My Big Fat Mafia Family

Chapter 1

Tito

Settling into our new surroundings didn't take much effort. Comparing frozen tundra to a heavenly, sun-drenched oasis of vineyards kissed by God himself—yeah, no contest. Rico and I knew that Sonoma was a great place to produce wine, but we didn't know that we were in the most fantastic wine-producing area in Northern California. Heck, that included all of Napa, Mendocino, and Lake Counties. The county of Sonoma stretched from the Pacific Ocean in the west all the way to the Mayacamas Mountains in the east. It didn't take us long to catch our footing, and my dad's cousin, whom we call Uncle Sol—coincidentally, sharing the same name as me and my dad—welcomed us with open arms. It reminded me of those sprawling family dramas you see on stage, you know, like the ones with larger-than-life characters and tangled webs of relationships. It's like those Greek families who name all their kids Nick, Nico, Nicolas, or Nickie if it's a girl. Regardless, Uncle Sol has been treating us just like family, and we're just loving it here.

Uncle Sol's, or technically the Barbarotti winery, has already garnered several national and international wine awards and is well-known across Sonoma as well as all over the country. Having Uncle Sol as our teacher was a stroke of good luck, a blessing, hell, it's as if we were predestined to be here, guided by fate and some divine hand. Since Uncle Sol and his wife, Aunt Sofia, don't have any sons, their only daughter, Stacy, complains about living in the middle of nowhere, as she puts it. She'd rather be in a big city like San Francisco, New York, or—if you can believe it—Chicago. I think she might have a different point of view if she spent a winter there. Regardless of Stacy's wishes, her parents were hoping for someone to take an interest in the wine business who could continue their legacy, and *boom*, out of nowhere, we popped into the picture. Who could have devised such an ordained plan? We sure hit the jackpot, stumbling into this opportunity like we're characters in some grand play directed by destiny itself.

Rico and I had two main focuses. First, we needed to get up to speed on the wine business. Second, we had to plan our wedding, a task I mostly left for Rico. After all, we didn't want too many chefs in the kitchen, so to speak. My primary concentration

was on understanding why Sonoma County is such a prime location for winemaking. Uncle Sol had already enlightened me on the two main factors: soil and climate. It's the unique combination of these, known as *terroir*, that makes Sonoma County so appealing to grape farmers. Climate, in particular, can be unpredictable, especially with recent climate change events. However, Sonoma boasts long, bright, dry summer days that are rarely too hot, complemented by chilly evenings, sea breezes, and fog. It's an environment perfectly suited for grape cultivation.

Even with all the perfect elements aligned in your favor, success in the wine industry is never guaranteed. The competition is fierce, especially in Sonoma. With a rich tapestry of eighteen wine regions and an impressive array of over 425 wineries, Sonoma County stands as a vibrant center of wine production. Within its borders lies a diverse spectrum of winemaking enterprises, ranging from intimate, family-owned ventures to globally renowned establishments. While Sonoma County boasts the cultivation of more than sixty grape varieties, a select group of six hold sway in the region's vineyards. Chardonnay leads this esteemed lineup, closely trailed by pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, zinfandel, and merlot. This captivating diversity in wine offerings is a testament to Sonoma County's rich tapestry of unique *terroirs*, as reflected in its nineteen distinctive American Viticultural Areas, each imparting its own singular character to the wines produced there.

I knew there was much to learn, and Rico felt the same. He had embarked on his Master's journey at the Culinary Institute of America, where he enrolled in a unique wine business degree program. Here, he could refine his tasting skills, delve into wine theory, and cultivate a robust skill set encompassing business management, industry innovation, and leadership. Our joint aspiration was to carve out fulfilling careers in the wine industry. While Rico immersed himself in the intricacies of the wine lifecycle—from bottle to table—I was hands-on in the vineyards alongside Uncle Sol. Additionally, I pursued online courses in winemaking from UC Davis, renowned for its support of both home and commercial winemakers and cellar workers seeking to consistently enhance the quality of their wines.

