

A black and white photograph of a shirtless man with a beard, looking to the right. He has a tattoo of a sword and a banner on his left chest. The background is a dark, textured red.

TWISTED KNIGHT

R.G. ANGEL

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Twisted Knight – Cosa Nostra book 2

By R.G Angel

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PROLOGUE



“Father, why now?” I tried to sound blasé despite the fear building in the pit of my stomach as I looked at the blond girl crouched in the corner of the windowless room.

She was sobbing, her face buried in her folded knees, but she couldn’t be much older than my thirteen years.

My father’s ever-present scowl deepened. “Because I told you to. Because it’s time for you to become a man. Because this girl needs breaking before we sell her.”

A wave of nausea hit me. My mother had kept me as far away from my father's side business, too scared of who I would become, a replica of him. Faithless, immoral, evil.

But she had died a year ago and I was now at his mercy. How many times had I wanted to tell the truth to Luca? My friend despite being the son of a low-grade made man and him being Mafia royalty, but what then? I’d have my father’s death and the one of all his men on my conscience, and what if what he did had been allowed? I’d be a traitor and what would they do to me?

I was just a boy, a coward who was nothing more than a lackey to his father.

I looked at the girl again. She peeked at me through her curtain of blond hair, her blue eyes filled with tears and dread.

“I don’t want to.”

My father punched me, and I tasted the blood in my mouth as I fell heavily to the floor.

“Very well then, she’ll have you to thank for what she will go through. You’ll stay and watch.” He pressed a button and three of my father’s men walked in.

The first one was a six-foot-seven three-hundred-pound man they called The Monster. He looked at the girl with a sick glimpse in his eyes.

“These three or you. Your choice.”

The girl looked up and paled before turning toward me, her eyes almost begging.

How could this poor girl beg me to hurt her?

I sighed with defeat. “I’ll do it.”

My father clasped his hand on my shoulder. “I knew you’d do the right thing, son.”

I moved toward the girl and undressed her as she cried, my hand shaking under my father’s scrutiny. What a way for this poor girl to lose her virginity. I’d lost mine a couple months ago on my thirteenth birthday to a prostitute twice my age. Not really the way I had wanted, but nothing like what that poor girl was about to go through.

“It’ll be okay,” I whispered to her, hoping my father was too far away to hear and would not take

this for kindness or weakness which we both would pay for. “What’s your name?”

“Emily,” she sobbed as I pulled her toward the bed and unzipped my pants, trying to block out everything around us—my father’s sadistic eyes and what I was doing to her.

I closed my eyes and entered her as gently as I could, trying to make less of the nightmare it must have been for her, and as I thrust into her, her sobs turned to wails and as I stole her innocence, I felt the little I had left vanished too.

It was the day I lost my soul and part of my humanity... And it had only been the beginning of my hell.

CHAPTER ONE



DOM

Twenty years later

“Please, no, don’t!” she shouted, trying to crawl away from me. “I beg you, don’t hurt me.”

I growled, her fear resonating all the way to my cock, making it harder than steel.

I pulled at her legs and wrapped my hand around her neck, squeezing hard as I slammed my cock inside her.

She thrashed with every thrust, tried to claw at my face. I let go of her throat, and she took a sharp breath as I grabbed her wrists with one hand.

“Please don’t,” she sobbed as I slammed into her harder.

She cried out with every ruthless thrust. I closed my eyes, grunting, losing myself in the moment.

I came hard and as soon as I was done, I stood up as the now familiar wave of self-loathing filled me.

I discarded my condom and zipped my pants, smoothing my features before turning toward her.

“You took acting lessons?” I asked, lighting a cigarette, looking at her lying on the bed with a little satisfied smile on her face.

She gave me a half smile. “You’re not supposed to smoke in here.”

I snorted. “I’m sure Genevieve will let that one slide.”

Genevieve Dupont, the Madame of The Rectory, owed the *famiglia* a lot for so many things; we were basically kings here.

She extended her hand. “Then give me a smoke. I think I earned it.”

I extended her the cigarette; she took a puff. “And yes, I did take some classes. A lot of guys are into the same things as you are. Your kinks are not that special. The only thing that is different here is that I have a hard time pretending I’m not coming with you because your big dick really hit my G-spot.”

I nodded, grabbing the cigarette back from her. There was a difference between those guys and

me. For them it was just a kink, an itch to scratch, some rough play they couldn't bring home to the wife, but for me it was different.

I was a monster, a sick bastard. For me it was the only way to get it up, her screams and her fighting that made me come.

I got out a wad of bills out of my pocket and threw five hundred dollars on her nightstand.

She looked at the money and threw me a sultry look. "The going rate is three hundred fifty dollars."

I shrugged, grabbing my jacket from the red velvet chair in the corner. "Bonus for all your hard work."

Elodie was the only prostitute at The Rectory that enjoyed the fight and the all non-con play so she was the only woman I picked because contrary to popular belief, I didn't want to hurt women or traumatize them; that was the last thing I wanted to do, despite the monster lurking under the surface, the evil running in my blood... I never wanted to hurt them. It just seemed to be the only way for me to work my cock.

I might have been Mafia, but I still had a conscience, some sort of moral compass—admittedly a misdirected one sometimes, but I lived by my rules.

"Coming back to see me soon?" she asked sultrily, opening her legs in an invitation to repeat what we'd just done.

I sighed. I knew it was going to come eventually; she was misconstruing my repeated visits for attraction or even worse... affection. The only reason I picked her every time was because she enjoyed the depravity instead of enduring it as the others would. How she looked or who she was didn't matter at all to me.

"I'm quite busy," I replied evasively. It was not a lie; my consigliere job was taking a lot of time, especially since Cassie, Luca's wife and my sister at heart, was getting closer to her due date.

Luca was more and more the doting husband and future father than capo these days, and I was making sure I didn't let something slip. I had their backs—always.

Plus, I didn't enjoy sex like that. No, truly I didn't; it was just the only way I could. It was a part of me I hated. I'd be celibate if I could, like Luca did for over two years, but I was not Luca, and my dick sometimes got the better of me despite how shitty and disgusted I felt afterward. That was why I tried to limit my visit to once a month.

"You're an important man." She nodded before sighing and stretching, flaunting her erect nipples to my face. "What if you moved me to your home? You could have me any way you want, every night."

I let out a low chuckle. "You couldn't handle me every night." I was much too rough, much too violent just... too much.

She winked at me. "You'd be surprised."

I was just done with this conversation. I wanted to go home and be with my circle, my family.

"I'll see you around," I said, adjusting my jacket.

I didn't look back at her as I exited the room and walked down the corridor full of doors to other rooms. No matter the pretense of luxury, The Rectory was nothing more than a brothel, but one that valued secrecy above all else and one that will always be here—too many powerful men were part of this exclusive club.

I reached the underground parking and climbed in my gray Porsche 718 Boxster, the only extravagant expense I ever made with the Mafia money I made.

As soon as I turned on my phone, I was assaulted by texts, mostly from Cassie sweet-talking me

into stopping at the fast-food joint on my way home.

She had the weirdest cravings during her pregnancy and Luca was all about health kicks. If she shamelessly begged me for that, it was clearly because her husband, my capo, refused but I was a sucker for that woman and even if I knew Luca would shit a brick I was going to stop for her extra-large fries, her burger with extra pickles, and her chocolate milkshake... consequences be damned.

“Dom?” she called as soon as I walked in.

I looked down at the greasy, smelly bag I held in my hand. I swear her pregnancy turned her into a hound.

I went to the kitchen, putting the bag on the table before going to the living room she’d transformed a few months ago.

Cassie had been transforming this austere house with her light; it was nothing like it was just a year ago.

I leaned against the doorframe and looked at her sitting in the fancy pregnancy chair Luca bought her, her hair in a messy bun on top of her head, her pregnancy dress wrapped around her huge stomach.

I smiled tenderly at her. I was home now; I’d left the darkness behind at The Rectory.

