorenzo and Kyla.

“What’s going on is that Lorenzo is being reckless and going to get himself killed by being with *her*.” Aurora gestures a hand towards Kyla. “Did you know that there are literally billions of women in the world, Lorenzo, and you had to pick the one who’s sure to get your ass fed to some pigs?”

“She has a name and you fucking know it,” Lorenzo hisses between clenched teeth.

“It’s okay. I... I need to get home anyway,” Kyla says.

“No, you don’t,” Lorenzo grunts.

“Okay.” I clap my hands together to get everyone’s attention back on me. “Aurora, apologize to Kyla and leave your brother alone,” I tell my granddaughter.

“But, Nonna, if he dies, I’m stuck with just Enzo. Do you have any idea what kind of existence that will be for me?” she whines.

“He’s not dying, Aurora. You’re being dramatic,” I say.

“Fine, sorry, Kyla. But if your dad does kill him, you better hide.” Aurora narrows her eyes in Kyla’s direction before stomping out of the room.

“I’m going to fucking strangle her,” Lorenzo mutters under his breath.

“She’s just worried about you,” I remind him.

“She doesn’t have to be a bitch about it,” he says.

“Right, well, I just came in here to look for cookies, not drama. So, I’m leaving. Talk to your sister, Lorenzo. Nobody loves you like she does.”

Aurora might go about things the wrong way, but she really does feel deep. She just has no idea how to be protective and kind at the same time. She’ll learn with age, I’m sure.

A few minutes later, I find myself walking up and down the foyer of the

house. Waiting. I haven't seen my sister since Christmas. My mind drifts to how this holiday season will be, and I can't help but wonder how fast this disease is going to take my twin away from me...

"Holly, you okay?" Neo asks from the landing. He's coming down the stairs by the time I turn around to answer him.

"Ah, yeah. I'm just waiting for Reilly to get here," I say.

"Oh, yeah, they're arriving today."

"Yep."

"If you need anything, let me know. You got this," Neo says while wrapping an arm around my shoulders and squeezing.

"Thank you," I tell him.

"Why the fuck are you touching my wife, Neo?" T comes down the hall, his voice booming through the open space. Clearly he's irritated.

You would think, after all these years together, my husband would ease up on the whole *nobody touches my wife* thing. But, no, he still carries on about it. Although I do think it's more out of habit than anything else.

Neo drops his arm, and we both find T glaring at him. "Really, T? You hug my wife all the fucking time," Neo counters.

"She's my fucking sister," T says.

"So?"

"So she's my fucking sister," T repeats. "I can hug her."

"Well, Holly here is my soul sister." Neo shrugs.

"Nice try," T tells him. "Don't you have a granddaughter to go make sure isn't setting fire to the house?"

"Mabilia wouldn't set fire to the house," Neo huffs.

"Just schools then?" T laughs.

We found out the reason Mabilia was expelled. Apparently, she lit up the science lab. She said the science teacher deserved to burn for calling her stupid. He didn't burn, thank god, but the building sure did.

"One word, T," Neo says. "*Aurora*." His laughter follows him down the hall when he pivots on his heel and walks away.

"He has you there," I tell my husband.

"Aurora is perfect," T insists.

"When she's asleep, maybe." This comes from Dante, who just so happen to stroll through the front door with his mother in tow.

"I don't even want to know. Reilly and Bray are almost here, so let's pretend to be a normal family for at least a little bit," I say.

“Think that ship sailed when you birthed four boys,” Livvy chimes in, and I grin.

“You’re probably right.”

Then I hear the sound of cars pulling up, and rush to the door. Dante opens it for me before I get there. I wait for everyone to pile out, and as soon as I spot my sister, I make a beeline for her. She must sense me coming because she immediately turns around to face me, and I almost collapse with relief when it’s clear that she recognizes who I am. I know I’m being ridiculous—of course, she’s not going to forget me this soon. It could take years, but that fear is going to be there every time I see her from now on.

I wonder how T would feel about spending the first few years of his retirement in Sydney. Maybe I should talk to him about it...?

My arms wrap around Reilly. “I’m so glad you’re here,” I tell her.

She returns my embrace. “Me too, but maybe lighten up on the hug, Holly. We’re not young anymore. You’re going to crack a rib or something,” she huffs.

“Shit, sorry. Are you okay?” I pull back and look her up and down.

“Don’t do that, Holly. This is why I wasn’t going to tell you,” she says. “I’m fine.”

“I’m sorry.” I fight to hold back the tears. But I’m a crier and my sister knows that.

“Do not cry. If you cry, your husband’s probably going to start shooting people.” Reilly laughs.

“Speaking of shooting, how is Matteo? I heard he got shot,” my niece says, coming up and pulling me into a hug. “Hey, Aunt Holly.”

“Hey, sweetheart. He’s okay. It was only his arm,” I tell Hope.

“Oh. My. God, he made it sound like it was going to be amputated.” She chuckles.

As much as Matteo tells me, Savvy, and Aurora that he’s okay, he tells everyone else that he’s seriously injured and almost died. That boy has always been the dramatic one out of the bunch. It’s no wonder Aurora is the way she is.

“Holly, how’re things?” Bray is next to greet me. He pulls me into a hug and I sink into his embrace. I can only imagine what he’s going through right now.

“Good, you?” I ask him. Reilly might be my twin sister, but she’s his wife.

“I’m good. I was promised some kick-ass whiskey. Lead me to it,” he says, walking up to T.

“Right. Come on in. It’s fucking hot out here,” T tells him.

Everyone files into the house. Hope’s twin sister is the first to speak up again. “Aunt Holly, this place is even bigger than your other one,” Lily says, stepping up next to me.

“This is the Donatello Palace. It’s bloody huge. Don’t be surprised if you get lost more than once,” I tell her.

“It’s beautiful. I love it,” she says before turning to her husband. “Alex, we should buy a palace.”

“Sure, Lily, whatever you want.” He grins at her.

Lily winks at me. I know she’s not really going to buy a palace. Although I have no doubt that her husband would find a way to get her one if that’s what she really wanted. That man adores her.

