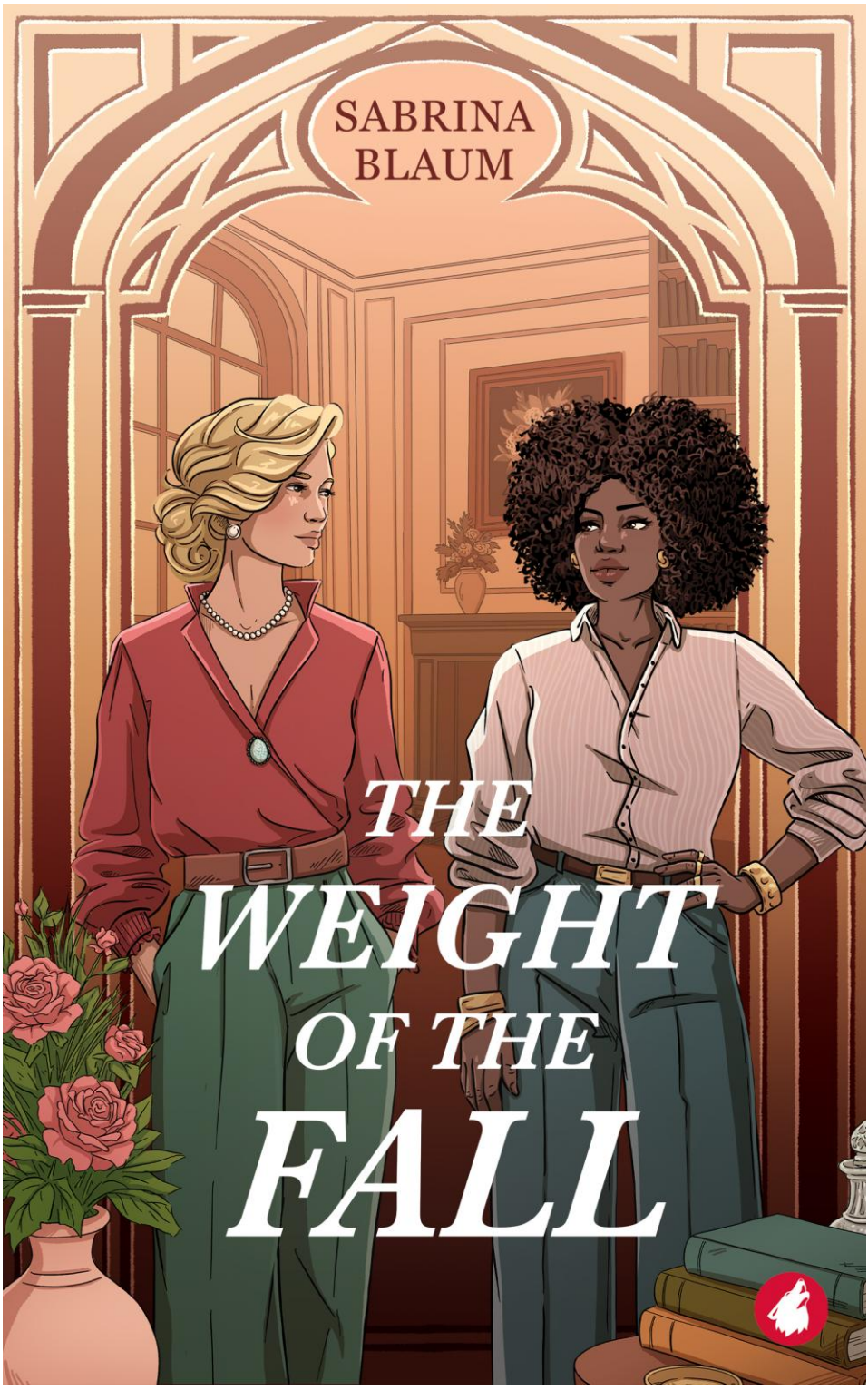

SABRINA
BLAUM
THE
WEIGHT
OF THE
FALL

Prologue

Knots

Francesca Greco leaned back in her chair, a small smile curving her lips. With the *Madonna* returned, her enemies scattered, and new possibilities opening before her, her usual caution eased—if only for a moment—while she sat with the people at the heart of the Collective, her family.

It was not a state she trusted.

The doorbell stirred her from her thoughts.

"Excuse me." She rose. She wasn't expecting anyone else, and it was nearly ten—too late for a delivery.

Habit made her glance toward the monitor mounted beside the door. She ignored it, straightened her sleeves, and opened the door instead.

Then she saw who stood there.

"I need your help," Valentina breathed, swaying on her feet.

"I can see that. I just don't understand why *I* should be helping *you*." Francesca crossed her arms, her voice cooling into instinctive distance.

"Because your *Madonna* cost me. It…it was the last straw." She was panting. "I tried to control them. But—"

"They turned on you?"

Valentina clenched her jaw. "Yes."

"Terrible feeling, isn't it?"

"I didn't…leave you bleeding."

"Not on the outside, no." Her fingers ached from gripping the doorframe. A lifetime of composure and somehow, with one glance, Valentina Varnelli had dragged her straight back to the chaos she'd thought she'd buried decades ago.

"Please, Fran. There's no one…else I can trust."

Francesca narrowed her eyes, stifling the urge to reach out and pull Valentina inside.

"And you trust me?"

A beat, during which time stilled.

"Yes."

Francesca's stomach dropped.

Valentina's eyelids fluttered. Her pale face was sweaty, and her blonde hair stuck to her face. Blood smears lined her temple and cheek and stained parts of her hair.

She held on to her side, her hands covered in the same sticky red.

Francesca opened her mouth to speak—then Valentina collapsed.

Jerking forward, Francesca caught her on instinct, steadying Valentina against her own body.

Valentina's breath ran ragged, and small whimpers bled from her lips as tears pooled in her eyes.

