

Chapter One: Opened Up

If one more thing hits my desk today, I'm going to snap.

Sofia Valenti cradled her aching head in her hands and questioned the wisdom of working with family once again. Joining Valenti Brothers Construction had always been her dream. But since Gabe's death, that dream had become a nightmare.

She pushed aside the stack of time cards she needed to process for payroll to give the contracts her cousin Seth had dropped off a first read-through. Dropping her cheater glasses down from their perch atop her head, she squinted at the fine print. Seth and his best friend, Nick Gantry, were incorporating their custom woodworking business into the larger family firm, and the details of the deal fell, as usual, onto Sofia's desk. The thought of woodworking drew her mind to the purchase order for cabinets that had landed on her desk late in the day. Needing to get that done so it could be filled first thing, she pulled it from the stack and laid it on top of the thick folder of legalese. The contract could wait.

Perfect. The order form was only half filled out. She clicked her computer screen awake and opened the supplier's website, while she let a soothing stream of curse words flow through her mind. Now she'd waste precious minutes looking up part numbers that damn well should have been filled in. This was not how she envisioned using her double degrees in Business Administration and Interior Design. Her thoughts drifted to the naïve but tempting dream she'd shoved into the back of her mind the day after Gabe died: the pretty, airy design studio, a waitlist of clients eager for her services, her father's respect. All of these goals had taken a back seat when her mother had lost her eldest son and fallen apart. She carefully tucked the dream away and turned her mind back to the pain-in-the-ass order.

Someone had needed to step in and keep the place running while her parents had dealt with their grief. Bills and contractors needed to be paid, and she'd needed a temporary job while she got her design business up and running. That had been three years ago. Truth be told, the mind-

numbing work had gotten her through the worst of her grief after Gabe died, but now she needed more.

Basic cabinet package, bulk drawer pulls, the same retractable faucet kit they put in every house. The list never varied much. Valenti Brothers stood for good work at affordable prices, and their orders reflected that ethos. Though it hurt her creative soul, at least the part numbers were easy to find bookmarked on the site. With a few clicks, the order was entered, approved, and in queue for payment. If she was going to be stuck doing the office work, at least she could do it well.

As her mother and father, Josephine and Domenico Valenti, argued over how to pull back from the company and retire, the bulk of the day-to-day responsibilities fell on Sofia's shoulders. It had been months since she'd played with a design. No one even knew that she was available for design consults, because Dad never told anyone. Frustration weighed heavily on her mind as she tucked the PO into the appropriate file and pulled the contract back in front of her.

The legalese began to blur, and her glasses fogged over. She pushed the glasses back into her hair and blinked away the tears. God, she needed a break. A week at the beach would do. Hell, even a weekend over in Monterey would work. The soothing waves and brisk sea air would clear out the cobwebs in her mind. Since that wouldn't be happening any time soon, she hauled in a deep breath and reached into her emergency drawer. Her stash of snack-sized candy bars was flush, and she chose one with care. Almond Joy. She could certainly use a little joy today. She unwrapped the candy and popped the whole thing in her mouth.

She wouldn't mind a little action involving nuts either, but she'd have to get out of the office regularly for that to happen. What had seemed like a temporary drought of male interest was turning into full-on climate change. The Almond Joy disappeared before she had a chance to taste it, so she reached for a mini 100 Grand. This time she focused on the chocolaty, sugary goodness filling her mouth and soothing her scrambling mind.

A hundred grand would certainly be nice right about now. If she had some reserves, she could finally get out from under her father's thumb. When she'd started, having everything wrapped up with a neat little bow had seemed ideal. The plan was simple: work for the family business, live in a family property rent-free, pull a small salary to cover expenses but not drain their coffers, with the understanding that someday she'd have equity in the firm and would make commissions from her design work. Now that little bow was pulling tighter around her neck every day, and her father didn't understand that she was suffocating.

If she was ever going to make a name for herself, she needed capital to invest and time to design. Right now, her bank account was crying by the end of the month. As long as she was stuck at this desk, trudging through paperwork and indulging in pity parties, her account was going to keep weeping.

Enough. She slid the drawer closed and double-checked her planner. Two more hours before she could knock off for the family meeting her dad and Zio Tony had called. At least she knew she wouldn't have to rely on her freezer for dinner. Family meetings always took place around her mother's table, laden with food. She put her head down to focus on her remaining tasks, despite the images of her mom's lasagna triggering her salivary glands and tempting her to open the drawer just one more time.