Chapter Thirty-Three

T
Valentino

*H*olly has been anxious all morning about the arrival of her sister. Now that her twin's here, my wife appears more relaxed. I watch as she takes Reilly and the girls through the house, giving them a full tour of the large estate.

Bray, Alex, and Hope's husband Chase follow me into one of the living rooms and over to one of the wet bars. I pour each of them a generous serving of whiskey. Bray gulps his down in one go and then holds his glass out for a refill.

"Still not a fan of flying?" I ask him.

Chase and Alex share a collective groan while shaking their heads. “If he weren’t my father-in-law, I would have shot ’em,” Alex grumbles.

“And I would have loaded the gun for him,” Chase adds.

I pour Bray twice as much whiskey this time. “How is everyone holding up?” I know it’s a stupid fucking question. I mean, how do you take the news that you’re going to watch your wife, mother, sister slowly disappear in front of your eyes?

“It’s... I don’t know what the fuck it is.” Bray sighs. “The girls aren’t handling it well.”

“Understandable.” I nod my head. A silence falls over the room. It’s obvious no one really knows what to say.

“I hope you’re not giving that asshole my good whiskey, Pops,” Theo says, entering the room and pointing at Alex.

“No, I gave him *my* good whiskey.”

“Fuck off. Neither of you would even know about De Bellis whiskey if it weren’t for me.” Alex rolls his eyes.

Theo shakes Alex’s hand and then Chase’s. He hugs Bray and whispers something in his ear, but I don’t catch what he says. “Well, I don’t know why you’re all standing here looking grim and shit, but Ma said lunch is ready and both of your wives...” He gestures to Alex and Chase. “...are lost and wandering from room to room in the east wing.”

“How do you know they’re lost?” Alex asks.

“Because I was the one who led them into a room and then disappeared through a hidden door, leaving them to find their own way back.” Theo grins and then pulls up the house’s camera feed on his phone, zooming in on Lily and Hope stumbling around as they try to get their bearings in such a large space.

“You know they’re going to be pissed when they find you,” Chase says.

Theo shrugs. “I can take ’em.” Then he laughs. “Come on. If we don’t show up for lunch, Matteo’s offspring will eat all the fucking food.”

“I heard that, Zio Theo,” Aurora yells into the room as she passes by on her way to the kitchen.

“Good. Don’t eat my steak, Aurora,” he yells back.

Aurora pauses and smirks through the open doorway. That’s never a good sign from her. “I won’t eat your steak, Zio Theo. I might spit on it though,” she sings, and then bolts down the hallway.

Alex and Chase crack up laughing. “She wouldn’t actually spit on it,

would she?” Alex asks.

“I wouldn’t put anything past that one. She’s pure fucking evil,” Theo replies as we follow the sound of Aurora’s laughter down the hallway.

I walk around the dining room, lean forward, and kiss my wife on her forehead before taking the seat next to hers. I look down at the table that the staff extended to cater for everyone’s arrival. There’s a fucking lot of us. And, for some reason, the McKinleys along with some other young girl I’ve never seen in my life are here today too.

I look to Lorenzo. His shoulders are straight and he has that “try me, motherfucker” look on his face. The one he gets when he has an idea in his head that no one will be able to talk him out of. Unfortunately, I think that idea has a lot to do with the girl on his right, Kyla McKinley.

My mind wanders to thoughts of the day I lost my father at the dinner table. His death and the resulting bloodbath are more than enough to last me a lifetime. I don’t need to see a repeat.

Raising a hand, I call one of my soldiers over to my side.

“Boss.” Antonio nods his head at me.

“I want everyone at this table stripped,” I tell him. Antonio nods again and then talks into his earpiece, likely calling in reinforcements to help ensure no one in this room is armed. I push to my feet and tap on the side of my whiskey glass, getting everyone’s attention. “Antonio here is going to put a basket in the middle of the table. I want every weapon you have on your person in that basket,” I instruct, and everyone groans and grumbles in response. “If you can’t do that, then you can leave.”

“Why?” Mabilia asks.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Because I said so.”

“We’ve never done this before,” Aurora chimes in.

What is it with these teenage girls arguing with me? Fucking hell, is this really what my life has come to right now?

Antonio clears his throat and places a basket in the center of the table. “Your items will be promptly returned as soon as lunch has concluded.”

“It’s not like we’re going to shoot each other, Nonno,” Dante huffs.

“Which is why nobody should care. Now strip yourself or I’ll have someone do it for you.”

Theo is the first one to stand up. He removes two pistols from his chest and sets them on the table. He then reaches down and pulls a knife from his ankle and another pistol from his back, before placing them all in the basket

and reclaiming his seat.

“Are we in a war I didn’t know about?” Matteo asks his brother, then quickly follows suit as he removes one pistol from the left side of his chest and a knife from the right side.

“A meal with your offspring is worse than war,” Theo replies.

“How’s the steak, Zio Theo?” Aurora asks him.

“If you messed with my food, Aurora, I’m gonna assign Dante and Orlando to guard duty when you go back to school,” Theo threatens her. There is nothing Aurora hates more than being watched all the time. She’s somehow managed to lose every single guy we’ve put on her tail at least twice.

“What did I do to deserve that kind of punishment?” Orlando asks Theo.

“I second that,” Dante adds.

Alessandro rises from his seat. “Can we just get this over with so I can eat my damn food already?” he growls out.

“Yes,” I tell him.

“T, why are we doing this?” Holly whispers from beside me.

“Because I’m trying to save your grandson’s life,” I whisper back. She looks right at Lorenzo, then nods her head in agreement.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lorenzo
Valentino

Everyone is here. My family, Kyla's family... This is the perfect time to break the news that we're together. That we are getting married.

I'm glad my grandfather is making everyone relinquish their weapons. It means I'll have somewhat of a chance of surviving the announcement.

My Zio Romeo stands up next. He pulls out two Glocks, two knives, and a set of knuckle dusters from his pocket. I raise an eyebrow at that one, seeing as it's not something I would have pictured him having.