Francesca gazed at the face she'd not seen this close in decades—the woman she'd loved beyond comprehension and whose betrayal still gnawed at her.

What Valentina had done at the warehouse—returning the *Madonna*—had meant something, but it hadn't untangled Francesca's swirling mess of emotions. She refused to look closely; she might not survive what she'd find.

Francesca had planned to go on pretending Valentina didn't exist, to soldier on as always. Yet life had other ideas.

"Oh, Val," Francesca murmured, pressing her lips against the crown of her head.

Valentina wept, clutching Francesca's white blouse—staining it red.

Chapter 1

Quiet Bedlam

Francesca's fingers traced the red stain on the right side of her blouse as she stood in the doorway, her gaze drifting to Valentina, unconscious in the guest bedroom with fresh bandages around her head and side after Francesca's doctor had made a house call and pumped her full of painkillers.

"Stay," Valentina had mumbled before the medication had pulled her under.

And so Francesca did, still in the clothes she'd worn to dinner—the same dinner that had ended with Valentina's collapse.

She hated change, probably even more than she loathed chaos. Yet, on the night to celebrate all they'd accomplished together, both change and bedlam had arrived at her doorstep.

Valentina, the woman who—

And here, her mind derailed, not because there were no more tracks ahead but because so many routes diverged at this switch—none of them familiar, none that fit. Not after Francesca had caught an exhausted, hunted, and bleeding Valentina in her arms.

"You should call the police," Skye had suggested before Lucia had shushed her.

Her surrogate daughters and their divergent temperaments. Francesca had more love for them than she knew what to do with, but in that moment—with Valentina at her feet and with her own future hanging in the balance—Francesca hadn't thought clearly.

The past she'd tried to bury hadn't just returned; it had dragged her back. The nerves racing through her, the gnawing pit in her stomach—sensations she hadn't felt in decades.

The woman who had once meant everything to Francesca—before turning into her archnemesis for almost three decades—had sought *refuge* with her, even after the fracture that had torn them asunder.

Lacking both bandwidth and patience to deal with her family, Francesca had bid them all farewell, almost having to physically push Skye and Lucia out of her home. Jules had left quickly, and Penelope had eventually succeeded in coaxing Lucia out.

Once the door had fallen shut behind them, Francesca had hurried back to the guest bedroom, only to hover by the door before easing it open.

That had been half an hour ago, and still she just stood there.

"Get a grip, will you?" she ground out, wiping a hand over her face.

She needed a shower and a change of clothes. According to Dr. Williams, Valentina was likely to sleep through the night. She could leave and not break—

Since when did Francesca owe this woman anything?

With a huff, she headed for her own bedroom, stalking immediately into her en suite and turning on the shower.

Half an hour later, dressed in her most comfortable loungewear, Francesca settled into the armchair next to Valentina's bed with the book she'd meant to read next. Did it really matter *where* she read it?

Besides, Valentina couldn't be trusted, so there was good reason to keep an eye on her.

She opened the book, but her eyes blurred. The words gave way to memory.



Spello, Umbria, May 1979

"Eww, that's gross." Valentina giggled, tossing the soggy cigarette butt onto the cupboard floor.

Francesca frowned, crouched under the kitchen sink beside her. She stuck the half-smoked filter between her lips and grimaced. "Ugh."

Another yellowed stub—pilfered from the ashtray in the garden—landed beside the first. "I don't know how Papa can smoke these," Francesca said.

"Did you know Michaela got a puppy? A small brown one. He's so cute!"

"Puppies are messy," Francesca muttered.

"What? They're adorable and—"

"Hush." Francesca grabbed Valentina's hand and squeezed it.

A door outside their hideout fell shut, and footsteps drew near.

"I don't care, Dom. Elio betrayed us, and we can't let him get away with it."

Francesca stiffened at her father's angry voice.

"I know, but…" Domenico sighed. "I like the guy. Maria's friends with his wife."

Francesca's eyes widened. Even in the dim light, she caught the warning flutter of Valentina's lips parting. She pressed a finger against Valentina's mouth. Nothing good had ever happened when they'd interrupted one of their fathers' conversations—and getting caught eavesdropping would be even worse.

Papa didn't like anyone talking about work with Francesca around. He was some kind of businessman, but no one ever told her what he did—not even her mother, whom she'd pestered a lot.

"Well, he should've kept his mouth shut! Our shipment's down the drain. That'll cost us a ton of money."

"You're right."

"You can't make business decisions based on feelings, Dom."

A pause.

"Send Sebastian to handle it?" Domenico asked.

"Yes."

The fridge door opened and closed. "And bring the good wine to dinner tonight. The last one tasted like vinegar."

Domenico laughed. "Oh, come on, Tony. By the end of the night, even that went down."

Francesca didn't hear her father's reply as the sound of the two men's voices became more and more distant.

A moment of silence lingered.

"I don't like Sebastian," Valentina mumbled, tightening her hold on Francesca's hand.

Cold. Despite the stuffy cupboard, Valentina's fingers were cold.

"Me neither."

"Elio is nice. He always gives me candy. The red kind," Valentina said.

"Yeah."

They never saw Elio again.



A clang startled Francesca awake, and she jerked upright, disoriented. Her book lay crooked on the floor, its bookmark resting beside it.

"Damn it." She bent down, retrieved both, and smoothed the book's pages before setting it on the dresser.

She stretched her back and stepped closer to the bed.

Valentina hadn't moved—the slow rise and fall of her chest the only sign of life in a woman usually so energetic, so forceful, but now arrested in an ashen stillness that scratched Francesca's throat raw.

"What have you gotten yourself into this time?" Francesca murmured.

Her stomach growled, and she glanced at the nightstand clock: 4:15 a.m. After one last look at Valentina, she headed for the kitchen.