“Food’s in the kitchen.”

She looked up, her face lighting up with a huge smile.

“Domenico, you are the best of men!”

I chuckled. “Let’s not say that to your husband, okay?”

She shrugged with a little pout. “He said no.”

I laughed again. “I figured.”

“Oh!” She rested her hand on the side of her stomach. “The babies are thankful too.” She gestured me forward. “Come, you can feel a heel.”

I looked down at my hands. I had to shower; no way I was touching her after what I’d done with Elodie, after the impulse I had after I degraded that woman...

I shook my head. “I’m just going to take a quick shower.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be silly. Here.” She pressed her forefinger against a little bump I could see on the side of her stomach.

I pointed toward the kitchen. “You better go eat your greasy food before your husband finds out.”

She muttered something under her breath as she pressed the button at the side of her chair to help herself up.

I looked down, trying to hide my grin. Food was the best way to derail her.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” I told her as she waddled slowly out of the room.

She raised her hand in a dismissive gesture, like she couldn’t care less, and right now I was pretty sure that was the case; she was hangry.

I got to my room on the first floor and took a quick shower before going to the second floor to Luca’s office.

I knocked once, not really in the mood of exasperating him tonight.

I heard papers shuffling. “Come in.”

I opened the door and saw him breathe out a little breath of relief.

“Oh, it’s you.” He leaned back on his chair, ignoring the papers in front of him. “Come in.”

I walked in and leaned forward, peeking at his computer screen and the medical article on twin pregnancy.

I shook my head and looked at the empty glass on his desk. “Want a refill?”

He nodded, turning toward the screen again and rubbing his chin; it was something he did when he was preoccupied.

“She’s going to be fine,” I said as I served us both a double drink.

He sighed. “Yea...” His statement lacked conviction.

“Why are you even hiding up here as your wife is watching her romcom downstairs?”

He rolled his eyes. “I did have some work to do but then—” He shrugged. “She keeps trying to guilt me into getting her some junk food. I already caved four times this week... no more.”

“You can go down now; she won’t harass you again.”

Luca looked heavenward. “You bought her that damn burger, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “Of course I did.”

“Dom,” he started with a weary sigh.

I took a sip of my drink. “You know I’ll never refuse her anything.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not good for her.”

“She’s pregnant, Luca. She’s not sick.”

“She’s so small.”

“Yes, and you’ve put two babies in her. This one’s on you.” I meant it as a joke but as Luca paled ever so slightly, I realized he was scared.

I’d rarely seen my best friend scared before. He was the beast capo, the scarred Mafia boss that terrified our rank almost as much as Genovese, the heartless bastard capo dei capi, did, and he was scared now.

“Women have been doing this for thousands of years. She is strong and valiant, our Cassie.” I let out a humorless chuckle. “Hell, she would have run a long time ago if it wasn’t the case.”

“I know.” He nodded. “It’s just—” He looked toward the computer again, remaining silent.

And I understood exactly everything he was not saying. Cassie was his everything; she had been the one who got him out of his pit of despair and self-destruction. He was living for her, breathing for her. If he’d lost her— I shivered. He would not survive it and I couldn’t even blame him.

I used this opportunity to change the subject. “You know, maybe it’s not the best time for Cassie’s cousin to come.”

“Dom... please.”

“Luca, as your consigliere—”

Luca laughed. “You know for a title you didn’t want, you use that card a lot.”

It was not that I didn’t *want* to be his consigliere, of course I did, but he was Mafia royalty. I’d been a son of a prostitute and a made man. A made man that was killed in mysterious circumstances when I was fifteen, circumstances that had never been investigated—because everyone, including me, were way too pleased for his untimely death. Luca’s position had already been challenged, but I shouldn’t have expected anything else from him. What Luca Montanari wanted, he got.

“She’s a stranger, Luca. An outsider.”

“So was Cassie, and look how she fits in. How much you care for her.” He arched an eyebrow. “I mean, in any other circumstances and were you any other man, I would shoot you just for how fusional you two are.”

I sighed. “It’s different.”

“Different how?”

I shook my head. I had no real argument except that we got very lucky with Cassie. Genovese accepted an outsider because Luca had something he wanted and gave it to him in exchange. We also got lucky that Cassie was basically the most caring woman in the world and accepted our darkness without blinking, which was also due to the fact that her parents had been serial killers and so much worse than we could ever be—at least in her eyes.

“Dom, I did all the searches on that woman, plus all the ones you requested.” He threw his hands up in exasperation. “I even had the poor woman followed by a PI for days! My wife would kill me for that. She’s her family.”

I crossed my arms on my chest. I knew I’d lost, not that my argument made a lot of sense to start with.

“Maybe she can come later? Cassie is not due for another month. The woman doesn’t know anything about our world; we don’t need to risk her discovering who we are.”

Luca tapped his fingers rhythmically on his desk. I was getting on his nerves—that was clear.

“She will not go full term.” He sighed, rubbing his hands on his face with weariness.

I frowned. “She told me everything was fine with the doctor today.”

Luca leaned back on his chair. “And it is but the babies are big and the chances of getting to term are very low. She is scared, Dom. She’s putting on a brave face for me and you and the kiddo but it’s not enough. She needs a woman by her side, someone who can understand better than we do. Nazalie is sweet but she’s not her family and if it makes her feel happy? Safe?” He shrugged. “I’m going to welcome her with open arms.”

I didn’t expect that. Cassie didn’t seem scared of anything, but she was a young woman who went through a lot of things in such a short period of time, so I sometimes forgot she was not a warrior.

I nodded with defeat. “Fine.”

“You’ll go pick her up? No tricks?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be there.”

Luca’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “No scaring her so she’d want to leave.”

It was a tactic that did cross my mind, but I knew that if the woman told Cassie, she would kick my ass into next week. “I won’t.”

He nodded, apparently satisfied by my answer. He looked at the clock. “Okay, time to go hunt for my wife. I think I gave her enough time to eat her food and hide the evidence.”

I raised an eyebrow, a small smile tugging at my lips. “You won’t tell her you know.”

He shook his head, a glint of humor in his eyes as he slid a box of tums in his jacket pocket. “No, it makes her way too happy when she thinks she outsmarted me, and I love seeing her happy.” He patted his pocket where he put the Tums. “So, I’ll be there with her in a couple of hours when she’ll start moaning about the heartburn, and I’ll be her Tums hero—pretending to not know she did exactly what she was not supposed to.”

“That’s cute,” I admitted.

Luca shrugged. “I love her.”

That statement alone was enough. We didn’t love often in the Mafia; it could get way too messy. Most Mafia men were in arranged marriages, based on so many factors, and they were not unhappy. We could say that most of them had affection for their wives. But there were a few lucky ones, or unlucky ones, all depending on your views on love, that fell in love hard—like Luca did—and once we loved, it was all-consuming, overbearing at times and forever. It took a strong woman to deal with our kind of love, and Cassie was just that—she was Luca’s everything.

These two were a relationship goal; too bad I was way too messed up to ever have a chance to get that.

CHAPTER TWO



INDIA

I jolted awake as the plane touched the ground and I looked around groggily. The flight only lasted five hours, but I didn't have the best night and after Cassie's husband, Luca, upgraded me to first class I had to admit that the nap had been heaven.

Once the plane landed, I waited for first class to be emptied before I stood up and reached for my overhead luggage. I always tried to wait for most people to be gone because I had never been keen on the looks I was getting. Some surprised, some judgy, some appreciative... some envious and it had been like that since middle school. I always preferred being invisible, but it was not easy when you were a six-foot-tall woman.

I was genuinely happy that Cassie's and Jude's lives turned around and that she met a lovely man I had yet to meet.

I was also grateful she wanted me to visit; leaving Calgary was a good idea after the breakup. It was not just a normal breakup either. No, it was a destructive bomb, and this chance to get away had been my saving grace. Leaving, even if just for a little while, had been mandatory for my mental health.

I picked up my suitcase and exited the arrival to the sea of people waiting for their friends or family.