Then my Zia Livvy pushes to her feet. She removes a small knife from her thigh, which shocks me more than the brass knuckles. When Zia Livvy

sits down, Liliana stands up and deposits a pocketknife into the basket. It continues like this around the table as each of my family members strips themselves of various small weapons. The only ones who appear to be unarmed are the McKinleys. Kyla's friend is sitting next to her with a very pale face. I don't think this is the kind of lunch she had envisioned attending.

I lean into Kyla's ear. "Is Cassie okay?"

Kyla turns to the girl. "Don't worry, Cassie. They're all harmless, really," she says.

The last person to stand is Aurora. I inwardly cringe at just the thought of what the hell my sister is going to be putting into that basket. "Whatever you do, do not react. She thrives on the fear of others," I tell Kyla, half joking, half not.

Aurora places her right foot up on the chair, digs into her boot, pulls out a pocketknife, and sets it on the table in front of her. She then sticks her hand back into her boot and removes what looks like a pen.

"Is that a tactical pen?" Dante asks her.

"Yep."

"Cool," Dante says.

But Aurora isn't done yet. She continues to rummage through her boot, this time pulling out a smaller knife. Then she sets that foot down and lifts the other one onto the chair, drawing out a larger knife and two throwing stars.

"Aurora, why the fuck do you have throwing stars?" Dad asks her.

"So all that other shit's fine, but it's the stars that have you concerned?" I question him.

"Enzo gave them to me." Aurora shrugs.

"Enzo, stop enabling your sister," Mom tells him.

Aurora drops her foot to the floor, reaches behind her back, and removes a stun gun from God only knows where—*I gave her that one*. Just when I think she's finished, she slips a hand under the neckline of her shirt and removes a black leather necklace with the smallest knife I've ever seen dangling down the center. She continues to fish inside her shirt before pulling out a plastic bag with two pills inside.

"Whoa, what the fuck are those?" I ask, jumping up and swiping the bag from her hands. I swear to God if my sister is doing drugs, I'm going to find the fucker who gave this shit to her and remove his fucking limbs one by one.

"Cyanide," Aurora says.

Dad groans while rubbing at his forehead. “Why on earth do you have cyanide, Aurora?” he asks, sounding exasperated with her.

My sister shrugs. “In case I get taken in by the Feds or, you know, the enemy,” she tells him.

Mom gasps, and Dad’s eyes widen. “If you get taken in by the Feds, you fucking call me or Zia Liv. You do not fucking swallow cyanide!” he yells. “And if you ever find yourself facing off with the enemy, you fucking hold on until we get there.”

“Please, anyone who takes her will hand her back within minutes,” Alessandro grumbles.

“Right. I doubt they’d even get five minutes down the road before they realized their mistake,” Liliana agrees with her brother.

“Don’t worry, Dad. The pills aren’t for me. They’re for *them*, to slip into their coffee or something when they’re not looking.” Aurora smiles, then adds, “You know, if you all would just let me have a gun, I wouldn’t need any of this.” She gestures to the small arsenal on the table.

“You’re not getting a gun, and all of that, I’m confiscating,” Mom tells her before pointing to me and my brother. “And, you two, stop supplying your sister with weapons.”

“She needs to be able to defend herself,” I say.

Mom glares at me, and I know I’ll be hearing about this later. “I’m not discussing this right now, Lorenzo. We have guests. Now, if we can put all this away and eat lunch, that’d be great.” She sighs.

“I agree.” My grandfather waves his hand and then Antonio comes and picks up the now-overflowing basket of weapons. “Let’s eat.”

“Lola and James will be here tomorrow, and then Lilah is coming on Friday. Which means you all need to tone down your bullshit when they arrive,” Neo says, gesturing to the youngest generation.

Lola is my dad’s aunt. Her husband, James, is a doctor. They live outside of the mafia limelight. So does Lilah, who’s my Zia Maddie’s sister. She married a doctor as well and moved to a small country town in the south.

Everyone starts piling their plates with food. Aurora snickers when Zio Theo reaches for the steak. He looks at her and then puts it back down. “I think she’s ruined steak for me,” he groans.

“What’d you do?” I look to Aurora, who is seated across from me.

“Nothing. I just threatened to spit on his steak because he said you, me, and Enzo would eat all the food,” she says. “I didn’t actually do it.”

I try to hide my laughter and am unsuccessful. “Just eat the steak, Zio Theo. She hasn’t touched it,” I tell him.

“I think I’m gonna stick to veggies today. Lily says it’s the best diet.” Zio Theo sighs. His cousin Lily is the only vegan at the table.

“It is the best,” Lily confirms.

I glance around at my crazy-ass family, and then at Kyla. I know I’ve told her I’ll move to Melbourne, but can I really leave everyone else behind?

Kyla reaches for my hand under the table, and my answer is immediately yes. I can leave for her. I’d do anything for her. I’d miss my family like hell, but for her, I would do it.

I let go of Kyla’s hand and stand from my seat. “I have something to say.” I look at everyone until my gaze lands on Kyla’s dad, who is staring at me with the blankest expression on his face. Completely devoid of emotion. “I asked Kyla to marry me, and she said yes,” I announce quickly, not taking my eyes off Dominic McKinley.

He doesn’t react. Doesn’t even blink for what feels like an hour, though it’s probably only minutes. And then, before I know what’s happening, he’s jumping over the table before his hands wrap around my throat.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Matteo
Valentino

“*F*uck!” I’m out of my seat the second I see Dominic hop over the table and knock my fucking son to the ground. I don’t care who the fuck he is. No one lays their hands on my kids.

By the time I have my arm around Dominic’s neck, pulling him off, he’s already landed a good hit to Lorenzo’s face. My son doesn’t fight back, which just pisses me off. I know he’s holding back because of Kyla. I, however, don’t have that issue. I yank Dom’s body, dragging him away from my son. The fucker throws his head rearward and connects it with my face.

I hear the sounds of everyone screaming and ignore them as I use all of

my weight to throw Dominic down. Bringing my fist back, I connect my knuckles with his jaw. I get him three times before I'm pulled back by my brothers.

"Touch my kid again, I will fucking kill you," I hiss as Theo and Romeo hold on to my shoulders.