Had her coffee machine always taken that long to brew a cup? She snatched a banana from the fruit bowl, peeling and chewing it mindlessly, hardly registering the flavor.

The coffee was bitter, though. Francesca grimaced and cleared her throat. But she drank the rest before rinsing the cup and tossing the banana peel into the trash.

What was she doing? Should she have called the police and washed her hands of this entire saga, like Skye had suggested?

As if she'd ever invite the police into her home—never mind that *she* wasn't in the habit of betraying others.

Her watch buzzed. Lucia.

Let us know if you need anything. Even if it's just company.

Francesca smiled and pulled out her phone.

Thank you, Lucy. I'm fine.

And with that, she marched up the stairs to return to her silent vigil. She wasn't fine—nowhere near—but she didn't know what might help, except for answers from the woman who had stopped talking to her a long time ago.

Back in her armchair, she closed her eyes, trying to quell memories from a lifetime ago, memories that threatened to inundate her with scenes she'd locked away for a reason.

Apart from their recent run-in at Valentina's warehouse, Francesca hadn't seen her in person for over a decade—a single glance from afar didn't count. She'd avoided Valentina, and she'd bet this had been a mutual effort.

Too much history. Too many memories. Too much pain. Too many *what if* questions that Francesca would like to bury close to the earth's inner core. Let it melt, disappear.

She tried to live in the now and to look ahead. For the most part, she'd succeeded, but any such attempt now was moot. Not just because she'd

spent more time near Valentina within the last twelve hours than she had in decades.

No. The problem sat behind her chest wall. Her heart was so heavy, she worried it might rupture the pericardium and land at her feet.

How dramatic.

That was another thing—she *wasn't* dramatic. At least not without Valentina around. Even unconscious, that infernal woman impacted Francesca, and she *hated* that fact with a passion that rivaled the heat of a thousand suns.

There you go again.

Francesca groaned. This would get tiresome fast.

She must have dozed off, because the next time she opened her eyes, light streamed in through the gap in the blackout curtains.

She blinked, trying to discern what had awoken her, and why she was—

Oh, Valentina.

The woman stirred, a small whimper escaping her lips, and Francesca jumped to her feet.

"No, please…don't." Valentina's head moved from side to side.

Francesca stepped closer, about to wake her, when Valentina's eyelids fluttered open. Francesca's hands, curled into fists at her sides, slowly loosened.

"Fran," Valentina croaked.

"I'm here." Her voice sounded foreign to her own ears.

"You…stayed." Valentina swallowed. "Thank you."

Francesca had no words, but the thing in her chest that had always gotten her into trouble tightened.

Chapter 2

Gap

"You need to rest," Francesca finally said.

Valentina struggled to keep her eyes open. "They got it…"

"What do you mean?"

Shaking her head, Valentina moved as if she wanted to sit up.

"No." Francesca touched her left shoulder firmly enough to extinguish any resistance.

Valentina stilled.

"We can talk about this later."

"They…"

"Yes?"

Valentina grimaced. "Kill me."

Francesca's eyebrows shot up. "You're safe here."

Valentina seemed to want to reply, but instead, her breathing evened out and she fell back asleep.

"Damn it. I should have gotten her to take her medicine." Francesca glanced at the bottles her doctor had left behind. She'd call her later—though Williams had said she'd return tonight. Could it wait?

Francesca wondered who "they" were. The Belgrave Trust? Probably the very thugs who'd dethroned Valentina and sent her fleeing to Francesca's.

If Valentina had told anyone about their past, they might connect the dots between them. If not, Francesca should be the last person anyone would expect her to turn to. Should she hire actual security?

While she hated the thought, her cameras, motion sensors, and alarm system might not be enough. Valentina had never shown great discernment when it came to staying away from the more dangerous, unstable elements of their world—their fathers' world, really.

Unlike Francesca, Valentina had never fully cut the umbilical cord—one of their constant points of contention.

Francesca rotated her neck; a tension headache crept behind her temples. With a sigh, she sat back in the same chair, picking up her book, freezing after only a few pages.

Kill me.

That wasn't… Valentina surely hadn't asked Francesca to… No. Impossible.

Of course, that seedling found fertile ground and drew Francesca back decades. Home. To a high seat in the woods.



Spello, Umbria, July 1984

"Stop being so melodramatic." Francesca leaned against the wooden railing of the raised hunting seat tucked into the woods behind both their families' properties. It had become their hideout once they'd outgrown the cupboard under the sink.

"I'm serious! Father has lost his mind."

"A boarding school would suck."

"It won't just *suck*, Fran. It'll destroy my life!"

Francesca wanted to roll her eyes but didn't. She'd be pouring gasoline on the fire that was Valentina's temper. "We'll write each other, and there's still the holidays."

"No! I won't accept that! We've never been apart and—"

"We have. When you visit your grandma at Lake Como."

Valentina waved her off. "Short little trips don't count. We're talking *months* of separation." She pulled her knees closer to her chest. "It's unacceptable."

"Then maybe you need to stop arguing with your parents all the time," Francesca said. "Be more…unobtrusive."

"Are you serious?"

"If you want to stay here, become invisible. If you constantly aggravate your parents, they'll keep coming up with ideas like shipping you off to boarding school."

"So it's my fault now? Whose side are you on, *Francesca*?" Valentina's tone had bite.

Francesca grasped her hand. "Yours. Always. You know that."

Valentina averted her gaze but squeezed Francesca's fingers. She sighed.

"I can't go there."

"It might not be so bad. Nothing ever happens here, and our parents are so controlling. Maybe you'll find a bit of freedom."

Valentina scoffed. "I highly doubt that. It's probably a prison—you know, like the schools in those English films with cold dormitories and sadistic headmasters."

Francesca chuckled.

"But that's not the point. I don't want to be anywhere without you. You're my best friend, and the thought of not seeing you all the time, of being away like that…" Her voice faltered. "I can't do that. They might as well kill me."