It had always been fascinating to me to see people interact at airport arrivals; it had even been the subject of my thesis.

My eyes stopped on a tall, broad man with a well-trimmed goatee. He was studying the crowd too, with a scowl on his face. I sighed when I noticed his sign, 'I. McKenna.' Of course, the boogeyman dressed all in black was here for me.

I stopped in front of him and looked up. That was also quite a rare occurrence too. I was a six-foot-tall woman and meeting taller guys was quite a challenge.

How many guys on dating websites said they were over six feet and weren't? A scarily high number.

"Did the *Men in Black* send you?" I asked with a little grin, trying to lighten the mood and ease the scowl that made me uncomfortable. I had enough experience with angry men; they made me very

nervous.

The man looked at me silently, his brown eyes so dark they looked bottomless. He was extremely good-looking, that much was sure, with his square jaw, high cheekbones, and long straight nose. He was not classically good-looking but the dangerous kind—the kind that will burn your heart and soul and leave you breathless and heartbroken in your bed, the kind of man I needed to stay away from. I didn't come for this; I came to stay away from any complications.

“Let's go,” he ordered with a low sexy voice before reaching for my suitcase on the floor and walking out.

Was he a security guy working for Cassie's husband? I knew she married well, but I didn't know much more. She'd been quite evasive about the whole situation, but she seemed genuinely happy when I saw her on Skype, so I was not really worried. My cousin had been to hell and back—I trusted her judgment.

“Can I have your name?” I asked the man as we reached the underground parking.

“Domenico.”

My pace faltered; it was impossible. “*You are Dom?*” *The Dom* Cassie described to me was funny and kind and all in all a unicorn, but right now he seemed more like a strict asshole to me.

He threw me a side-glance before stopping by a luxurious black car.

“Why?”

I sighed with exasperation. “Are you the type of man to answer questions with another question?”

“And what type of man is that?” he asked, putting my suitcase in the trunk.

I rolled my eyes and followed him to the front of the car.

He reached for a paper from under his wiper; his nostril flared as he read it and looked around the quiet parking lot. If I thought, he was scowling before, he looked murderous now.

“Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn't I be?” he asked, bunching the paper in his fist before putting it in his pocket. “Get in.”

“You know it's bound to get very old, very fast,” I told him as he reversed the car out of the spot.

“What is?” he asked, throwing me a quick look before concentrating on the road again.

“You!” I snapped. “I met you ten minutes ago, and I already feel like murdering you. Cassie made it seem like you were such a nice person.” I shook my head, looking out the window, deciding I was done with him and this conversation.

“Are you really Cassie's cousin?” he asked after a while.

I turned toward him. “Why? Is it the skin color that throws you off?” I was biracial and it's true that when people heard my name McKenna, they rarely expected a half Indian girl to walk in.

“No.” He threw me a look that seemed to say it was the stupidest thing he ever heard. “Why would you say that?”

I raised an eyebrow at him; how could I not?

He shook his head. “No, Cassie's a midget.”

“And I'm not?”

“Exactly.”

I shrugged. “Genetics, I guess. My mom is pale and short like Cassie so I presume it all comes from my father—not that I would know.”

“Uh, the joy of genetics.”

“Indeed.”

I didn't miss the fact that he didn't press the issue about my father—yep, the man knew more about

me than he said.

“Let’s start over. I wouldn’t want Cassie to think I was rude,” he said as we exited the interstate.

“But you were.”

He threw me an irritated side-look. “Hence the due over.”

“You don’t want to upset her?”

He snorted. “It won’t upset her; it will piss her off and she is even angrier these days.”

I laughed at that. “Hormones.”

“Terrifying.”

I sighed. “Fine, let’s start over. Cassie told me you’re her best friend.”

He nodded, his face softening as a tender smile appeared on his face. I didn’t need to be a psychologist to know he really loved my cousin. “I think calling us best friends is a bit basic. It’s deeper than that. I love her like my sister, just like I love Luca like my brother.”

“And you don’t like the idea of a person you don’t know coming around and disturbing the dynamic.”

He remained silent; it was confirmation enough.

“Occupational hazard. I’ll stay out of your way and out of your head.”

He nodded once. “It’s better for you, trust me. You wouldn’t want to roam in there,” he said, tapping the side of his head with his forefinger. “You’ll come out traumatized,” he added with a laugh, but I didn’t need to know the man to see he meant it, which made me want to look in it now. Pandora’s box was my weakness.

All the thoughts of the complicated man beside me vanished when we passed the iron gate of a gigantic Victorian Manor.

“What is Luca doing for a living again?” I asked, not able to remove my eyes from the place.

“Business,” he replied evasively, stopping the car at the bottom of the stone steps.

He got out first and retrieved my bags from the trunk as I waited at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the structure.

“Come,” he ordered as he took the first step. “I know Cassie is eager to see you.”

I didn’t even get a chance to look around the hall as Cassie came out from a room waddling toward me with a wide grin on her face.

“India!” she squealed and I couldn’t help but laugh.

I’d not seen my cousin in over three years, and I’d forgotten how short she really was. Now almost at terms with twins she almost looked as wide as she was tall, but despite her obvious discomfort she seemed happy to see me.

“I’m so happy you came.”

I leaned down, giving her an awkward hug. “I’m so happy you asked me to come. How are the little ones doing?” I asked, resting my hand on her stomach.

She grinned, resting her hand on top of mine. “Restless and stubborn, like their father.” She looked up at me and blinked. “Oh, Lord, you’re stunning,” she said, reaching for her messy bun on top of her head, trying to straighten it up before whipping at some crumbs at the corner of her mouth. “I must look like a total mess.”

I shook my head. “Course you don’t, you’re glowing.”

“That’s because I’m sweating all the time.”

Dom let out a little chuckle. “Okay, I’ll leave you girls to it. I’ll take your bags upstairs.”

I nodded. “Oh no, wait, just leave me the carry-on. I’ve got something in it.”

Cassie’s face lit up as Dom looked at her with both good humor and tenderness in his face. It was

quite intriguing, in fact, as he could switch from the detached man I'd met to the loving man standing in front of me. He had a lot of walls, that man.

Dom sighed and shook his head. "What did you convince her to smuggle for you?"

I frowned. "Was I not supposed to?"

Cassie glared at Dom, rubbing her stomach. "Don't listen to him; he's being dramatic."

Dom turned to me, his eyes still full of mirth. "What?"

"Timbits, maple syrup chocolates, Nanaimo bars..."

Dom laughed a full belly laugh and for a second I was just in awe. This austere man was... beautiful. "Wait until Luca hears about it."

Cassie pointed an accusing finger at him. "You wouldn't dare!"

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Your secret is safe with me, munchkin."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

Dom rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, she got me to smuggle her food three times this week."

"Four," Cassie replied with a little cheeky smile. "It's just Luca's on my ass about eating healthier for the babies and I do but—" She shrugged.

"He might not be wrong now, is he?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Not you too!" Cassie sighed with exasperation.

Dom raised his hands in surrender. "I'm out of here. I'll leave your suitcase in front of your room." He turned to me, his smile a little more generic than before. "It was nice meeting you."

I nodded, looking at him jog up the stairs with my super heavy suitcase like it weighed nothing at all. That man was something.

When I turned toward Cassie, she was looking at me with a little smile on her face. What was that for?

"Let's go to the kitchen. We can have a cup of tea and chat for a while."

I gave her a side-look. "You want to eat some of the food I brought you, right?"

She laughed. It was so melodious and happy that it eased the remainder of worry I had about her. She was clearly happy. I didn't need to be a psychologist to see that she transpired happiness.

"Let me help you; that's why I'm here." I pointed at a chair. "Just sit and tell me where everything is."

I saw she was about to argue when I reached into my bag for the box of Timbits. "Here."

Her face lit up and she took a seat as she grabbed the box from me. "The teapot is in the first cabinet. You can pick the loose herbal teas from the counter just beside the kettle."