Our plates were undeniably full, especially considering that Rico and I were getting married in mid-June, a mere five months away. I anxiously awaited Rico's return

from his trip to visit his parents. Though Rico attended the University of California at Irvine, he grew up in Fresno, nestled halfway between Sacramento and Los Angeles in the San Joaquin Valley. The drive spanned about three and a half hours, covering approximately 216 miles from Sonoma. However, Rico had been away since early Thursday morning, and as late Sunday afternoon approached, I found myself missing him dearly. This marked the longest period we had been apart since our paths crossed. Even during Rico's month-long hospitalization after sustaining a gunshot wound to his ribs and a major brain concussion while heroically saving my life from an assassin's bullet, I visited him nearly every day.

Fresno, while a relatively liberal city, was home to Rico's strictly conservative family. Rico hadn't broached the subject of us yet, feeling he needed to do so face-to-face. During his month-long hospitalization, shrouded in profound amnesia following the heroic act that saved my life, Rico could only reach out to his parents and his older sister Marlena once he began to mend. They expressed a desire to visit him in Chicago, but we had already made plans to travel to California, and Rico wished to settle in a bit before breaking the news to them. Yes, he was gearing up to disclose not only his being gay, but also the news of our impending marriage. He sent me a reassuring text last night, indicating that all went well, but he preferred to share the details in person upon his return home. I eagerly awaited his arrival, eager to hear all about it. The future unfolded along lines no one had dared imagine as Rico's car rumbled up the long gravel road, weaving through the vineyard towards the house, and I hurried out to greet him.

"Rico, how did it go? You must be exhausted from the drive. Come inside, and let's unwind with a glass of the new blend Uncle Sol and I have been crafting. I've missed you so much."

Rico's face lit up with happiness as he stepped out of the car and enveloped me in a warm hug. "I'm thrilled to be back, Tito," he said. "You have no idea how much I missed you, too, and I have so much to share. A glass of wine sounds perfect after that three-hour-plus drive.

I was so happy to see Rico, but I was also very horny and couldn’t wait to give him a proper greeting. But first, I waited, realizing that Rico needed to wind down and

share everything that happened during his visit with his parents. He took off his shoes, collapsed on the lounge chair, and began his account of what had transpired.

Rico told me that his father, Noah Bass, had always been at odds with him regarding how they saw the world. He was against Rico joining the FBI, and after Rico explained everything that had happened in Chicago, all his father had to say was, "Why did you give up on your job so easily?" So much for being empathetic to his son, who was shot and suffered a severe head injury—so bad it left him hospitalized for weeks with amnesia and PTSD. You'd think he'd be a little more understanding, especially since Rico's short tenure as a criminal psychologist had exacted such a devastating toll on his young life.

But anyhow, I digress. At that point, Rico told him he was gay and had known since the age of twelve. His father said he knew he was *different that way* but thought it was just a phase and that he'd grow out of it, adding, "Rico, you just needed to find the right girl, and that will fix everything."

After hearing that, I decided to sit right next to Rico so I could hold his hand. Sensing the difficulty he must have gone through, I told him, "Please continue."

He said his mom, Annemarie, bless her heart, was a lot warmer than his dad. She actually told him, "Your life is your own—just live it," which is practically the parental equivalent of getting a standing ovation. She just wanted him to be happy. And then—oh boy—he got to the part where he dropped the bomb. Not just a little abbreviated version, mind you, but the whole ordeal—how I proposed. But before he got there, he gave me the full recap, like I hadn't lived through it myself. You know, from the moment we met to Uncle Sully getting murdered, to the part where he "forgot" to mention that he was an FBI agent undercover, investigating yours truly and the whole Barbarotti clan. Fun times. And me? I'm over here trying to pull a Houdini act and turn this crime family into a Fortune 500 business. Talk about mixed signals.

As he recounted the story his hands moved like a maestro conducting an orchestra of disaster, each flourish adding more absurdity to the chaos that had become our lives. The way his eyes gleamed—half mischief, half *I can't believe I survived that*—you'd think he had just passed through the gates of judgment and lived to tell the tale.