Francesca pulled Valentina's hand against her chest, as if warmth alone could fix everything, could soothe her friend.



"I'm quite pleased with her progress, or rather, her lack of further deterioration," Dr. Williams said. "But you have to make sure she takes her antibiotics and painkillers."

"Of course," Francesca said. "How long do you expect her to be out of it?"

"It's hard to tell. I'm still uncomfortable treating this outside a hospital and would love to do a head CT, but I understand your position. Her pupils are responsive and otherwise unremarkable, which is good."

"I'll suggest the CT when she's awake, but I doubt you'll get your wish."

Williams nodded. "All right. If she develops a fever, hallucinates, or is in agony, take her to the ER and call me."

"I will. Thank you, Dr. Williams. I appreciate it." Francesca saw her to the door. After she'd left, she leaned against the doorframe and closed her eyes.

Another night and day in this limbo and she might lose her mind. Every ghost she'd ever banished had returned to further hammer at her skull. She needed answers, but they remained out of reach.

She'd fielded messages from her people today—Lucia offering to talk again (where would she even start?), Skye suggesting dropping Valentina off at the closest hospital (if only), while Jules offered her services. ("Need me to hack into anything? I can see if I can get behind Valentina's crew's firewall.")

Francesca trudged to the kitchen, bone-tired, as if she'd spent the night under siege. She brewed a pot of herbal tea and brought a tray with cups to the guest room. Not that she had any hope of Valentina drinking it. She also brought water.

Over an hour later, when she was hardly able to keep her eyes open, Valentina's rough voice startled her.

"Fran?"

"Yes?" She leaned closer.

"I'm…hurting."

"Oh, of course." She jerked up and grabbed the bottle, pouring the correct amount into the medicine cup. "Here. The doctor said you can have this every six hours." She stared down at Valentina's prone figure. "Uh, let's see."

She shuffled her feet, still staring at Valentina, who started to shift as if trying to rise.

"No! Wait." Francesca moved closer, her free hand clenched into a fist she forced open before slipping her hand behind Valentina's head to help prop her up. She held the cup to Valentina's lips. "Here you go."

Valentina blinked, emptying it. "Thanks," she rasped.

Francesca lowered her back down, quelling the urge to pull away as if burned.

"Right. Do you think you can eat something?" She stepped back. "I have some applesauce. Or water? I made tea, but…"

"Water."

She nodded and repeated her ministrations, letting Valentina take a few sips before placing the cup back on the nightstand.

"The applesauce? It's the one—" Francesca pressed her lips together, swallowing the rest: *that you like.*

Valentina shook her head.

"The doctor changed your bandages. You show no signs of infection, and she gave you another antibiotic shot, but tomorrow, we have to start you on pills."

"Thank you."

"Sure." Francesca sat back down, resigned to another long night as Valentina drifted off again.

The house was silent but not still. A floorboard creaked now and then, the wind breathing faintly against the shutters as the nightstand clock crept ever forward.

Francesca watched Valentina sleep, mesmerized by the slow rise and fall of her chest.

Back when she and Valentina had been together, when sleep eluded her, she'd roll over and watch Valentina breathe. Focusing on her lover's breath, on having her so close, would lull Francesca back to sleep.

Sometimes, she'd press a fingertip to Valentina's arm—just to anchor herself.

With a quiet gasp, Francesca pulled back.

She'd gotten so lost in the memory that she'd nearly touched Valentina's upper arm.

This closeness was messing with her head.

She'd spent the first half of her life at Valentina's side—and the next without a single word between them. Only a year had gone by since Valentina *loaned* the *Madonna* she'd stolen decades earlier to the Meridian Museum—a taunt Francesca had heard loud and clear.

Salt poured into a wound she'd never been able to heal or recover from.

Francesca had never trusted another soul more than Valentina. Even when she'd ended things between them—for a valid reason—she'd not expected to come home and find…

She pursed her lips. Those memories were toxic. She'd hoped that once they'd retrieved the *Madonna*—

You mean when Valentina returned *the* Madonna.

Francesca leaned forward, her eyes closed. Her mind had never been on her side when it came to that woman.

She'd buried Valentina under an avalanche. Boxes nailed shut and then encased in steel. Everything soft, everything fragile—abandoned. She'd been betrayed at a depth that should have been unfathomable.

Valentina, the woman she'd loved more than anything and anyone, had gutted her.

Without her Collective, without taking in Lucia and Skye and loving them in the dry, austere way she could, Francesca might have shriveled up into a mere husk of all she'd ever been.

But here she sat now, right next to Valentina, unable to leave, unable to keep the distance that had been her saving grace.

Valentina had come to *her*. She was right here.

And despite the storm of emotions raging inside her—feelings that *shouldn't* coexist—Francesca didn't know how to let go again.

Cutting Valentina out hadn't just ended their relationship. It had killed a part of her.

But she'd find a way. While she didn't believe for a second that Valentina would want to rekindle what they once had, even if she did, Francesca wasn't strong enough to survive that kind of heartbreak again.

Either way, after all that had happened, there was no way back. This was an aberration she would endure. Then she would continue as before.

Alone.

Chapter 3

Secrets

A dull ache woke Valentina, and when her eyes fluttered open, she realized she was panting. A metallic taste lingered in her mouth.

With that awareness, memories rushed in: Lewis shouting, grabbing the letter opener. Then Jameson and Miller hurried in, too, but they didn't help her; they stood behind Lewis.

She swallowed hard.

Chester. She'd wondered where he was, only to remember she'd mixed up his days off—too distracted by her *Madonna* scheme, which had blown up in her face in spectacular fashion.

To be fair, she'd have taken such an opening, too, if she'd ever needed to topple the head of an organization. The key difference was that she'd never offered one before. Francesca Greco remained, as always, the bane of her existence—the dangling thread she couldn't cut.