I nodded and started to make us tea.

"I'm happy you're here," she said, her mouth full of Timbits.

I couldn't help but laugh because even if I brought her the fifty box; I was not sure I'd see one.

"Where's Jude?"

She sighed. "Boarding school." She shook her head. "I didn't want him to go but Luca said I had to let him do what he wanted. This is a school upstate for little geniuses like him." I shrugged. "He went for their summer program and fell in love with the school." She popped another Timbit in her mouth. "What choice did I have?"

It was a bummer, but I got it. "Luca was right here. Jude's a smart kid; he needs to make his own choices."

She leaned back on her chair. "I know." She rubbed her stomach. "I hope these two will stay with me."

"Yeah..." I was not about to discourage her before her babies were even born.

“My back is really hurting me today so I won’t be able to give you a tour of the house.”

I shook my head. “Hey, don’t worry about it, I don’t need a tour. I’ll explore as we go.” I brought the tray with the tea and cups to the table before sitting across from her.

“I’ll have Dom give you a tour later,” she added decisively. I’d forgotten how stubborn she could be.

“Dom...” I trailed off. “He’s something, isn’t he?” I was not sure how to put it; that man was just so hard to read.

She nodded with a small smile. “That’s a way to put it, but honestly Dom is the best but don’t tell Luca; he might get jealous.”

I laughed. “With the way you talk about him? Not a chance, the man is clearly the love of your life.”

“That’s good to hear.”

I looked up, startled at the deep masculine voice coming from the side.

I tried my best to keep my surprise in check at seeing Cassie’s husband leaning against the kitchen’s threshold, his hand buried in his suit’s pants pocket.

His appearance was striking to say the least. He was a tall, wide man, with scars that made him look dangerous and somehow, despite the friendliness of his smile, I suspected he was just as dangerous as he looked.

“Wife,” he said commandingly but the softness of his eyes and her blush showed the obvious game between these two.

“It’s not what you think,” she replied, holding a Timbit between her thumb and forefinger.

“Uh-huh.” He walked toward her with a grace I didn’t expect, keeping his eyes on her before leaning down slowly and wrapping his mouth around her fingers to steal the Timbit from her.

It was nothing overly special and yet it looked so intimate, so erotic, I felt as if I was intruding.

“Thief...” she breathed, flushed as he let go of her now empty fingers.

He straightened up and gave me a playful wink as he chewed on the sugary goodness.

“It’s nice to finally meet you in person, India,” he said, standing behind Cassie, wrapping a protective, possessive hand on the side of her neck as she leaned her head against him.

I didn’t think they realized it themselves, but they were clearly connected, fitting in to each other in ways we wanted but rarely got.

“You too, Luca. Your house is beautiful. Thank you for inviting me.”

He chuckled, rubbing his thumb up and down the back of her neck. “Don’t thank me. I’m pleased you could come. It will ease my mind the days I have to go to the city to know you’re here with this food smuggler.”

“Technically I’m not the smuggler,” she said, laughing and looking up to meet his eyes. “Plus, you did that to me.” She pointed to her belly with fake indignation.

“I don’t remember you complaining about making them.”

“No... but the extra eating is on you.”

He cocked his head to the side, pretending to ponder this for a minute. “That’s utter shit but A plus for originality. Good attempt.”

“Thank you!” She beamed, still looking up at him.

He leaned down and pecked her lips before concentrating on me again. “I’ll see you for dinner and try to rein her in tomorrow while Dom and I are away.”

Cassie rolled her eyes, but I could see the genuine concern in his eyes.

“Will do!” I promised, having no idea how to rein in this cute little woman who apparently had

the power to bend everyone to her will.

He looked at his watch and sighed. "I've got a call in a bit. Be good, okay?" he asked Cassie.

"Always."

He shook his head with a small smile before leaving the room again.

"He is very..." Protective? Powerful? Charismatic? Overwhelming? I was not even sure of what to say.

Cassie smiled, brushing her fingers against her lips as if she could still feel his kiss. "Yeah, he is. Men like him are a different breed."

"Men like what?"

She seemed to be taken aback by my question. "I- What? No, I mean Italian men."

I cocked my head to the side; she seemed too taken aback, too dismissive. There was more to her statement and I made myself a promise to discover what.

CHAPTER THREE



DOM

Saying the woman was beautiful was an insult to her. She was breathtaking, the kind of woman to bring you to your knees with just a smile. She was the kind of woman that could bring down an empire... She had Cassie's green eyes but against her caramel skin it looked almost surreal.

She could easily be on the cover of the magazines without using Photoshop, and I hated that she seemed nice and all-seeing as well.

I shook my head. I was happy Luca and I would be gone today, because it felt like when she was around I was mesmerized—just sitting beside her at dinner last night, hearing her melodious voice, smelling her subtle flowery perfume had been torture.

I reached for my suit jacket. As I put it on and put my hand in my pocket, I remembered the piece of paper I'd stuffed in there at the airport.

I got it out and read it again. One word. One stupid, hateful word that could ruin all the hard work I did, ruin the person I became.

'*Rapist.*' That was a word I hated, a word that woke up the voices haunting me. The voices that I had now managed to quiet most of the time were back, screaming.

I'd looked around, but there was no one in sight. If it had not been for the woman with me, I would have gone to the security office to check the feeds. I couldn't ask for help on this. Luca would go out all guns blazing, and he had enough to worry about these days.

He had to fix all his uncle's stupid decisions, and Lord knew he made a lot of those in his two years of power. He also had to deal with Cassie and the pregnancy that terrified him. I couldn't burden him with that, especially without knowing if it was really something worth his time.

I threw the paper in the trash and rushed downstairs, just to see Luca whispering in Cassie's ear while lovingly cradling her stomach, and India, leaning against the wall, looking at them with a little smile.

My heart tightened in my chest as Cassie looked up at Luca, her eyes full of love and trust. Despite everything she knew, everything he was, she was looking at him like her hero, her knight in his shiny armor.

I was not jealous of them. They deserved nothing more than the happiness they were giving each

other, but even if I knew I could never have what they had, I couldn't help this little part of me that envied them, that yearned for this love without conditions, without secrets.

I felt my neck prickle and turned to the side to meet India's inquisitive green eyes; what had she noticed? I couldn't let my guard slip in front of someone like her.

I schooled my face in cold indifference as I held her eyes challengingly.

She kept up with me for a couple of seconds before looking away with a half smile on her lips. She surrendered and yet why did I feel like I'd just lost?

"Ready?" I asked Luca as I descended the last couple of steps.

"Sure." Luca ran his hand down Cassie's cheek. "Be good, okay?"

She grabbed his hand and kissed his palm. "I promise."

I snorted. "Do you know the meaning of being good?"

She glared at me. "You better stop or I won't name my son after you!"

I raised my hands in surrender. God, I loved that woman and when she had told me that their son's middle name would be Domenico in my honor, I had a hard time containing my tears.

"Call me for anything, *si*?" Luca tapped his jacket pocket.

"Of course! Now go and do your thing; we'll be here when you come back."

Luca looked at her for a second, clearly conflicted.

I nudged him forward. "Come on, the sooner we go, the sooner we'll be back."

I leaned down and kissed Cassie's forehead before turning toward India and giving her a cordial nod. I couldn't and shouldn't be outright hostile to her. I knew consciously that she'd done nothing wrong. It was not her fault if she looked like all my wet dreams built into one woman.

Once we settled in the back of the car, and the driver started to pull away, Luca threw a last longing look at the house.

"She'll be fine, Luca. It's only one day."

"I don't like going far these days," he admitted.

"You never like leaving her, since New York and Savio... Not that I blame you, but things are different now. The security is airtight, and she has India with her."

He sighed with a nod. "But you don't like her, do you?"

It was my turn to sigh. Yep, I'd walked right into that one. "It's not that I don't like her. I'm not keen on new people, that's all. She seems nice enough."