Dominic is already on his feet. Luca, Neo, and my father are in front of him, separating the two of us. He spits out a mouthful of blood. "Do your best. Because I'm not just going to touch your son. I'm going to fucking dismember him. Feed the fucker to my pigs for even thinking about going near my daughter."

"Oh my god! Stop." This comes from Kyla.

"Pops, it's fine," Lorenzo says.

"No, it's not fucking fine, Lorenzo. Don't you fucking let anyone hit you," I tell him.

"He's her father. I'm not hitting him," he tries to rationalize.

"Okay, this is stupid. I'm leaving. When you all decide to grow up and act like reasonable adults, let me know." Kyla turns around and walks out of the room.

"Kyla, wait," her mother calls out before following her. Lucy stops at the door and stares at her husband. "You better fix this, Dom. Or you're going to lose her completely," she tells him.

Dominic barges past all of us, aiming his glare at Lorenzo. "Stay the fuck away from my daughter."

My son meets Dominic's glare with one of his own. "I'm marrying her, whether you're there to see it or not. I'm not asking for your approval. I have hers and that's all I need." Then he storms off in the opposite direction.

"Lorenzo, where are you going?" Savvy asks.

"Out," he grunts.

"Well, that was interesting," Romeo says. "You know Dom's threats aren't empty."

"I know." I sigh, then turn to Enzo. "Go follow your brother. Try to keep him alive."

"On it, Pops." He nods.

"Wait for me! I'm coming too," Aurora calls after him. "You know, if you all would just let me have a gun, I would have shot him," she reminds us.

"And that's why you don't have one," Savvy tells her.

"Ah, I'm just gonna..." Kyla's friend gestures over her shoulder. "...go

find Kyla,” she says.

“I’ll show you the way out.” Dante leads the girl out of the room.

“Dante, there’s no pool house here,” Romeo yells at his son.

“T, call the doctor. Matteo, you’re bleeding everywhere, and I think your nose is broken,” Mom says.

“You’ve ripped open your stitches. Come on.” Savvy takes hold of my free arm and tugs me towards the other room. “I can’t believe that just happened,” she says. “You know, you could have pulled Dominic off Lorenzo without having to fight him too.”

“I could have, but I’m not about to stand by and let some asshole touch our children, Savannah,” I tell her.

“I know, but they’re supposed to be our friends,” she says.

“Friends don’t jump across the table and try to choke out your son, because the dumb kid wants to marry their daughter.”

She pulls me into a bathroom. “No, I guess they don’t.” She sighs. “What the hell is Lorenzo thinking? Kyla is eighteen. She’s not old enough to get married.” Savvy undoes the buttons on my shirt and pulls the sleeve down my arm.

“I would have married you the day you turned eighteen if you had let me.” I look at my arm in the mirror. A few stitches have come undone, but it’s not a big deal. My face, though? Mom was right. The fucker broke my fucking nose.

“What would you say if Aurora came home and said she was getting married?” Savvy asks me.

“I’d say good luck to the guy and tell him to sleep with one eye open.” I laugh.

Savvy turns on the faucet and wets a washcloth before wringing it out and bringing it to my face. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“It depends. If I knew that she had found her person, then I’d find a way to accept it. If it was just some douchebag who was this week’s thing, I’d lock her in a fucking cell until she came to her senses.”

“Do you think Lorenzo and Kyla are that person for each other?”

“You didn’t hear that girl when she called me thinking he was dead. They are definitely each other’s person.”

“I think they’ve always had a special connection. I just didn’t realize how serious they were about it.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I admit. “Pops knew. That’s why he took everyone’s

weapons.”

“Your father is a smart man,” Savvy says. “Do you think we’re going to get past this? With Dom and Lucy, I mean?”

“Babe, it’s not the first time Dominic and I have come to blows. It’s just been a while. I’ve known him since we were kids, remember? Hopefully, his wife will talk some fucking sense into him.”

“Yeah, hopefully.”

Not even a minute later, there’s a knock at the door. I open it and find Lucy standing there. “Can you try to call Lorenzo? Kyla took off and she won’t answer my calls,” she says. “I’m hoping she’s at least with him and not out on her own somewhere.”

I take my phone out of my pocket and call Enzo, since he’s more likely to answer. When he doesn’t pick up, I dial Aurora, who sends me to voicemail. Which forces me to hit Lorenzo’s number in my contacts. “None of them are answering,” I say when that call rings out too.

“Well, I guess we can assume they’re all together then,” Lucy tells me.

“Yeah. I’ll be back.” I leave the bathroom and make my way to the dining room, where my brother is still seated with his wife. “Romeo, I need you to track the kids’ phones.”

“I can do it,” Dante says from behind me.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Lorenzo
Valentino

“I can’t believe my dad tried to choke you,” Kyla says, running her fingers over my neck before she adds, “Actually, yes, I can. I told you this would happen.”

“You could have warned us you were going to make that announcement,” Enzo chimes in.

“That would have taken the surprise out of it,” I tell him.

“Yeah, meaning we could have prevented you from having the shit choked out of ya and probably Dad and Dominic coming to blows,” he says.

“What are we going to do?” Kyla asks me.

“We’re going to get married,” I tell her. “I don’t care what anyone else thinks, Kyla. There are two people in a marriage, you and me. That’s all that matters.” I take her hand. “Come here.” I pull her into me, wrapping my arms around her. “I love you,” I whisper into her ear.

“I love you too,” she says. “Okay, let’s do it. Right now. Let’s get married today.”

“Today?” I repeat.

“Yes. Why not? We can get married today, right?” she asks me.

“I can make it happen. But don’t you want to wait? Have your family there?”

“I want to be married to you. Like you said, a marriage is only two people. My dad is going to take a lifetime to come around to the idea of you and me, and I’m not waiting a lifetime, Lorenzo. I love you, and I want to be your wife,” she says.

“Wait... You do know you’re like eighteen, Kyla. Are you sure you don’t want to wait a few years? I’ve lived with him my whole life. Trust me, it’s no easy feat,” Aurora pipes up.

Kyla looks over to my sister and smiles. “I’m sure,” she says.

“Okay, well, we’re going to need a dress. No sister-in-law of mine is getting married in a pair of cutoffs and a band tee,” Aurora tells her.