Every word was a mix of relief and disbelief like he'd dodged a bullet—literally and figuratively—after confessing all to his parents.

****

Rico

I decided to rip off the Band-Aid and dove right into the heart of the matter. "Mom, Dad, remember when I said I was working for the FBI? Well, surprise! I was actually doing undercover work. Oh, and I met this guy on a dating app who was the subject of my investigation. By the way, we're getting married!"

Okay, so I didn't phrase it exactly like that. But trust me, in my parents' ears, that's how it sounded.

When Tito asked me, "How did they react to that?" I took a deep breath, mentally replaying the scene of my parents' faces cycling through confusion, shock, and what I can only describe as impending aneurysm.

"Well," I began, "let's just say their reaction was less *Congratulations!* and more *How hard did you hit your head during your undercover ops?* I had to explain the whole story slower than a sloth on Ambien."

I continued, "I clarified that you weren't actually part of the Mafia family business—their eyes nearly popped out at that phrase—and that you had aspirations to start your own wine business. I think they were relieved until they realized that meant you'd be providing alcohol to the masses. Can't win 'em all, right?

I tried to focus on the positive aspects," I admitted, feeling a gush of affection. "I highlighted all the great things about you—your intelligence, your sports achievements, your academic prowess, and your drive to succeed. I may have compared you to a young Al Pacino, only with better career choices, less yelling, and, of course, a hell of a lot better looking.

By the end, I think I had them half-convinced. At least, they expressed a desire to meet you and see for themselves what I see in you. Probably to make sure you're not some elaborate hallucination I've cooked up."

Tito's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? I assumed we'd meet eventually, but how soon are we talking about? Should I start practicing my 'respectable future son-in-law' routine now?"

I chuckled nervously. "Well, here's where it gets...interesting. They seemed okay with the whole *son of a Mafia family* thing. Apparently, that's just spicy enough for their tastes. But then I mentioned you were a Democrat."

Tito's eyebrows shot up. "And?"

"Let's just say they're more concerned about your voting record than your family's rap sheet. Welcome to the Bass family, where we fear donkeys more than horses' heads in bed. Where we believe in God, guns, Trump, and the GOP," I added, doing my best impression of a game show host. "To be fair, they're probably hoping your family's, um, business acumen might balance out the Democratic leanings."

Tito shook his head, a smile tugging at his lips. "And here I was, worried about explaining my family's history. Looks like I should be more concerned about defending my stance on healthcare reform and climate change."

"Oh, absolutely," I nodded sagely. "My advice? Brush up on your Reagan quotes and practice looking disapproving whenever someone mentions taxes. It'll go a long way."

"You're kidding, right?" Tito asked, his eyes narrowing.

I held his gaze for a moment before breaking into a grin. "Mostly. But maybe keep a red tie and MAGA hat handy, just in case."

****

Tito

The thought of meeting Rico's parents initially seemed like a simple meet-and-greet. However, after hearing Rico describe his familial inquisition, I started to feel like I was walking into a high-stakes courtroom drama—one that came with its own set of rules. I was about to learn the hard way.

I figured I'd just have to be my charming self and act less liberal than at a Bernie Sanders rally. Truth be told, my views on business and finances were about as conservative as a Wall Street broker's expense account. But try explaining that when your resume includes *purveyor of fine herbs*—and I don't mean oregano.

I could already picture the scene: Rico's father, eyebrows furrowed, grilling me about my stance on trickle-down economics while I'm desperately trying not to let slip that the only thing I believe should trickle down is the olive oil on good focaccia.

Given Rico's father's disposition, a little bit of my special brownies might help him loosen up. I mean, nothing says welcome to the family like accidentally dosing your future father-in-law with CBD, right? I could already see the headline: *Local Conservative Finds Inner Peace, Hugs Tree*.

As I imagined navigating this minefield of political discourse and family dinners, I couldn't help but chuckle. Who knew that my biggest challenge wouldn't be explaining away my family's colorful past, but rather convincing Rico's parents that my love for their son was stronger than my distaste for supply-side economics?