From the moment Francesca had offered her crayons after Valentina's bratty cousin had broken, chewed, and eaten hers, Valentina had been doomed.

Her earliest memory—most of her childhood memories, really—included Francesca. Maybe that was why she avoided even *thinking* about her past.

She dug her fingernails into her palms, trying to regulate her breathing and drown out the pain rattling through her.

Her side burned as if the blade were still lodged there.

How could she not have seen this coming? Had she underestimated Lewis's sway with the others? Worse, what Lewis was capable of? Funny, she'd escaped her father's world only to invite it back into her home.

Maybe her preoccupation with Francesca had left her blinded to the dissatisfaction in her ranks and Lewis's true goal.

How fitting. And infuriating. As always, Francesca acted as a foil to—

"Time for another dose of painkillers."

Francesca's voice dragged her back to the present.

Valentina closed her eyes, still in utter disbelief that she was here—in Francesca's home. More than that, Francesca seemed to have been staying by her side.

Warm fingers touched Valentina's forehead, almost a caress.

Clenching her jaw, she ignored the shiver this simple contact most certainly did *not* cause.

"Cool. Good," Francesca said.

Valentina wasn't so sure she'd call anything *good* right now. But she was alive. That had to count for something. That, and Francesca hadn't slammed the door in her face or dumped her at the nearest ER. Although, knowing Francesca's aversion to hospitals, that probably had more to do with her than Valentina.

"Here you go," Francesca said, once more propping her up a bit, though this time, Valentina was able to help. "About that applesauce?"

Valentina worried at her lower lip and looked at Francesca, really saw her for the first time since arriving. She still looked the same—older, yes, with streaks of gray at her temples, the lines around her mouth deeper, and her gaze still steady and cutting—essentially Francesca.

A face that had haunted her dreams for decades. How were the planes of her face still so achingly familiar? Why did Valentina's fingers still itch to reach out and smooth the furrowed lines of her brow?

"OK," she croaked.

"Great." Francesca smiled.

Because Valentina had agreed to eat applesauce. What was happening to her life?

She closed her eyes.

"Hey, don't go back to sleep. You need to eat."

With Francesca's help, Valentina sat up enough to take the first spoonful.

When the familiar flavor hit her tongue, she wrestled several impulses: to spit it out, beg for more, or cry.

She did none of them.

Just swallowed and then proceeded to eat the entire container.

Had Francesca bought her favorite applesauce while she was out? Ordered it, knowing her. Or maybe she always stocked it. Did that mean something?

She groaned and lay back down. *Ridiculous*.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Thank you." She couldn't even look at Francesca.

"Of course." Francesca rose. "I'll…take this down." She gestured at a tray. "Then I'll be back."



Spello, Umbria, May 1985

"That makes no sense. I would read it as *friend,* not *fiend*," Francesca said.

Valentina huffed. "The context doesn't give it away? Since when do I consider *Michaela* a friend?"

"There was a time you liked her. Or at least her puppy."

"That's her *only* redeeming quality. Maxwell is adorable, but that doesn't change that Michaela is…"

"A fiend?"

"Yes! Besides, look, we use this loop as an *R*." She wrote on a piece of paper and gave it to Francesca. "See?"

"I suppose."

"You need to take this more seriously. We can't afford to have our parents find out all our secrets. There are things they can't know!"

"Because they think we might be criminals?" Francesca deadpanned.

"You're not funny," Valentina said.

"You're right. I apologize. I'll be more diligent with our secret code."

"Don't mock me."

Francesca's smile vanished. "I'd never."

"Oh? What about my book?"

"I'm not mocking you there either. I'm fondly exasperated about your tendency to be a secret hoarder."

"A what? Take that back, Francesca Greco, or I'll…"

"You'll what, Varnelli?" She leaned closer. "You don't scare me."

Heat rose in Valentina's cheeks. She sometimes hated how Francesca managed to make her feel off-balance. "I don't want to scare you."

Francesca straightened. "All right. I'm still not making fun of you. I'd never do that."

"Yes, yes. I just… Given our families' history and occupation, it's important to keep a record of what we know. Things we shouldn't know but do. It could be useful down the road." She shrugged.

"Do you plan to follow in their footsteps?" Francesca asked, her dark eyes serious and her face unreadable.

Francesca had always been more disturbed by their families' business—although Valentina didn't like it either. There were other ways to get what you wanted without being so…ugly. So violent. But she couldn't deny a surge of pride at how powerful their families were.

But Francesca hated that world, so following in their families' footsteps was out of the question regardless.

"No. Of course not. This is more of an insurance policy."

"Written in code." Francesca smiled.

"Yes. And only you and I know how to read it, so it'll be safe, even if someone were to find it. That's why we need to know the code in our sleep. Mixing up *fiend* and *friend* can't happen!"

"All right, Val. I'll do my best. Write something else."

Warmth spread through Valentina, and with a smile, she refocused on the paper in front of her and wrote: *friendship* and *forever*. After all, Francesca needed to learn her *R*s.



"The doctor is pleased with your progress, but she wants to do a head CT at the hospital to rule out trauma."

"My head's fine." Valentina had no interest in going to the hospital—Lewis would surely be watching. Besides, she wouldn't drag Francesca there.

Francesca sat in the armchair beside the bed. "Hmm."

Valentina closed her eyes. She had no strength left to argue.

"Let me know if you change your mind."

"Fine."

Silence settled for a moment.

"You were pretty out of it."

"Well, getting stabbed will do that."

"You were saying something like 'they had it' and that they would kill you. So…do I need to be worried about your goons storming my house?"

The urge to strike—quick, venomous—flared in Valentina, but the fog in her brain dulled everything. Even anger. Her body ached. She was too tired. She just sighed.