“I left everything back at your house. I don’t even have my purse,” Kyla says. “Shit, I left Cassie there too...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this. I always have a credit card on me.” Aurora pulls out a black card and holds it up. I snatch it out of her hand and read the name embossed on the front.

“Who the hell is Adriana Hill?” I ask.

“My alias. I can’t very well tap a real card. If you two are running off to get married, do you really think the parental figures aren’t going to be looking for both of you right now?” Aurora says.

Sometimes I think I underestimate my sister. “You never fail to surprise me, Aurora.”

“I like to keep people on their toes.” She looks around. We’ve stopped at a quiet little village about an hour away from the Donatello estate. “We’re going to have to ditch the car.”

I pull out my phone and see the ten missed calls from my parents as well as a fuck-ton of messages. Ignoring them all, I call Liliana instead. “You okay? You know everyone is looking for you. Is Kyla with you?” she says as

soon as she picks up.

“She is. We’re fine,” I tell her. “Do you think you can get away?”

“Uh, considering all the oldies are hell-bent on tracking you down, yeah. No one will notice if I’m gone.”

“Okay, I’m sending you a location. Meet me there. I’m getting married today.”

“What?” she shrieks. “Jesus, Lorenzo, you *do* have a death wish.”

“I don’t. I just know what I want,” I tell her.

“Okay, what do you need me to do?”

“I need a suit. Bring me one from my room. And Kyla needs a dress,” I say. Letting go of Kyla’s hand, I walk away from the group. “When you’re in my closet, open the safe. The code is 1-9-7-3. There’s a ring inside a little black box in the back.”

“Holy shit, Lorenzo, how long have you been planning this?” Liliana asks me.

“I’m not answering that. Just keep it between us, okay?”

“Of course, no oldies. All right, be right there.”

I end the call and make my way back over to Kyla, my brother, and my sister. “Come on. We’re going to walk to the train and head to Florence. Liliana will meet us there,” I tell them as I take hold of Kyla’s hand.

“You know, I think you’re both crazy as fuck, but I’m finally getting a sister, so I don’t even care.” Aurora grins.

“Yesterday, you hated that I was dating Kyla,” I remind her.

“That was yesterday. This is today, Lorenzo. Keep up.” She sighs like I’m the lunatic here.

BY THE TIME we make it to Florence, Liliana is waiting for us. She’s not alone, though. No, Alessandro, Dante, Orlando, and Kyla’s friend Cassie are all lined up beside her.

“This is what you call coming alone?” I ask my cousin.

“I tried, and they followed,” Liliana says.

“So, where’s this wedding happening? Is there an open bar?” Dante looks around as if a venue is going to pop up out of nowhere.

“For you, no,” I tell him. He’s sixteen, and I’ll already be facing the firing

squad for running away to get married. I don't need to add giving alcohol to minors to my ever-growing list of punishable crimes.

Kyla lets go of my hand and hugs her friend. "I'm so sorry I left you there," she says.

"Oh, you left? I didn't notice." Cassie shrugs.

"I really am sorry. I swear the family isn't usually that insane."

"Don't listen to her. They're always that insane," Dante tells Cassie.

"I have a place, but we're going to have to fly there." I try to get everyone focused on the task at hand.

"Where?" Dante asks.

"There's a palace. It's in Caserta. We need to charter a plane," I say.

Orlando looks to me. "A palace? You want to get hitched in a palace?"

"Yes, there's a chapel there. We can get a priest to come to us," I tell him.

"Right, only you would want to get married in a palace." He shakes his head.

"I'm making Kyla my queen. She deserves nothing less than the best."

"I really don't need a palace, Lorenzo. We can just go to a courthouse or something," Kyla says.

"No, we can't. Sorry, babe, we need a priest," I tell her.

"You don't even go to church," she's quick to remind me.

"I do when it matters, and our vows matter."

"They do." She smiles. "We have the McKinley jet. I can just get the pilot to have it ready," she offers.

"And the moment you do, they're going to call your father," Enzo tells her.

"Right. Sorry." Kyla shakes her head.

"It's okay. I've got this. Already booked a private jet. Let's go,"

Alessandro says. "Bet you're glad I came along, now, aren't you?"

"I am glad you are all here," I say. Then I think about my parents and how fucking upset my mother is going to be about not being here to see this. Kyla's mother too.

Fuck, can I really do this?

I know I told Kyla that it's about us and that no one else matters. But family is important to both of us. Then again, my parents got married one drunken night in Vegas, so it's not like they have much to say on the subject. At least Kyla and I are clear-headed.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Holly
Valentino

Everyone is busy trying to hunt down where all the kids have gone. They know better than to just disappear like this. The only blessing is that Tilly messaged to let us know that everyone was safe. She also said not to worry.

I'm *not* worried. They will come back. Reilly and I decided to sit out by the pool with cocktails. We're on our third one. I really want to ask if she should be drinking this much with the medications she's taking, but I also don't want to ruin the moment.

"Stop looking so bloody depressed, Holly." Reilly kicks my leg with her

foot. "I'm not dead... yet."

"I can't joke about this, Rye. It's not funny," I tell her.

"Come on, Holly. I refuse to live the rest of my coherent days acting like I'm already dead. We've had a great life, the kind many people can only dream of having."

"I can't imagine living without you. You've always been there—literally even in the womb, Rye. How am I supposed to go on without you?" I ask her.

"You go on like I'm still here. I'll always live inside your heart, your soul. Death will not separate us, Holly. Besides, you're no spring chicken yourself. It won't be *that long* until we see each other again."

"Gee, thanks," I say.

"I mean it. I get that you're going to be upset, and I know I'm going to cause you a lot of pain. I wish I could prevent that from happening. I really do. But this is out of our control. Just promise me that you will grieve, and then continue living like you are now. I need you to watch over my girls. Over my grandchildren. I need you to be there for Bray too. He's putting up a strong front with everyone watching, but he's really struggling, Holly," Reilly says.

"Of course, I will be there for them, Rye. You know, T's retiring and I thought we could come stay in Sydney for a while."

"T's retiring? How exactly does a mob boss retire?" Reilly laughs.