"She is lovely, and she seems to genuinely care for Cassie so she's a winner in my book. Plus, let's be honest, she is stunning."

I raised an eyebrow. "Should we tell your wife that?"

He laughed. "She knows. We discussed it last night. I'm happily married, Dom, but I'm neither blind nor dead. Saying anything else would be foolish and a lie which my wife is not fond of."

I shrugged, not really ready to commit to anything.

"I'm just not sure why you dislike her that much. Is it because of the effect she may have on you?"

I snorted. "I'm not discussing this."

"How the tables have turned." Luca grinned at me.

I glared at him, making him laugh. "You were right, it *is* fun." He added, his grin growing wider.

I'd somehow forgotten that Karma was a bitch. "She seems nice enough," I conceded. "It's just weird how someone can just drop their own life like that on a call."

Luca looked away and I knew I touched on something there, but I knew better than to press. Luca would just close off even more.

He sighed. "I just don't see why Matteo needs me to go to that stupid meeting."

“You’re the capo, Luca; it’s a capi meeting.” I shook my head. “I’ll deny it until the day I die, but Genovese has been quite good to you, I think. He didn’t make many demands.”

Luca threw me a surprised look. “I thought I’d never see a day when you agreed with Genovese.”

“I know.” I faked a shudder. “I am traumatized too.”

“I hope it won’t last long.”

I shook my head. “It shouldn’t. Most of what’s going on is just between us, but if you want, just leave when you’re not needed anymore. I’ll take it from there.”

Luca exhaled loudly, visibly relieved. “I know it sound—”

“No, it doesn’t. It’s Cassie.” It was enough to say, I knew how much Luca loved her, and I knew how much she loved him. I was also amazed how she could disregard so much in the name of their love and how much happier and more alive he was because of this love. He had nothing more to explain.

Matteo lived in a compound just before entering the city. To be honest, it looked a lot more like a military facility than a home—cold, lifeless, overly organized. Very Matteo actually.

There was the main house in the back where only a few were authorized which Luca and I were privileged... or rather cursed to. The outer building, closer to the main entrance, was the main part of the compound, where the meetings were taking place.

Our car stopped by the security post, and Luca slid down the tinted window to reveal ourselves to the guard.

“Mr. Genovese is expecting you at the house,” he said with a nod.

I rolled my eyes. “What the flying fuck does he want now?”

Luca sighed, running a weary hand over his face. “Not sure but it can’t be long.” He pointed at the couple black sedan already parked by the compound. “Others are already here.”

“Oh yeah, like it ever bothered Genovese to make people wait for him.”

Matteo Genovese, the capo dei capi—our boss, our king... Our self-appointed God ruled over all of us with an iron fist and inspired so much respect and fear despite only being in his mid-thirties.

He had his favorites—that much was clear—and Luca, luckily or not, was one of them, but it didn’t have to mean much with Matteo. Rules were rules; disrespecting him was a death warrant.

“Let’s get this over with,” Luca muttered, getting out of the car and adjusting his jacket. He glanced at his phone before putting it in the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

We knocked at the door and were let in by a security guy who gestured us toward Matteo’s office.

We entered the waiting room just in time to see a tall blond man leaving Matteo’s office. Russian... that much was sure.

Luca glared at the man, as I looked down at Enzo, Luca’s younger cousin, sitting behind a desk in the waiting room.

Matteo had given him a job as his assistant—not something he really needed or something that Enzo was qualified for really, but it was a way to keep him close, making sure he would not spill the beans on who killed his father and his brother because contrary to what was said within the famiglia, it was not the Albanians who killed the traitors. No, it was Matteo and me. Me because they had taken Cassie and that was worthy of death. Why did Matteo do it? I wasn’t sure but the reason had to be selfish; Matteo didn’t have a selfless bone in his body.

However, I knew that job was not necessary. Enzo didn’t say as much but I knew he had loathed his father and his brother. They were always the first to bully and humiliate him. He would have probably paid us to do that.

“L-L-Luca, how are you?” Enzo asked.

Luca grunted, keeping his eyes on the Russian after he'd passed him and exited the room.

I rolled my eyes. Luca would always be a savage.

"Enzo, you look well." And it was true. It looked like the kid had more color now, and he was not as painfully thin as he had been a year ago. Being freed of his poisonous home environment did do wonders for him.

Enzo smiled tentatively at me. "T-thank you, Dom. I'm happy," he added, and I couldn't help but notice that even his stutter lessened.

I looked at Luca who was still ignoring us, looking at the door the Russian had taken, a speculative look on his face.

I nudged him before turning to Enzo again. "Matteo asked us to come before the meeting."

Enzo nodded. "Y-you c-can go right in." He gestured to the door.

I elbowed Luca in the kidney, making him grunt.

He turned toward me, a dark glare on his face. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

I gestured to the door. "Move."

I knocked once.

"Come in."

"Was that Alexei Volkov I saw leave your office just now?" Luca asked as soon as I closed the door behind him.

Gianluca Montanari... Smoothness personified.

"Welcome." Matteo gave Luca a small smile. "You know it was."

"The capo dei capi colluding with the Russians? It's bound to make people talk."

Matteo's smile turned into a predatory grin as he reached for his zippo on his black desk and started to play with it. "I was collecting a favor. You know how much I enjoy collecting them, don't you, Gianluca?"

Luca's nostrils flared, and I knew Luca owed him something. I suspected it was to ensure his help in rescuing Cassie from Benny and Savio. I was just scared to find out what Luca had promised him in his moment of weakness.

Matteo sighed, gesturing us to the seats across his desk. Everything in this office was black and glass, cold and emotionless—a true mirror to its owner.

Matteo reached for his cigarettes on his desk and lit one. "I heard you picked up a new stray?"

Luca arched his eyebrows. "How? She arrived yesterday."

Matteo shrugged with a little teasing smile. "I heard she is absolutely stunning. Maybe I should ask her out for dinner."

My stomach dipped down. I felt a burning jealousy even if I had no right or reason to.

Luca shook his head to the side. "Absolutely not."

Matteo leaned back on his seat, arching an eyebrow. "Oh, I see you want that one too? Aren't you greedy? Is your wife happy to share you?"

Luca snorted. "Of course not! I'm monogamous and Cassie is all I need. But India's family and I would not even unleash you on my worst enemy, so on my family?" He winced. "Nope."

I wanted to kiss Luca right there, again I was not sure why. I wanted to protect India, for Cassie's sake, but I knew I had no right to do it. Luca did though. As the head of the family, he could stick a 'No Touching' sign on her without any speculation.

Matteo laughed. "Fair enough, Montanari. If only you knew the irony of your statement."

I frowned. Matteo seemed to give up way too easily—almost as if he never had any intention to ask India out. That was the most annoying thing about Matteo Genovese... Well, at least *one* of the

most annoying things—the man was *always* playing games, always testing, always assessing. You were never sure about what came out of his mouth.

Luca sported a matching frown. “What do you mean?”

Matteo waved his hand dismissively, blowing his smoke toward me. “I’m just messing with you.”

“Aren’t you always?” I grumbled.

His calm icy-blue eyes turned to me. “Of course I am; that’s half the fun,” he replied with a teasing smile.

“Why did you want to see us before the meeting?” Luca asked. I guessed he didn’t have time for Matteo’s antics today—good on him.

“It’s about our little issue,” he announced, crushing his cigarette in the ashtray.

‘Little issue.’ That was a way to put it. A traitor was in our ranks, someone smart enough to play Benny and Savio as a puppeteer and get away with it. That was not a little issue; that was a nuclear bomb, and I wouldn’t want to be him once Matteo got his hands on him. Matteo had kept a man alive for five days, torturing him just enough for him to stay alive and suffer before putting an end to him. He looked like calm personified, but he was the most sadistic and demented of us all. A man without a heart, without a conscience, only living by the rules of the famiglia, ready to sacrifice everyone and everything to obtain what he wanted.

“I’ve got a few leads. Alexei said we should go to Verdi tonight. There’s a couple of men we can collect from the side alley when we’re ready. We will have a little chat.”