"Are you in danger?"

She managed a weak glare. "Does this stab wound not make it obvious?" There was only so much she could take.

"Don't play dumb. Do they know where you are? Our history?"

A pause.

"No."

To be fair, if she *had* told anyone what had happened, Francesca's villa would be the *last* place they'd look. She still couldn't believe she'd come here.

She remembered driving through a haze, blood loss making the road tilt. The wheel slipping under her sweaty hands. Dashboard lights swimming.

She stopped.

Got out.

Walked.

In her fear-soaked mind, only one face had remained. Only one place.

Loaning the *Madonna* to the Meridian had been a last-ditch effort with a singular goal: provoke a reaction from Francesca. Force her to look. And if she didn't…then at least the gesture would salt a wound Valentina hoped had never healed.

After twenty-six years of stillness, of stewing in pain and resentment, she'd woken one morning with a single, brutal clarity—she didn't want to die like this. Not without trying.

Valentina didn't want to lie on her deathbed, filled with regret because she never reached out to see if they could—

And here she stopped.

Not because she couldn't name what she wanted, even in the privacy of her own mind.

No. She simply didn't know.

A part of her still seethed, a part that remained so raw and broken that she sometimes wanted to hurt Francesca—gut her the way she had once shattered Valentina.

But what she realized that morning a year ago was this: Doing nothing would haunt her more. It would be the kind of regret that suffocated.

She hadn't expected her plan to land her in Francesca's guest room with a stab wound, but here she was. Valentina had rebuilt herself from the ground up, but one look at Francesca and the cracks split open again.

Yet she'd make the most of her current situation. Even if she didn't know what that meant.

Chapter 4

Undertow

On day four of the invasion—Francesca had rolled her eyes more in the past four days than in the last five years—Valentina was lucid and awake for most of the day.

Silence settled like a weight. At times, it felt like living in a pressure cooker.

Neither addressed the mountain between them. They were (mostly) civil, pretending they didn't have more history than feuding nations.

In the afternoon, Francesca sought refuge in her bedroom, immediately questioning her decision as her gaze locked on *The Madonna in Red* hanging above the bed.

Valentina had looked like a hollowed-out ghost when she'd silently pressed the painting into Francesca's trembling hands at the warehouse months earlier. The mask of arrogance from minutes before, gone.

Now they were both at Francesca's house. Not an outcome she could have imagined a year ago when she'd seen the *Madonna* for the first time in over twenty-five years, hanging on a wall in the Meridian Museum. Maybe that had been the first crack.



Atlanta, January 2025

Francesca had asked Jules to flag any mentions of the *Madonna*, though she hadn't heard a whisper about it in decades.

Then, one mundane Tuesday morning, Jules had called—out of breath, spilling a flood of words Francesca couldn't decipher.

Until her brain caught up and stalled.

"The *Madonna* is at the Meridian!"

Her steps faltered as she got to the east wing gallery where the museum displayed its most important pieces.

She rubbed her clammy hands together before shoving them into her coat

pockets. With her heart lodged in her throat, she entered.

There she was.

After what felt like forever, the *Madonna* was within her reach. All air fled her lungs.

A guest bumped into her.

"Oh, excuse me," the woman said, sidestepping her.

Francesca could barely nod.

She moved closer, each step leaden, her chest tightening around the frozen lump inside. She halted in front of her painting.

Her vision blurred, acid churning in her stomach. Francesca needed to get out.

She didn't know what Varnelli was playing at, but Francesca would find a way to make her pay. She should have made a move years ago, forced a confrontation.

But—

Her gaze caught on the plaque: *on loan from Valentina Varnelli*.

Francesca's jaw tightened.



A crashing sound drew Francesca out of her reverie, and she nearly tripped on the area rug in her rush to get to the guest room.

She yanked the door open. "What happened? Are you all right?"

The words were out before she was able to take in the scene before her: Valentina sat on the floor, panting, holding on to her side with a grimace.

Francesca frowned. "You fell out of bed?" Valentina had never been clumsy.

"Hardly," she said, sounding strained. "A little help?"

"Oh," Francesca breathed. She stepped closer and pulled her up.

Valentina leaned against the bed, eyes closed. "I need a shower."

"Uh, I'm not sure that's a good idea. What if you get dizzy and fall? You couldn't get out of the bed, and—"

"Good Lord. Then help me, Francesca."

Silence.

"All right." There were worse things, even if Francesca couldn't think of a single one as she helped Valentina into the bathroom.

More than half an hour later, Francesca returned to her bedroom and headed toward her en suite. She pulled off her wet shirt and dumped it into the hamper. She should probably shower, too.

With a sigh, she turned on the water before fully undressing. She stood still under the hot stream, trying to center herself.

Not only was Valentina back in her life but she was hurt, vulnerable, and, naturally, as prickly and defensive as a porcupine.

Francesca understood that, likely better than most, but it didn't make this tightrope walk any easier.

Valentina's wound still looked angry—red and swollen—and Francesca had to suppress a gasp at how gaunt she was. She'd been as slow and careful as she could be with her, which had only seemed to increase Valentina's ire.

Once Francesca finished showering, she went to the kitchen and poured a bowl of soup she'd made earlier in the day. She brought it on a tray up to the guest room.

"Can you sit up to eat?" she asked upon entering.

Valentina sniffed. "Pastina in brodo?"

"Yes." Francesca placed the tray on the dresser before helping Valentina get settled. She positioned it over Valentina's lap, revealing the soup, a napkin, a spoon, and a glass of water.

"Thank you," Valentina said, unmoving.

"You're not hungry? You need to eat, and—"

"Will you eat, too?"

"Yes, of course."

Valentina narrowed her eyes. "With me. Here."

"Oh. Uh, OK. I can go get another bowl."

"OK." Valentina held Francesca's gaze.