Giving up on the contract until her brain was fresh, she rearranged her desk for the eighteenth time and began the rote task of entering payroll. In all her years of being the older sister, she had learned that she needed to leave on time. Enzo and Frankie would inhale more than their fair share if she was late. After the day she'd had, that was *not* happening.

Adrian Villanueva heard the muttered curses as he pushed open Sofia's office door. That didn't bode well for his request, but he didn't have a choice. The tile that had arrived at the Chu project wasn't right, and he needed Sofia to call the supplier and sort it out before the warehouse

closed for the weekend. He couldn't fall behind on that job, or it'd set off a chain reaction of delays and angry customers as his other sites suffered. He protected the Valenti Brothers' reputation as if he'd earned it himself.

Taking his life in his hands, he strode up to the prickly office manager's desk with a grin on his face. It wasn't a hardship to smile at Sofia Valenti. For years, he'd had to remind himself that, no matter how touchable her soft blonde waves looked or how her blue eyes twinkled at his jokes, she was off-limits. When he'd started working for her father as a teenage dropout, she'd been a sixteen-year-old stunner, and she'd only improved with age. Despite the fact that she was now old enough to choose her own partners, she was still the boss's daughter. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his relationship with Dom Valenti, certainly not while he worked up the courage to ask for the keys to his future. But in this case, his smile was wasted. She hadn't even looked up. He tried a different tactic in his charm offensive.

"Hello, beautiful."

"Ugh." She rolled her eyes, her manic fingers still flying across her number pad. The stack of time cards rapidly moved from one pile to another, her rhythm unbroken.

"I need your help."

"Get in line." He knew the snark was meant to be sarcastic. That was the usual tone she took with him, but the furrow between her brows looked like it was carved in granite. He wanted to smooth it away with his thumb, but he had a firm no-touching rule. The last thing he needed was to lose his precious restraint around her, and giving in to his impulse would trigger exactly that.

Focus on the problem. Get in, get out.

"The tiles on the Chu project are wrong. I need you to straighten it out with the supplier."

She closed her eyes and let out an ear-piercing scream. It surprised him into stepping back.

"What was that for?"

“Long story.” She finally looked up, her slate-blue eyes brimming with anger and frustration. *Damn*. Nothing in his arsenal was going to smooth over whatever else was making her scream. His best option now was to muscle through the details and get out of her way.

“Here’s the original order form and the packing slip. It looks like they switched the final numbers. We need to catch them before they leave, or we lose three days on this project, and I’ll have to pull crews from scheduled work at other houses to finish.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! I need to be out the door in half an hour. I’m not a miracle worker.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Flattery will get you nowhere. Give me that.” She snatched the paperwork from his hand and grimaced.

“So, got a hot date?”

Her head snapped up, eyes wide with surprise and...offense?

“Excuse me?”

“You said you had to leave. It’s Friday night...”

“Screw you. When’s the last time you saw me leave this office before eight p.m.?” She gestured to her small room, walls covered in mismatched sample cabinets and drawer pulls for the clients to see, and desk layered in papers.

“Just trying to make conversation. So why do you have to leave, then? It’s well before eight, as you say.”

“Dad called a family meeting. He’s got something he wants to talk to us about.”

Jealousy clenched briefly, even as he clenched his own fist in response. It was always this way. Family first. He’d started working for Valenti Brothers in high school as a general laborer. After his father had been deported, he’d been forced to become the man of the house far sooner than intended, working any and all hours to keep his mother and sisters safe and sound.

Over the last twelve years, he’d worked his way up, learning, apprenticing, proving his worth. He now led his own construction team,

with Dom and Frankie leading the other two since Tony had officially retired last month. He'd always expected to work alongside the old man until Gabe had finished college and was ready to step in. But Gabe had chosen a different path, one that led him to the army and Iraq. One that hadn't led him back home.

He could see the opportunities, his own potential to fill that role. He wanted it so bad he could taste it: the stability, the power over his destiny, the sense of finally belonging. But as long as business was decided over family dinners, he was stuck, always on the outside looking in. He needed to get his ass in gear and ask Dom the question he'd been choking on for months. As casually as he could, taking care to bury his frustrations deep, he asked, "Oh, yeah? Any idea what about?"

She raced a highlighter across the invoice and reached for her phone, already tackling his problem.

"None. And if you don't get out of here, I'll never finish so I can find out. Shoo! Hello? Yes, can I speak to Javier? Thank you."

She continued entering numbers while she calmly reamed Javier a new one and wrangled a guarantee that the tiles would be delivered to the site by Saturday at ten a.m., no extra charge. He had no idea how she juggled it all, but better her than him. He backed out the door, wondering why that prim tone of voice turned him inside out.