‘A little chat’ for Matteo meant nothing less than a heavy torture session in this building’s basement which will end with the guys spilling it all and dying quickly or the guys saying nothing and dying slowly.

Actually, thinking about it, every ‘little’ thing coming out of Matteo’s mouth was an atrocity in the making.

Luca shook his head. “I told you before, I’m not spending a night away from my wife, especially so far along her pregnancy. That’s not negotiable.”

“But you have that,” Matteo waved his hand dismissively, “doctor or whatever living there.”

Luca sighed. “She’s a psychologist, hardly a doctor, and she could be an obstetric surgeon for all I care. I’m not spending a night away from my wife.”

“Young love,” Matteo sneered mockingly.

“Something you clearly can’t understand,” I couldn’t help but remind him.

Matteo turned toward me, his eyes full of amusement. “And you can? Actually, maybe the live-in psychologist will give you intensive therapy. We all know you need it.”

That reminded me of the note I received, something I really needed to discuss with him.

“*Basta*,” Luca growled, always so defensive of me and our little circle. “Let’s start that council meeting now. We didn’t come to chitchat.”

“Awww, now you’re hurting my feelings, Gianluca.” He rested his hand on his chest with a pretend pout. “Here I was, sitting, thinking what a delight it was to spend time with the two of you...”

I leaned back on my chair “What would Italians be doing at Verdi? It’s Russian territory. It would be stirring up shit. That would be like tattooing yourself as a traitor.”

Matteo shook his head. “None of us are that stupid.”

“I’m not coming,” Luca insisted more forcefully.

Matteo glowered. The man didn’t take no for an answer very kindly.

“I’ll go,” I offered. Luca was my best friend; we had each other’s backs. I knew he would have done just the same if the roles were reversed.

Matteo sighed. "I guess I'll just have to make due with the Wish.com cheap knockoff version of the capo."

I smiled at him. "Take it or leave it." I tried to sound unbothered, but it cut deep because it was how I felt every time we stepped out of the house to do anything with the famiglia.

I already knew how out of place I would feel today when I stepped into the meeting beside Luca, knowing I'd get the speculative looks and Luca would get the looks too. Choosing a simple made man as your consigliere was never done, and yet he'd done it—well, at the same time a capo was not supposed to marry outside the famiglia, and he did that too when he chose Cassie.

Luca was a capo who followed his head and heart more than the old-fashioned rules, and he was just powerful enough to get away with it.

Some were impressed; some were jealous, and some were waiting for him to fall, but I knew better. Luca was the best capo there was.

Matteo jerked his head toward the office door. "You better go ahead. We wouldn't want the others to think you two are the teacher's pets."

Luca sighed but nodded. "The sooner we start, the sooner I'll go home."

"What do you think the Russian had to do in all this?" I asked Luca as soon as we exited the house.

Luca sighed. "Let's walk," he said before gesturing to the driver and telling him in Italian to go park the car in front of the compound by the gate.

Luca buried his hands in his pockets as we took the path to the compound. "I don't know, but Matteo is probably the smartest, most calculating man I've ever met. He won't do anything without having thought of every single possible consequence or outcome."

I threw him a side-look. "You sound both impressed and a little bit in love," I teased.

Luca snorted. "Hardly, but when Matteo is on your side, it's the most lethal weapon at your disposal."

"Do you think he's really on our side?" I couldn't help but ask. As Luca had implied, Matteo was a master manipulator; who was to say he was really working with us? He must have had his own agenda.

"I'll deny it if you ever said anything, but yes, I do." Luca shrugged as the compound came into view. "I know the man would be honest enough to tell us to get fucked if he didn't want to help. I think he needs to figure out if there's a rat in our ranks even more than we do, so yes, as long as our interests are aligned, I think we can trust him."

That was not the best vote of confidence because you could then ask yourself what would happen when your interests and his were not aligned anymore.

I didn't get a chance to even ask more as Romero, one of the older members of the council, spotted us and told the other bosses who were smoking by the door.

"Let the show begin," I muttered to Luca as we both plastered our cold smiles on our faces.

CHAPTER FOUR



DOM

The meeting was as long and tedious as usual. The bosses had to give their two cents on what the other bosses were doing, and I could see that Luca was getting restless and increasingly annoyed by the questioning of his decisions and his desire to go home. I had to admit this version of Luca was the best yet, a version I never knew he could be, but I guessed that was what the love of a good woman could do to you.

Once the meeting was done, Matteo dismissed the other bosses rather quickly, offering them all free food at his restaurant in town before each of them had their flight homes in their various jets.

“Are you sure you’re okay to stay?” Luca asked me one more time before stepping into his car.

I turned around to see Matteo leaning against the door of the compound with a smirk on his face.

I sighed. “Yes, it won’t be the first time we’ve spent quality time together.” I had done it after Matteo and I had killed Benny and Savio for kidnapping Cassie and organizing the death of Luca’s family. “Just—” I stopped.

“Just?” Luca encouraged, leaning against the door of the car. “Anything.”

“I may have promised something to someone and—” I gave him a sheepish smile.

Luca grunted. “What does she want?”

“Donuts from the Donuts Palace... Six.” I extended him the paper I had folded in my pocket. “These are the flavors she wants and potential alternatives.”

He rolled his eyes, taking the piece of paper from me. “I swear my wife has you wrapped around her little finger.”

I couldn’t help but smile brightly at that one. “Pot meet kettle.”

He chuckled. “That’s fair. I’ll go get her the food. See you tomorrow, *fratello*.”

I walked back toward Matteo once Luca was in the car.

“You two are adorable.”

“Uh-huh. It’s called friendship; you should try it one day.”

“Friendship?” He scrunched his nose in disgust. “That sounds dreadful.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t help but smile at Matteo’s barely veiled disgust.

“What do you want?” Matteo asked as soon as Luca’s car disappeared from view.

“What do you mean?”

Matteo rolled his eyes before reaching up for his tie, straightening it. “You jumped way too fast on the opportunity to stay here with me, and I know you don’t particularly enjoy my company... despite the fact that I’m an absolute delight.”

“You’re a sociopath.”

“So?” He shrugged. “Both are not mutually exclusive.”

“They are.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“So what do we do now?”

He shrugged. “The meeting ran longer than expected. Let’s take the car and go to the city now, then you tell me what you want. Hopefully you won’t bore me too much.”

“Eager to collect your prize?” I asked, thinking about the poor bastard who was about to cross Matteo’s path.

“I’m bored these days. I’ll enjoy someone to play with.”

“And then you’re going to say you’re not a sociopath.”

“I never said I wasn’t.”

That shut me up. It was true. Matteo never said he wasn’t a sociopath. I remained silent until we reached the interstate, not even sure how I could approach my problem with him—and was it even a problem? It was just a note once...

I sighed as I leaned back on my seat.

Matteo eyed me curiously as he said, “Color me intrigued now. What’s gotten your panties in a bunch?”

“Maybe nothing.”

“I see.” He nodded, switching the gears of his BMW M3. As a true Italian man, he considered automatic transmissions an insult to cars. “I’m losing interest very fast.”

I shook my head. “It’s just... Who knows about me?”

Matteo’s hands tightened on the steering wheel before giving me a wary look. That was not a look I was used to coming from Matteo Genovese... He was not the wary type.

“*Cosa vuol dire?*”

I frowned. Matteo rarely reverted to Italian despite being a native speaker. “What I mean is who knows about my upbringing, what my father was. What he—” I winced as I swallowed past the ball of shame in my throat. “Made me do.”

His grip on the steering wheel loosened as his shoulders relaxed. “Ah.” Did he just seem relieved? Why would he be? “Not many people anymore. Romero, Luca, me...” He shook his head. “Your father’s side *business* was not something most of us were proud of.”

“And yet, nobody did anything.”

He shrugged. “It was not my place. Nobody asked me to intervene, and he was bringing a lot of money to the famiglia. Money has a tendency to make you go blind.”