"Theo's taking over. There's going to be a whole ceremony and everything this weekend."

"Oh, do we get to watch?"

"No, we're not invited. Some old-time ritual, made members only," I tell her.

"What happens at these ceremonies?"

"No idea. It's not spoken about."

"Huh, so your son is going to be the boss. Wonder if I can pull some favors now that my nephew's running the show?"

"Reilly, you've been pulling favors from T for forever. How is Theo taking over any different?" I laugh.

"It just is. Theo is my blood. T is just associated through marriage," she says. "Do you really think your husband is going to be able to back off, though?"

"He says he's ready." I don't know if he'll ever really back off. He's always going to look out for our sons. Family is everything to us.

Reilly looks off into the distance before turning back to me. “Do you believe there’s an afterlife? I mean, I’ve always talked to Dylan, and sometimes I swear I can feel him. But do you think I’m actually going to see him again soon?” Reilly asks me. Dylan is our older brother who died when we were just sixteen.

“I hope that there is. But I also worry about what that would mean for people like my husband... Will T and I get to live on together? Or are we destined to go to different places? Or am I just as bad as he is, because I turn a blind eye to everything, live off the luxury earned from a life of crime?”

“You are a good person, Holly. T is a good person too. Sometimes good people have to do bad things, like Dad did. That doesn’t mean you don’t get into heaven,” Reilly says.

“I hope you’re right. It would be great if Dylan could give us a sign, though. Let us know that he’s waiting for us,” I tell her, and just after the words leave my mouth, a little white bird lands on the pavers in front of us. It seems to look between me and my twin before fluttering away again.

“Well, if that isn’t a sign, I don’t know what is. Thanks, Dylan. See you soon, bro,” Reilly says, holding up her cocktail and toasting the sky.

I can’t help it. The tears come on like a tidal wave. “Reilly, I’m not ready. I can’t. I don’t want to lose you. We’re supposed to grow really old together. Sit in matching rocking chairs and gossip. We’re meant to be together.”

Reilly pushes to her feet and comes over to sit on my lounge. She wraps her arms around me. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“It’s not your fault. I’m sorry I can’t pretend better,” I admit.

“I know how you’re feeling. Even if you’re putting on a face, I feel it too,” she reminds me.

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?” she asks.

“Of not having you. I’m scared of being by myself.”

“I know,” she says, giving me comfort when it should be the other way around. “It’s going to be okay.”

“It’s not, Rye. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to lose you.” I cry harder.

“I know,” she says again. “I’m scared too.”

This has me sitting upright and wiping at my face. “What are you scared of?”

“I remember what it felt like when mom didn’t recognize us. I’m scared

of not knowing who you all are. What it's going to do to Bray when I can't remember who he is... I don't want to hurt any of you like that."

"Okay. If the day comes where you don't remember Bray, I will whisper in your ear, remind you that you know him. That you love him. And that he has a pierced cucumber you swear black and blue you could never live without," I tell her.

"Promise? And don't forget that last part. If anything is going to jog my memory of him, it'll be his cucumber for sure." Reilly smiles.

"I promise," I say. "I promise that I will never leave you, Rye. Even if you don't know who I am, I'll be there anyway. I don't care how angry you get at me. I don't care if you start throwing stuff. I will be there."

"I love you, Holly."

"I love you too."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lorenzo
Valentino

I'm sitting in one of the rooms of the Caserta Palace. I managed to pay the place enough to get them to shut it down for the afternoon and let us use it for the ceremony.

Aurora, Liliana, and Tilly took Kyla to a different room, telling me I couldn't see her until they were ready. So I'm sitting here, fucking nervous as hell, while wondering if I'm doing the right thing by her. I know she says this is what she wants. My fear is that she's going to regret not having her family here. I have my brother, all of my cousins, and the only person Kyla has is Cassie. I don't want her to wake up one day and wish she had one of those

huge, over-the-top weddings every girl dreams about having.

My brother and cousins just left the room to go on the hunt for a drink. I pull my phone out of my pocket and turn it back on. It's safe now. By the time anyone is able to track us down and get here, we'll be married and no one will be able to object. I scroll through my phone until I find my mom's number.

She picks up on the first ring. "Lorenzo, are you okay?" she whispers.

"I'm fine, Ma. Why are you whispering?" I ask her.

"Everyone is looking for you," she says.

"We're okay. We'll be back. Probably tomorrow." I pause. "Ma, do you regret marrying Pops without all the family there?"

My mom goes silent for a long minute. "The only thing I regret is not marrying him sooner. I wasted so many years because I was scared. By the way, this is exactly the opposite of what I should probably be telling you right now. Lorenzo, promise me you are one hundred percent sure about this."

"I've always been sure about her. Mom. I just... I don't want her to regret not having a big thing, you know? I don't want her to resent me later because we did it like this."

"Where are you? I can get Lucy and be there, Lorenzo. Just tell me where you are."

"I... I don't think that's a good idea. If her father finds out, he'll stop us—you know he will."

"He loves her."

"So do I," I say.

"I know. I know. It's just... you're my eldest child, Lorenzo. I'm supposed to be there with you," Mom says, and a new wave of guilt rolls through me. "But this isn't about me. At the end of the day, it's about you and Kyla. If this is what you both feel is right, then you do it. Just be prepared for the circus that will follow once everyone finds out."

"Thanks, Ma."

"I love you, Lorenzo. I love Kyla too. But make sure you are one hundred percent in this, because if you break her heart, I will choke you myself."

"Uh, thanks, and what if she breaks my heart?" I ask.

"Then I'll give your sister that gun she keeps asking about." Mom laughs. "Be sure your sister and brother make it home, Lorenzo."

"I will. I love you, Ma."

“You too.”

I hang up the phone and power it down again. Then I push to my feet, walk out of the room, and make my way into the chapel. I find the priest waiting there and go and introduce myself.

“She’s not Catholic?” he asks me.

“No, she’s not,” I say, and he nods.

“We’ll make an exception.”

“Thank you, Father. I appreciate it,” I tell him. “I’ll be right back, with the bride.” I walk down the hall to the room where the girls are holed up. I push my way inside and find Kyla standing there in a long white dress. “Get out,” I tell my sister, cousins, and Cassie.

