

CHAPTER ONE

BLOOD AND FIRE



Hold your hand out, with your palm facing upwards.' The way Valentino was watching me made my heart beat faster. I raised my arm, conscious of how slowly I was moving.

Felice was leaning back in the chair beside Valentino, one stick-like leg propped over the other. His arms were crossed tightly, like he was made of cardboard and someone had tried to fold him up. 'He's not going to chop it off, Persephone. Try not to let your cowardice show.'

'Felice,' Luca snapped. His jaw was so tight he looked like he could chew glass. He was sitting directly across the table from me, his body half turned away. I wanted him to look at me, to tell me it would be OK, but that wasn't his job. He had gotten me here, at least – I had a foot in the door. It was

foolish to hope for any more.

Nic cut his eyes at his uncle. 'The initiation is new to Sophie. Let her go at her own pace.'

Felice raised an eyebrow. 'If you say so . . .'

'Just because she's a Marino doesn't mean she's taken a blood oath before,' he pointed out.

Valentino tugged me towards him. I could feel his ring – thick and cold – pressing against my pulse. 'Let's hope not,' he murmured as he flicked his switchblade open.

I zeroed in on the handle. *Valentino*. The boss.

It will be easy. It will be quick. It's just a formality.

The room was nestled in the back of *Evelina*, Felice's gargantuan mansion. It was small, and dark, and way too hot. Everything was a collection of looming shadows and bright Falcone eyes.

Valentino punctured the skin at the top of my index finger and held it over an etching of the Falcone crest – a crimson bird half poised for flight. We watched in silence as the blood fell from my hand.

'At least we know she's human,' Felice muttered.

I threw him a dirty look. 'Try to control yourself, vampire. This is premium-grade initiation blood.'

Felice pointed incriminatingly at me. 'See, she's already making a mockery of it.'

Luca balled his fists on the table.

'*Stai zitto*, Felice,' Nic hissed. 'Stop goading her.'

Valentino released me, and my hand hovered on its own, the blood still dripping on to the paper. 'Say the words we taught you.'

I cleared my throat. 'I, Persephone Gracewell—'

'Marino,' interrupted Felice. 'Identify yourself properly.'

I glared at him.

He glared right back. He didn't want this – a Marino inside his ranks, however ignorant I had been to my own ancestry – but he had been outvoted and it was too late now.

'I, Persephone *Marino*,' I laboured, 'swear by my heart and my blood to uphold the values of the Falcone family so long as I am living. I will demonstrate honour and loyalty at all times, and will not break the sacred vow of *omertà*, on pain of torture or death. Henceforth, I pledge my allegiance to the House of Falcone and denounce all others, from now until my last breath.'

'Withdraw,' Valentino ordered.

I pulled my hand back and clenched my pricked finger inside my fist. He picked up the paper and pulled a box of matches from his pocket. He struck one, and in that instant I felt my world shrink around me. A breath caught inside my throat as it tightened. I could smell smoke – invading my nostrils, clouding my brain.

I am safe. I am free. It's just an illusion.

Valentino touched the flame to the paper and it began to burn, blackening and curling at the edges.

In my head, dying screams rang out. I was back in the diner. I was inside the fire again. I saw my mother's white sneakers inside the flames, winking at me. I could taste the ash and dust, I could feel it rushing into my lungs and parching my throat. My arms were sizzling and burning, the healing wounds ripped open again.

Not here. Not now.

Luca cleared his throat.

I tried to pull my thoughts from the inferno that had ripped my world away. The fire was over. The pain was all that remained. I tried to ignore my mother's face as it swam behind my eyelids. Those kind eyes, that gentle watery smile.
I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Mom.

'And the rest,' Valentino prompted. 'Sophie. Finish it.'

I blinked hard. The paper was nearly gone now. The flames had chewed it up into floating silver flecks.

'Sophie.' Luca's voice, quiet and stern, brought me back. I refocused. I remembered why I was here. What I had to do.

'La famiglia prima di tutto,' I finished.

The family above everything.

The family comes first.

My family.

Valentino dropped the last shred of paper. 'Sophie Marino, this ceremony symbolizes your rebirth into the Falcone family. From now on, you will live by the gun and the blade.' He beckoned me closer. I went, like a puppet on a string, jarred by the streaks of similarity between him and Luca as those deep blue eyes loomed larger.