I shook my head. Go say that to the thirteen-year-old boy I’d once been. Go say that to all the young girls my father stole and destroyed. Go say that to my mother who had chosen to take her own life when I was merely a boy instead of being raped once more by the evil scum that shared my DNA.

But no matter what I couldn’t hold that against Matteo because despite what he’d thought, he had only been fifteen himself at the time. He was seeing himself as a man, but he was what I’d been... just a boy.

“Why are you asking?”

I sighed. "I don't know. I just wonder."

"You just wonder?" He nodded. "Uh... *Quanto pensi che sia stupido?*"

I rolled my eyes. "I don't think you're stupid. I was just wondering, truly."

"*Bene*. Have it your way," he replied, parking in a darkening street in front of the alley behind Verdi.

I looked at my watch. "How long do we need to stay here?"

Matteo leaned back on his seat, sitting more comfortably. "Why? Am I boring you already?"

I threw him a side-look. We both knew that we didn't really enjoy each other's company that much.

"Shouldn't be too long. He said he's supposed to come to work around this time. He'll text me when we're ready to collect."

I turned fully toward Matteo now. It was not just a random guy that the Russians would be giving us; it was one of their own.

"What did Volkov want from you?" I crossed my arms on my chest. "It has to be something important for him to give you one of his own."

Matteo shrugged. "It's not really one of their guys. It's an opportunistic Albanian who seemed to be feeding at every table and when did we become *confidanti*, you and I?"

"I'm not saying I'm your confidant, Genovese." I shrugged. "We're going to be sitting in this car for God knows how long. Do you just want to do it in total silence?" Actually, maybe it was for the best. I sighed. "Just forget about it."

Matteo kept his eyes on the alleyway for a couple more minutes before talking. "He wanted the only thing that makes men like him weak. Love."

I turned toward him, remaining silent. I did agree that love could make you weaker but not the right kind of love, not the real one. True love, the one Luca and Cassie shared, made you so much stronger. It could make you climb even the highest most arduous obstacle and that was beautiful.

"So what's the secret? Just don't love?" I asked mockingly.

"No," Matteo replied, his voice somehow lower, darker. "The secret is not not to love; you can't stop the virus once it's in. The secret is to remove every potential risk from your life."

"This is quite a lonely existence."

Matteo let out a tired laugh. "*Lo so*."

He knew? How did he know? Had the cruel king, the coldest man I'd ever met, once been at a risk of thawing?

"Are you telling me—"

"Here." Matteo pointed at the alleyway and the unconscious man that had been thrown out by two big guys with Russian Mafia tattoos on their necks.

I was somehow grateful for the interruption. I was about to ask the stupidest question. There was no chance of Matteo Genovese ever being at risk of falling in love. Men like him didn't feel anything other than contempt, anger and a touch of sadism. I did feel sorry for the poor woman who would eventually have to marry him and give him an heir.

"Go pick him up; we don't have all night."

I pointed at my chest. "Why me?" I shook my head. "You wanted him."

Matteo arched an eyebrow. "Are you questioning *my* orders? *My* orders? Are you forgetting who I am?"

How could I forget? And yes, questioning his orders was beyond stupid and yet, I couldn't help but hold his eyes, just a few seconds longer. Maybe I did have a death wish after all.

“You pick him up; I play with him.” He gestured to the unconscious man by the overflowing dumpsters. “Unless,” His smile turned predatory. “I go pick him up and you play. Is that what you want, Domenico?”

I remained stoic but I cringed inwardly. I’d seen Matteo *‘play’* a couple of times and it was something I never would have been able to do.

I sighed, opening the car door. “Pop the trunk open.”

Matteo snorted. “That’s what I thought.”

I walked down the alley and nodded my head to the two Russians waiting by the door to ensure successful pickup of the package.

I turned the guy over; there was no mark on him. I looked up, throwing a questioning look at the Russians.

The shorter one reached in his pocket to show me an empty syringe. “Work smart, not hard,” he said with his heavy accent; this one was from Mother Russia.

I pulled the guy up and huffed. Fuck, he was heavier than he looked.

“A little help?”

The biggest one reached for his cigarettes. “Not our job, *mudak*. We delivered you the package. It’s your problem now. Boss said to make sure we can’t find him.”

“That won’t be a problem, *coglione*.” He called me shithead in Russian; I was just returning the favor. “After the boss is done with him? Nobody would ever recognize him.”

I struggled to take him to the car, and Matteo decided to be a prime asshole and didn’t even come help me lift him in the trunk despite all my huffing and puffing.

The trunk itself was lined with black washable plastic and I was wondering how many body parts this trunk had carried to make plastic a permanent feature.

“Thanks for helping me,” I spat breathlessly when I joined him in the car.

“Oh, you needed help?” he asked me, starting the car and driving a little faster than I would have liked. I guessed the man was more excited to play with his prey than I anticipated.

“What do you think?” I asked, readjusting my clothes before putting some order in my hair.

“I think that the big, strong and brave Domenico Romero never needs anyone.”

The sarcasm was strong with that one... Asshole!

I took a sip of the drink Matteo served me as I waited for the Albanian to wake up.

Matteo had tied him to a chair in the middle of the room over an hour ago, and both of us were getting a little impatient now.

I leaned back on my chair and looked around Matteo’s playroom. Well, that was what he called his basement—the playroom. It had nothing to do with that *Fifty Shades of Grey* crap. No, it was far from being that type of playroom.

I looked at all the instruments he had on the far wall. This basement was nothing more than a torture room.

Matteo sighed, looking at the clock on the wall. “Seriously, what the fuck did they give him?” He growled with frustration. “Do you think he’ll wake up if I cut his pinky?” he asked, reaching for the pruning shears on the metal table.

Everything in this basement was made of metal and concrete. My eyes drifted to one of the drains

on the floor, just under the Albanian. The drains that became useful when the room was hosed down to make all the blood disappear after one of Matteo's 'discussions.'

That was the moment the Albanian grunted and lifted his head, blinking rapidly.

"It's like he heard you," I teased Matteo before taking another sip of my drink.

"I know." He cocked his head to the side, putting the shears back on the table. "If only he had waited a minute longer; I was really looking forward to it."

I knew that was not a joke either; he was a true sadist.

The guy's eyes widened when he finally came back to full consciousness and started to spat things in Albanian. I didn't need to speak the language to know that none of his words were friendly.

Matteo seemed completely unfazed by the outburst as he removed his suit jacket and put it on the back of the chair he had been previously occupying.

He concentrated on the man who was still shouting in Albanian. His face was red, the veins of his neck almost popping as he glared at us, the hate behind his eyes, unmissable.

He moved his arms, trying to remove his restraint, then screamed in pain as the metal cut into his flesh.

That binding was one of Matteo's pride and joys—rope mixed with barbed wire. The more you struggled, the more it gripped you.

Matteo stood in front of him stoically, his light-blue eyes just as cool and expressionless as the ice man he was.

"Are you done?" he asked with a calm, even tone once the man stopped screaming. "I won't lie to you; you're going to die tonight. There's no question about it, but you can choose how you die. If you speak now, I'll give you a quick and painless death," he said, tapping his holster holding his gun. "Or we can make a game of it." He gestured to his basement wall, which proudly held most of his torture equipment. "I've got enough fluid and skills to keep you alive at least two days in excruciating pain. Personally, I'd like for you to pick option two. I finished my show on Netflix and I'm a little bored."

"What show?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Sociopath Unchained."

"Ah." I nodded. "Isn't that the masterclass you taught?"

Matteo's lips lifted slightly on the corner; it was the closest the man ever came to a genuine smile. "It was indeed." He turned to the guy who was looking at Matteo with burning hate in his eyes. "So, what will it be?"

"Fuck off, Italian filth. I'm not telling you shit!"

Matteo's face broke into a wide grin, like a kid on Christmas morning. "Good answer!" He turned toward me. "Do you want to stay and watch me play?"