"Right. Yes." Shaking her head, she left the room and returned to the kitchen, where she finally released a long groan. What was she even doing?

Dr. Williams was supposed to come back and check on Valentina in the morning. Maybe she could ask if Valentina was ready to move out?

Francesca rolled her eyes. She filled her bowl, poured herself a glass of water, and went back upstairs.

When she entered the room, Valentina sat there, unmoving, having touched neither the spoon nor the glass.

Francesca put her water down, then settled into the armchair. "Eat. Or you'll waste away."

"*Buon appetito*." Valentina dipped her spoon in the soup.

"Thank you."

They ate in silence.

"Do you still cook a lot?" Valentina asked when she'd finished her food and placed the spoon back on the tray.

"Not as often. More when I have company."

"Do you often have company?" Valentina looked at Francesca, inscrutable.

"No."

Stillness.

They both sipped their water.

When Francesca stacked the dishes and reached to lift the tray off Valentina's lap, cold fingers covered her hand.

Francesca froze.

"Can you come back? I…I need to tell you something."

Francesca met Valentina's gaze. Despite once knowing that face better than her own, Francesca couldn't guess how bad this was going to be.

Valentina had learned to control her features. Miracles did happen. Inconvenient ones, at that.

"Yes. Let me just wash this up real quick."

Downstairs, Francesca stood motionless after dumping the dishes in the sink. She didn't want to hear what Valentina had to say.

Either it would relate to *them*, and Francesca was in no state to unpack that, or it concerned whatever had landed Valentina here in the first place.

Francesca had spent too long stitching herself shut to risk tearing open again.

Her own Collective actually listened to her; Valentina would have a dozen counterarguments and dissect every word.

Besides, did she really want to get dragged into whatever war Valentina had started?

Then she remembered how tiny and helpless Valentina had looked in the bathroom—something Francesca would never say out loud. She preferred to keep on living.

But who was she kidding? As if she'd leave Valentina stranded.

Again.

God, why was that choice still haunting her? It had been the right one.

Her doorbell echoed through the house, and at first, Francesca didn't move, unsure what to do with it. It was like the outside world had ceased to exist since Valentina's arrival. She walked down the corridor and checked the front door camera feed before unlocking and opening the door.

"Ms. Greco?" a woman dressed in a messenger uniform asked.

"Yes."

"This is for you. Please sign."

She shoved an unmarked envelope into Francesca's hand; it was light, maybe a bill. No return address.

Francesca signed her name, handed back the scanner, and closed the door.

With a sigh, she placed the letter on the console table in the hallway. She'd deal with it later.

Back in the guest room, they sat in silence a moment.

"So what's this about?" Francesca finally asked.

"Do you recall my book?"

Francesca's brows furrowed. "Your journal of secrets?"

"It's not a journal!"

"Right. Yes. I do. What about it?"

Valentina fidgeted with the seam of her blanket, not meeting her eyes.

"They have it. That is, *she* has it."

A pause.

"Who is she?"

"Lewis. She…well, she stabbed me." She cleared her throat. "She wanted me dead and enough of my people…listened." Her voice dropped.

Francesca balled her hand into a fist and had to force herself to unclench it.

"And Lewis. Is she… She still wants you dead?"

"I'm not sure. She wants what the book hides."

Francesca rubbed her hand over her face. "Let's stop all this cryptic nonsense. I'm assuming the last few decades didn't stop you from hoarding every secret you could find and writing them down in your book."

Valentina jutted her jaw but remained silent.

"Please tell me you used a cipher or something else to protect its contents?"

"Of course."

Francesca released a small breath. "OK, good. So, what does the book hide?"

"Well, you know. Whatever people try to hide—notes about pictures, documents, receipts. Where they are, who they belong to."

"A ledger." Francesca nodded. "And I'm assuming you've got the actual copies hidden somewhere, then. Does the book say?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Val, I swear, if you don't—"

"Look, this isn't easy for me—"

"And it's a cakewalk for me? We've not seen each other in decades, and then you come to me, bleeding, and—"

"We saw each other at the warehouse a couple months ago! Where I gifted you the *Madonna*—"

"*Gifted*?" Francesca jumped out of her seat and stalked closer. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Valentina held her gaze, unmoving—proud, infuriating, and as beautiful as ever.

"No. I didn't have to do that. And it cost me dearly."

"You didn't have to steal it either. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be in this predicament."

"You deserved that and worse, Francesca Greco!"

Francesca gritted her teeth. "And now?"

"Now I'd like to retrieve my evidence before Lewis gets her slimy little hands on it."

"And what? You expect me to help you? Haven't I done enough already? Don't you have lackeys lining up for a chance to help you?"

"You want a medal for not letting me bleed out on your doorstep?"

Francesca folded her arms in front of her chest.

A pause.

"They can't help."

"Why not?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Oh, it matters to me if you expect me to walk into some kind of trap or risk my life for—"

"Your name is on the account."

Another pause.

"Excuse me?"

Chapter 5

Unsaid

Valentina sighed and took in Francesca's expression, wide eyes and parted lips. Should Francesca really still be that surprised by Valentina?

She had always known she'd need Francesca if she ever wanted to withdraw from her collection of secrets, but she'd (foolishly) assumed threats about what was in her possession would be enough and this day would never come. She supposed being here already put her one step ahead, considering she'd have struggled—uninjured—to knock on Francesca's door.

Mind you, this wouldn't go any smoother because she'd been stabbed.

"Explain," Francesca said, her tone flat but still sharp enough to cut.

Case in point. She stifled a deep sigh, also because it was liable to hurt.

"It's a long story."

"Do I look like I have any urgent engagements planned?"

Valentina tilted her head. "Could I get my pills first?"

Glancing at her watch, Francesca rose. "Of course." She handed Valentina her medicine. "You don't have to ask me for your pills."

"Then maybe leave them in an easier-to-reach spot."