“What? Why?” Aurora tries to argue.

“Get out,” I repeat.

“Fine,” my sister huffs and barges past me with Liliana, Tilly, and Cassie in tow.

I don’t move. My eyes stay glued on Kyla, who stands in front of me, twisting her hands together. “You are fucking breathtakingly beautiful,” I tell her.

“Thank you,” she says. “So are you.”

“I want to make sure you’re one hundred percent sure this is how you want to do this. I don’t want you to resent me in a few weeks, months, years for not giving you the wedding you deserve.”

“I’m marrying the man I love, in a freaking palace built for royals, Lorenzo. Which is amazing by the way. But I don’t need anything else but you,” she says. “I love you.”

“And I love you. I just don’t want you to feel pressured into anything, because I will wait for you. Forever if I have to.”

“Well, I’m not as patient as you are, and I’m not waiting to be Mrs. Lorenzo Valentino. Now, are you ready to become my husband?” She lifts a questioning brow.

“I was born ready for that job, babe,” I tell her.

“Let’s do this.” Kyla nods.

With her hand in mine, I lead my bride-to-be into the chapel, where everyone is already waiting for us. The moment we’re standing in front of the altar, I pull my phone out of my pocket again.

“Video call Zara,” I say into the speaker before handing the phone to Aurora.

Kyla's little sister picks up on the second ring. "OMG, where the bloody hell are you guys? You know everyone is looking for you, right?" she says. "Wait, Kyla? Why do you look like you're about to get hitched?"

"Ah, because I am. Lorenzo and I are getting married. Right now. You wanna watch?" Kyla asks her sister.

"I knew I should have come to Italy. Damn it. Okay, let's do this," Zara says. "But you have to video call me when Dad finds out what you've gone and done—*that* I want to see."

"Okay, we can start," I tell the priest, taking hold of Kyla's hands. I tune out most of what he says, until it's time to place the ring on Kyla's finger. Enzo hands me the ring from the little black box, and I slide it onto her finger.

"Oh my god, Lorenzo, it's gorgeous," she says. "But I don't have a ring for you..."

"Here. Gotcha covered." Liliana hands her another ring box. I have no idea where my cousin got it from. But I am thankful.

As soon as we've exchanged vows and the priest has pronounced us man and wife, my lips find Kyla's. I pick her up off the ground and spin her around. When I put her back down on her feet, she pulls back and breaks the kiss.

"You know this means you're mine now, right?" She smiles.

"I wouldn't want to be anyone else's," I tell her.

"Okay, so who's gonna break the news to the oldies?" Dante asks.

"Not it," Orlando says.

"I already told Mom," I admit.

"You called your mom?" Kyla turns to me, and I nod my head. "So did I." She laughs. "She promised to make sure Dad doesn't try to kill you again."

"Well, that's a start."

"Should we go home?" Aurora asks.

"You all need to go home. I'm taking Kyla away."

"You know you have to be at the ceremony on Friday?" Enzo reminds me.

"I know. I'll be there," I tell him. I have two days, and I plan on keeping Kyla to myself for both of them.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Theo
Valentino

“They did what?” I ask Liliana, who’s apparently just decided to return home.

“They got married. It was actually really beautiful,” she says.

“Beautiful? Running off and getting married isn’t beautiful, Liliana. Don’t ever think that it is,” I tell her.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t worry, Daddy. Travis is old school. He’d want the whole big wedding thing,” she says, and I scowl.

“I’m going to fucking kill him! Lucy, call our lawyers. That marriage will be annulled within the hour!” Dominic yells as he paces up and down the

living room.

“We’re not doing that, Dom,” Lucy says, attempting to place a hand on his shoulder but he keeps moving. Dominic looks like a caged lion right now, ready to pounce on anyone. Ready to kill.

“Bee, we are not letting our eighteen-year-old daughter marry into the fucking mafia,” he growls.

“Actually, Lorenzo isn’t a made man yet,” Romeo says.

“Yet. But he will be. My daughter is the heir to not one but two billion-dollar empires. She doesn’t need to be mixed up with your family.”

“But it’s okay for me to do business with them?” Lucy counters.

“That’s different.” Dominic waves her off.

“It’s actually not, Dom. Lorenzo is a good guy. You know that.” Lucy tries to placate her husband.

“I don’t care if he’s a fucking saint. She’s fucking eighteen, Lucy. What is nobody understanding about that?” he hisses.

“I get it. I do. But eighteen is the legal age to consent to marriage. She hasn’t been forced into this.” This comes from Luca.

“If it helps, Lorenzo plans on moving to Melbourne, because he doesn’t want Kyla to have to move away from her family,” Enzo says.

“No, it doesn’t fucking help,” Dominic snaps.

“Okay, you need to calm down. Listen to me, Dominic. Because I swear to God, if you push our daughter away with this macho bullshit of yours, I’m going with her.” Lucy crosses her arms over her chest while giving her husband a look that says she’s not bluffing.

This gets his attention. Dominic stops in his tracks and his head snaps in her direction. I doubt Lucy has ever threatened to leave him before, because the look on his face is a mixture of pure rage and fear.

“Lucy...” Dominic starts and then stops. He walks over to his wife. “I can’t do this. I don’t... I can’t let her go off and ruin her life like this,” he says in a much calmer tone.

“What if she’s not? What if this is the start of the rest of her life? The rest of her long, happy life.”

“He’s not good enough for her,” he grinds out.

“Woah, what makes you think your daughter is good enough for my brother?” Aurora fires back.

Dominic ignores my niece’s outburst and focuses on his wife instead.

“Lucy, we are her parents. We can’t let her do this.”

“We don’t have a choice, Dominic. She’s eighteen now. Which means you can either support her or she will walk away and you won’t see her. It’s your choice. I know what mine is.”

“Can’t I just kill him? It’d be the best option for everyone,” he says.

“Only if you want to sign the death certificates for your entire fucking family,” my father growls.

“Okay, this really isn’t helping. Stop with the death threats. No one is killing anyone. Dominic, what would you have done if your parents told you that you couldn’t be with Lucy?” Bray asks. Dominic is the only child of Bray’s younger sister.