I shook my head with a low chuckle. "No, thanks. I think I'll go upstairs and have some of the amazing lasagna your housekeeper made."

He shrugged. "*Fai come vuoi*. I'll see you in a while; just help yourself."

I threw the Albanian another look, almost feeling bad for him. He had no clue what was about to be unleashed on him.

I called Luca as soon as I closed the basement door behind me and gave him a quick rundown of the situation.

I grabbed a container of lasagna, and I'd just put it in the oven when Matteo walked into the kitchen with a sigh.

I looked at him as he wiped his wet hands on a red towel. I suspect it was a color picked on purpose.

“Already?” I looked down at my watch. “It’s only been twenty minutes.”

“I know.” He shook his head. “It’s always the ones who think they are tough who crack first. I just put like what? Two razor blades under his nails and he was singing like a nightingale.”

“A canary?”

“What?” Matteo frowned, throwing the towel on his shoulder. “*Cantava come un usignolo.*”

I nodded. “I know in Italian it’s nightingale, but in English it is canary.”

“*Perche?*”

“Perche no?” I replied. I had no fucking clue why; it was just the way it was.

He rolled his eyes, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. “Thank you for the English lesson of ‘nobody fucking cares.’ I’ll teach you how to torture one day.”

“Did you find out anything?” I asked as I knew better than to antagonize him further. I let my eyes trail down and stopped at his collar. “You’ve got some blood there.” I touch the corner of my own collar.

“He was a bleeder,” he confirmed with a nod.

“So, Did you find out anything?”

He twisted his mouth to the side, clearly not overly happy. “Either Volkov is playing me, or this man was pretending to know more than he did.” He walked to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water. He took a long sip. “He said the man they spoke with sounded young and from New York.”

“I see... That narrows it down.”

He rolled his eyes. “At least it was what I expected—it wasn’t Benny or Savio. He said the man called himself *Mano Vendicativa.*”

“The vengeful hand?”

We both grimaced; that was beyond cheesy.

“He never met the man. He was careful and only spoke with different burner phones. He said he had a plan that the famiglia would fall, and when he’ll be on top, he’ll remember.”

“Um, so we don't have much?”

He shook his head sharply. “No, but apparently there’s a guy named Hoxha—also known as the ‘living ghost.’”

“Do you know who he is?”

“Not yet but it’s only a matter of time, and when I do...” His nostrils flared, the only physical sign of his irritation. “Nothing will be able to save him.”

“I have no doubt.” And it was true. Matteo was like a hunting dog. Once he was on his trail, I would not want to be this living ghost.

The oven pinged and I jerked my head toward it. “Want some?”

He shook his head. “I’ll go shower. You can stay here tonight, it’s late. There’s a room ready, first floor, second door on the left.”

I had not expected his concern—this was not Matteo at all—and despite everything, I couldn’t help but ask. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you helping us with all that?”

He turned around slowly, meeting my eyes. “Having a smart rat in our rank is not good.”

“He is not against you.”

“He is taking out the famiglia without my authorization. He is against me. He is smart and cunning. I can’t have that acting against us.”

I looked at him silently for a second. “Is that all there is?”

“What else could it be?” He shrugged. “*Sono l'uomo dal cuore di ghiaccio.*” he added before leaving the room.

I looked down at my lasagna... The man with the heart made of ice... And for the first time since I'd met Matteo Genovese, I was wondering if it was not all pretend.

CHAPTER FIVE



INDIA

I was twenty-seven years old and yet I felt like a teenager about to meet the asshole bully she had a crush on. Except that I was not a teenager, and Domenico was neither my crush nor my bully, and yet I checked on my outfit and hairdo three times before going to look for him in the manor.

I made sure to wear my best pair of jeans, the ones that really made my ass look good and my red top that revealed just enough to entice.

That man was truly a mystery with two so different sides of him. I saw his little attentions toward Cassie, his gentleness and good humor. I heard him speak on the phone with Jude and it had been beyond cute and yet, as soon as I entered the room or appeared in his line of vision, he turned to ice. I could almost see the wall being erected around him, and it rubbed me the wrong way.

It might have been the psychologist in me, but I needed to understand why he was going out of his way with me when it was clearly not in his nature to be cold and dismissive. Did he think I was a threat to his family?

He had to see the truth. I'd been here over a week now and except for the forced conversation we were having during dinner or when forced together, he had not warmed up to me, and I didn't like it.

My phone vibrated on my bed and some of the apprehension I felt at seeking Dom faded. Jake's name flashed on the screen... Why was he calling me? How dared he call me? I could feel my cheekbone tingle as I rejected his call. I had wanted to block his number, but then who knew what he'd do to contact me? He wouldn't come here; that much I knew, and if he tried, I knew he would face men that would teach him some manners.

Maybe he should come and see how people his own size reacted to his attitude. He looked like everything a woman would want and I had to admit his interest had caused me to falter. He was rich, good-looking, and well mannered—apparently a gift to women... a poisoning gift to say the least.

I sighed, shaking my head. I would not let Jake Warner steal one more good moment from my life, one more smile or one single second of happiness he didn't deserve it. I arranged my curls so they fell nicely around my shoulders and trying to ignore the excitement that settled in the pit of my stomach at seeing the tall sullen man who seemed to dislike me on principle.

I found him in the game room sitting at the chess table, facing a laptop. He was playing a game

with someone I couldn't see.

"Knight in D3? Are you sure, little man?"

"Dom, just move my piece."

I was not really familiar with the voice but based on the youth of the tone it could only be Jude.

Dom chuckled. "So bossy, you do belong in this family."

I studied him. He was talking to Jude with evident pride and affection—a look I'd been seeing a lot on his face... Well, except for me; that was clear.

He was dressed in black dress pants and a white button-up shirt rolled up to his elbows, revealing his tanned, muscled forearms. I'd never considered forearms as attractive, and yet I could barely stop looking at them as he moved the pieces around the board.

I didn't feel comfortable spying on their moment, but I felt compelled to keep on going; that man was a mystery to me.

"How's Cassie?"

"Cassie's doing great, kid. She's so excited for you to come home and meet the babies. Didn't you talk to her yesterday?"

"I did but she's always trying to shield me. You're not. I know you'll tell me the truth."

Dom looked up and met my eyes through the gap in the door.

"Always," he said with a sure voice, keeping his eyes on me in a way that challenged me from saying otherwise.

He did just lie to the kid though. Cassie wasn't great. She had contractions and that was why she and Luca were gone today, and it was also why I was seeking the man who disliked me.

I heard a loud bell coming from the computer.

"Got to get to class. Thanks for the game. We'll finish it tonight."

Dom looked down at the screen and winked at Jude. "Sure thing, kiddo. Enjoy learning."

"Always!"

He sighed, closing the laptop. "Are you always spying on people?" he asked, staying on his chair, sprawling into it like a king in his kingdom.

I shrugged, trying to sound and look as if I was not embarrassed. "You're not the most forthcoming person. I have to try to figure out who you are," I admitted. There was no shame in that.

"There's no need." He stood up, straightening his back, once more reminding me how broad he was. "Was there anything you needed?"

I nodded. "Yes. Cassie left a little in a panic this morning, and she talked about turning the flowers in the greenhouse. I promised I would, but I'm not sure what she meant."

He looked out the window and the bright sunlight hit his face from an angle showing me that his eyes were actually not as dark as I thought. They were a darker honey than actual brown.

He turned toward me again and gave me a sharp nod. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it." He stood in front of the door, frowning down at me, still blocking his path. "What are you doing?"

I looked up, standing my ground. It was fairly rare that I could actually look up to a man.

"I want to help. That's why I'm here."

He shook his head. "Not necessary. I said I'll do it," he replied—or rather barked back.

I was grating him the wrong way, but I knew it was the best way to get at least a genuine reaction.

He tried to bypass me, but I moved in his way again.

"What?"

"I want to help. Please let me help."

He grunted. "You won't let it go, will you?"

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