"Oh." A sheepish expression crossed Francesca's face, and she moved the bottles to Valentina's nightstand.

She took her pills.

"Before leaving Paris, I emptied my bank vault and brought everything with me to the States. When I signed up with a new bank and they handed me the paperwork, I just… It seemed like a brilliant idea to—"

"Add me to your bank account? After all that had happened?"

Valentina almost had to laugh at Francesca's incredulous expression. "I've never been particularly rational when it comes to you."

Francesca averted her gaze. "Continue."

"It seemed like the perfect insurance. No one could force me to retrieve anything. I set it so I could add to my collection anytime I wanted, but to withdraw something, both of us had to be present."

"How did you even manage to add me to the account?"

Valentina blinked. "I know all your personal information, and I've pretty much been able to forge your signature since I learned to write."

"There's that, yes. Still, that was…risky."

"Yes. That was always part of the problem, wasn't it?"

Francesca's lips thinned. "You want to unpack that now?"

"I never do, but maybe we should?"

"It doesn't matter. It was a lifetime ago, and nothing will change either way."

Valentina didn't react, but the words were a punch to her solar plexus, and she had to force herself not to droop like a damn wilting flower.

It didn't matter. She wasn't here for… She wished she could lie to herself.

No. She still didn't know *what* she hoped to accomplish here, aside from crushing Lewis, or at least preventing her from fully taking over her operations. But Francesca's dismissiveness cut.

A lot.

It felt like an ending before Valentina could even make her case, whatever it might be.

"As you wish," she said, pleased her voice didn't wobble.

"What's your plan?"

"I don't have one. I was preoccupied with not dying. But my goal is to get my position back." She paused. "I think."

A humorless laugh left Francesca. "You think?"

"These last few days have been a lot. My perspective on this… It may have shifted."

"Maybe you need to figure it out first before stepping back into the line of fire."

"Would you let me?"

"You were never my prisoner, and you've always done what you wanted."

"Back then, you never even asked if I—"

"If you what?"

Valentina studied Francesca—rigid posture, hard lines, tension bleeding off her in waves. She was still fluent in Francesca, so she waved her off.

Now wasn't the time.

Maybe she'd never get to say it. Right now, Francesca was nowhere near ready to hear her.

"Never mind. I need to go to the bank, and I need you to come with me."

"And if I say no?"

"Then I can only hope Lewis never cracks our code and has no inside help to get into my deposit box."

A pause.

"Is this where you leverage whatever secrets you have collected on me?"

Valentina gave a mirthless chuckle. "I don't need a written record to remember your secrets."

Francesca hesitated and, for a second, Valentina hoped—still capable of hope when it came to this infuriating woman—that she would open up, talk. But then the walls snapped back up, and that was it.

"You're not well enough to shower yourself, much less go to the bank to retrieve anything."

"I'm not suggesting we go tomorrow. Just as soon as possible."

"We'd need a plan, and my people have to do more research and look into your Lewis."

"She isn't my *anything*," Valentina spat, trying hard to banish the sensation of Lewis's hot breath on her face, her total indifference as she plunged the blade into her side.

"Figure of speech, Val." Her voice softened, though the edge never fully left.

"Does that mean you'll help me?"

Francesca rose, sighing. "What do you think?"

"I don't know. Before Paris, the question would have been easy to answer."

"I didn't leave you at the nearest hospital. That should tell you enough. Good night." Francesca patted the doorframe and left the room.

"It doesn't," Valentina mumbled and lay back down, closing her eyes, refusing to dwell on the memory of how gentle and careful Francesca had been when she'd helped her shower.

She was so tired—more than her wounds could explain. Her bones were tired. God, her *hair* was tired.

There were moments she wished she'd fall asleep and never wake up.

That would also free her of her dreams, visions of what she'd escaped. It was over. Why did Valentina's mind insist on revisiting the mistake she'd almost paid for with her life?

Of course, she couldn't even say what she'd prefer: a replay of her most recent encounter with Lewis or of the night Francesca made her bleed.

But her mind offered no mercy, and sleep dissolved into the past.



Paris, June 7, 1999
8:35 p.m.

Valentina sat on the couch where Francesca had left her—unmoving, as if trapped in tar. A heavy mixture of rage and devastation swamped her, threatening to undo her at the seams.

Funny how she'd thought she knew grief.

Her anchor had broken. No, that implied happenstance. *This* was choice.

At first she'd thought that if she waited, if she didn't move, then maybe it hadn't happened, or perhaps Francesca would return.

Instead, the grandfather clock ticked away, one pendulum swing after the other, indifferent to the gaping hole torn inside her.

Her world forever altered, yet time didn't stop. It continued.

So would she.

Valentina rose and inhaled deeply.

She let her gaze wander over their cozy living room—the sumptuous brown leather couches, a metal table with a polished wooden surface. Artwork lined the walls—landscapes, portraits, an eclectic mix of both their tastes.

The entire house was a melting pot of who they'd been. Valentina took stock, seared every detail into memory—so *nothing* of her future life would ever look like this.

She'd leave Paris. Returning to Italy was out of the question.

New Zealand or Australia? No. She hated flying, and her work demanded too much travel.

Valentina forced her legs to move. She needed to function. Get her suitcases and start packing. There wasn't much she'd take. Some clothes, a few novels she couldn't part with. Her journals. The book.

Everything here was tainted, saturated with Francesca, and she couldn't bear it.

She strode into the bedroom and froze, her gaze locking onto the painting above the headboard.

The Madonna in Red.

Yes. That, she'd take. An eye for an eye, maybe. It wouldn't match the wreckage inside her, but it was all she had left.

Her vision blurred, but she blinked it away.

Francesca had left her. For good.

Valentina would leave, and Francesca would never find her. She'd always thought endings were loud. But it turned out they could whisper, too.

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