Valentino pressed a hand to either side of my face and brushed his ice-cold lips against each of my cheeks, the movement quick and perfunctory. He was inches from me, our noses almost touching, and a shiver raked up my spine. I stared right into those calculating eyes, as he said, '*Benvenuta nella famiglia, Sophie.*' He dropped his hands and pulled back from me again. 'We are one until death.'

I expelled the breath that had been swelling inside me.

'So, that's it, then?' It was over as quickly as it had begun. There was a strange tingle of warmth blooming in my chest.

'I'm one of you now?'

'Almost,' said Valentino, pushing back from the table and rolling his neck around until it cracked.

Luca answered at the same time: 'Yes.'

They looked at each other, heads tilted in matching displays of confusion.

Valentino twirled his hand in the air, but when he spoke, it was in reply to Luca, not to me. 'She will have to kill a Marino before she can fully commit to the Falcone regime.'

'Ah!' Felice, who had unfolded all his limbs and was on his feet now, lit up like a glow stick. 'Christmas has come early.'

Luca was still staring at his twin. 'You can't be serious.'

Valentino's eyes narrowed. 'How else would we bind her to us?'

Felice's words flashed in my head. *Try not to let your cowardice show.* 'Who?' I asked, hearing the rasp in my voice and hating it. 'Who do I have to kill?'

'A small player,' Valentino replied. 'A test. I'll let you know the target soon.' He was so nonchalant it almost tricked me into a feeling of normality. In place of fear, a sense of duty began to rise. This was my task. Of course I would have to do something to prove myself. Of course it would be this. How else would they know I wasn't a Marino spy? How else could they help me avenge my mother?

'It's fine,' Nic said, the flicker of a smile lifting the hard edge of his cheekbone. 'It's not like she'll have to do it alone, Luca. We'll help her.'

'She'll have to make the killing blow,' Felice warned. 'Make sure she pulls the trigger.'

'Of course,' said Nic, without missing a beat.

'Of course,' I echoed, feeling a million miles away from the girl I had been just a few months ago.

'It's settled.' Valentino's words floated over his shoulder as he moved away from me. 'The next Marino casualty will belong to Sophie. And then Sophie will belong to us.'

I had barely reached the hallway when the distant sound of shouting filtered through the house. I jogged towards it, following Gino's voice as his pitch climbed higher and higher, the sudden wrongness of it echoing around me.

I sprinted past the kitchen, ignoring the laughter of Paulie's three little girls, skidded into the foyer and wrenched the front door open. Outside, Dom and Gino were already trekking towards the end of the driveway.

In the distance, flames were billowing above the entrance to *Evelina*. My heart leapt into my throat as an onslaught of dread careened over me. It prickled in my fingers, slithered up my arms, flashed warmth beneath my cheeks. Memories crowded against my mind, trying to push their way in.

No.

I tracked after the boys, my gaze on the back of their heads as they crested the hill halfway down the driveway and approached the flames. Every step pushed me further into my nightmares – into the searing heat of the diner, those final moments with my mother.

Don't.

That voice in my head, pulling me back to reality. To the mysterious burning heap at the end of the driveway. How mesmerized I was by the flickering amber streaks, how trapped I felt by all my memories inside it.

The heat of the fire, both real and imagined, was beating against my cheeks. I was close enough to see what was burning, all the shiny bits of metal inside it – a painful, familiar blue – and I knew, several seconds too late, that we were making a huge mistake.

Right in front of the big black gates and blocking the entranceway to Felice's driveway was a battered blue Ford. A Ford that had driven me into the city countless times, that had dropped me off at Millie's house, that had sat in my driveway as I tried to work the stick shift and cursed every time it stalled.

My mother's car was at *Evelina*.

My mother's car was burning at *Evelina*.

'Dom!' I screamed, but he was already circling the fire, trying to investigate it. 'Come back!'

Gino was even further from me. 'Gino! Get away from it!'

My voice railed against the sudden heat, the blinding crackling in my eardrums. Gino heard me, just enough to turn his head and stare, bewildered, at my sudden flare of panic.

I took another step, raised my voice. 'Get away from it!' I flung my hands out to the sides, arcing them as I shouted. 'Move backwards!'

'Sophie!' Luca's voice thundered down the driveway behind me. 'Get back!'