“They would never have said that,” Dom counters.

“I know, because they let you make your own decisions,” Bray tells him.

“Bee, call the lawyer. Have a postnuptial agreement drawn up. That fucker isn’t getting a dime of her money,” Dominic grunts.

“That, I will do,” Lucy concedes.

“You think I need her money? I would never touch a dime of her money,” Lorenzo—the brave, stupid fuck that he is—says from the doorway, where he’s standing hand in hand with Dominic’s daughter.

Kyla maneuvers in front of my nephew, which is funny to see. “Daddy, I’m sorry I left. But, well, you were going to kill him, and I really do love him,” she says, then holds up a hand. “We got married. We’re buying a house in Melbourne together and, well, that’s all there is to it.”

Dominic looks like he’s about ready to have a heart attack. Breaking the silence, I walk over to Kyla and kiss her on both cheeks.

“Welcome to the family, Kyla,” I tell her. This results in having every one of my family members take turns saying their own versions of congratulations and welcome.

“I thought you were staying away for a couple of days,” Enzo says to his brother.

“We changed our minds,” Lorenzo replies.

“I’m not welcoming you to my family, and you will sign the papers our lawyers draw up. If my daughter ever sheds one fucking tear because of you, I’ll cut the ducts out of your eyes, then I’ll rip your fucking heart out and burn it in front of her,” Dominic grunts.

“I love her. I’m not going to ever hurt her,” Lorenzo replies. “And I’ll sign your prenup, postnup, whatever. Like I said, I don’t need her money. I don’t want it either, and she sure as shit can have all of mine.”

Chapter Forty

T
Valentino

I wanted this month to be relaxing for my wife. I wanted her to get everything out of this time together that she dreamed of having. What we got instead was one fucking drama after the other, and news that has made my wife cry herself to sleep every night since she's heard it.

Holly wants to go and live in Sydney for a while, to spend as much time with her sister as she can. And as much as I wanted to be around to help Theo transition into his new position, I can't deny my wife this request. She's put up with following me around the world, dealt with the unusual work hours that my job has always required of me. Never once has she complained about

what I do or ever asked me to leave the organization. Not that leaving was an option. The only way out is in a casket. But I sure as fuck would have tried if she wanted me to.

I have complete faith in our son, though. He's going to be a great leader. He already *is* a great leader. I think back to my father, to the man who raised me. I was always meant to take over for him, just not so young. I wonder what kind of boss I would have become if I had the opportunity to remain under his guidance longer.

Shaking off the guilt that comes with thoughts of my father, I lay out the picture card of St. Aloysius Gonzaga. I chose this particular saint for Theo because he's a model for servant leadership. Something I hope will help guide my son throughout his reign.

Next, I place a handgun and a knife on the table. Once I'm ready, I take my seat at the long oak table. This meeting room has been used for Valentino ceremonies for centuries now. If only these walls could talk, I'm sure they'd have a million stories about all the men who were made in this room.

I was supposed to take my own oath as Don right here, in this spot. My father was supposed to interview me when the time came. But I didn't get that option. When he was murdered, I had to take over right away. There was no ceremony, no easing in to my role. Theo has been my underboss for most of his adult life, though, and I need to remind myself of that. He's ready for this.

Neo walks into the room, interrupting my quiet ruminations. As the head of the council, my cousin overseas every renewed oath. "You ready?" he asks me.

"Yes," I tell him.

"I never would have thought either of us would have made it this far, you know," he says.

"Yeah, neither did I, but thank fuck we did."

"Yeah. He's going to be okay," Neo reminds me. "Theo... he's got this."

"I know. I trained him."

"Good to see retirement hasn't humbled you." He laughs.

A moment later, the door opens and all four of my sons walk in. I make eye contact with Theo. He's ready. He wants this. I can see it in his eyes. "You ready?" I ask him aloud. I need to hear him say it, even if I know it to be true in my heart.

"Yes," he tells me.

I nod my head at the two soldiers at the door. Luca, Matteo, and Romeo all take a seat at the table, while Theo remains standing at the head, in front of me. The room fills with some of the highest ranking members of our organization. I wanted this to be a quiet event, but from the looks of it, every man and his dog turned up to watch my son take his thrown.

Theo already has the respect of the guys. He's earned it. He wasn't handed his position. My son had to fight and bleed his way up the ranks just like anyone else did, albeit he might have done it a bit faster because of his last name.

Neo stands, calling the room to attention. "Thanks for coming. Theo Valentino, do you know why you're here?"

"No," Theo says. It's the standard answer. Even though everyone knows you *know*, the answer is always the same.

"You're here to swear in as active Don of the Valentino Family. Do you accept the responsibility that this position entails?" Neo asks him.

"Yes," Theo says.

Neo sits down and I stand up. "Theo, do you pledge allegiance to the Valentino Family?"

"Yes."

"Will you do everything in your power to ensure the organization's health, wealth, and status remain intact?"

"Yes."

"Will you put the family above all else? Will you put the needs of the family first?"

This one gives him pause. It's a fucking difficult question to answer.

"Yes," he finally says, and he and I both know it's a lie. His wife and children will always come before the organization. I know this because I would have burned the whole Valentino Empire to the ground for my wife and my sons if I had to. And so would he.

"Hold out your left hand," I tell him. "Repeat after me."

Once Theo repeats the family oath, I pick up the knife and slice through the center of his palm, not deep, just enough to draw blood to the surface. Theo closes his hand, holding it over the card we have laid out on the table, as he lets the droplets splatter onto the face of St. Aloysius. When he's done, Neo hands him a white cloth and my son ties it around his palm. I pull a lighter out of my pocket and light up the corner of the card, watching as the flames flick higher, before I drop it into the ashtray in front of me.

Nobody says a word, watching the card disintegrate until it's nothing but ash. Removing the ring that has sat on my finger for most of my life, I walk around the table before stopping in front of Theo. Then I kneel at my son's feet, slide the ring onto his left pinkie, bring his hand to my lips, and kiss the family emblem.

“Theo Valentino, you are now the Don of the Valentino Crime Family.”

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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.

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