I was still screaming at Gino and Dom when Nic caught up with me, his boots skidding on the gravel as he grabbed me by the waist and swung me around. I barely had time to react before the car exploded and we all went flying backwards under a sky of raining metal and dead rats.

The noise thundered all around me as a fireball shot into the air. Heat, white-hot and searing, rolled over me as I scrabbled towards Nic, my fingers clutching the grass. The entire sky turned to smoke and ash, and jagged bits of fur and blood splattered us as we crawled towards each other.

Dom and Gino had gone flying to either side of the driveway, smashing into the blood-streaked gardens, the momentum rolling them over and over into flowerbeds along the periphery. They shouted each other's names as they dragged themselves away from the hungry flames, clawing their way back up to us.

I pulled myself to my feet, barely standing on shaking legs. When I lifted my head, the driveway right in front of the house was full of Falcons, each one consumed by their own unique brand of horror.

Luca jogged over to me, his arms streaked with blood and fur. He was saying something, but I wasn't listening. The reality of what had just happened was sinking in. The ground around us was littered with dead rats, and my body was streaked with their blood. One had landed a yard from my shoe. I stepped over it, moving towards the explosion site.

Yet again, the proof of Marino cruelty was shimmering in front of me. I was watching my mother's blue Ford now burnt black and heaving beneath dying flames. I was fighting the urge to rip their poisoned, savage blood right out of my skin.

Felice and Paulie darted past me, their arms filled with buckets of water. Elena was outside too, trying to keep the children away from the flames. I could hear her screeching at Sal and Aldo behind me. One of Paulie's girls, Greta, was wailing uncontrollably.

I drifted towards the car. At the very end of the driveway, plumes of smoke curled into the sky, turning the air to an unnatural, rancid smog.

A gift of smoke and ash. A hundred bloodied rats. A warning, not a shot. And somehow, that made it all the worse.

I stared as the flames made my eyes water, as the dead rats painted blood at my feet. I stared as Nic and CJ tied rags around their mouths and batted at the dying fire with blankets. I stared as Felice doused four buckets of water over the car, as Paulie inspected the damage. I stared as Elena came charging towards her sons, the younger children now barricaded inside the house.

Gino and Dom were covered in blood, too. It had soaked into their jeans, and criss-crossed their T-shirts, ending in smudges around their necks. Gino had a big crimson splodge on his cheek.

The smell was so achingly familiar. Dom's forehead was mussed with grey, his hair burnt at the tips. Gino's ponytail was like straw, strands broken off at the ends. He looked like he was about to vomit on himself. Dom raised his head to his mother. 'They stuffed the car with dead rats before they detonated it. It nearly blew us into the next life.'

Elena walloped him on the side of his head. '*Non parlare così!*'

'*Mamma!*' he yelped.

'*Imbecilli!*' she snapped, giving Gino a similar clout. 'Have I really raised morons? Do you not understand the danger in unfamiliar gifts? You do not approach what you don't understand! Go inside and get cleaned up before I twist your ears off for not listening to me!'

I stayed rooted to the spot as every inch of me turned to rage and ice, as thoughts of revenge surged into my mind and swept me up inside them. I stared and stared, and then I screamed so loud that my voice cracked and my throat felt like it was bleeding. It was a raging cry, a response to their message, so loud and unavoidable now. Because that was when it hit me. They had stood here and looked up at *Evelina*, through the gates, and laughed – I'd bet – *laughed* as they destroyed my mother's car. They had brazenly come to our door and hurled the threat directly at me. *Remember what happened to your mother? Look and see. Remember what we did to her? Here is your reminder. Here is what we do to rats. Here is what we will do to you.*

You are a rat, Sophie Marino, and we are coming for you.

'Sophie.' Luca's hand on my arm, holding me back, as though I would leap at the car and burn myself against the scalded metal. 'Come away from it.'

I rounded on him. 'Why should I?'

This message was for me. Why should I hide from it? The immediate world began to fade – the edges of it blurring black and quiet around me. I had never known animosity like this. I had never felt so passionate about anything.

I stared at the car again. I could feel my anger pounding in my ears, heating the tips of my fingers. It was catching in my chest. Pooling underneath my tongue. Prickling up the back of my neck.

Calm down.

Your time will come.

You're going to make them pay.