

Chapter 1

Alfredo Montovani sat alone on the floor of the small, dank room, his arms and legs bound tightly with duct tape, the same tape wound around his face, covering his mouth. Sweat beaded his forehead from the heat, as well as the fear that threatened to overtake him. He had been struggling with his bindings, hoping that the constant friction would serve to loosen them somewhat. But he had been tied up in the little room for hours and the tape that bound him refused to give an inch.

His eyes darted to the doorknob as it twisted with a familiar sound. Alfredo's heart immediately thudded heavily in his chest; he could hear it loudly through his ears and he knew his captors would sense his fear. The door opened slowly and the man walked in, the heels of his shiny shoes clicking on the porcelain tile floor, revealing his confident gait.

Alfredo swallowed hard when the man approached him and knelt beside him. Tearing at the tape around his mouth violently, the man smiled savagely when Alfredo's eyes teared up at the assault.

"That hurt, you Montovani pussy?" the man asked.

Alfredo could smell the stale whisky on the man's breath, and the pungent odor of sweat on his clothes.

Better to remain silent than to get the guy riled up, he thought.

"What, you swallowed your tongue? I hear all you Montovanis are good at swallowing. Especially your women. The whores! How about you, pussy? Are you a whore, too?"

Alfredo wanted to tell him to cut the tape and he'd show him who the pussy was, but all he could do was glare.

“Your uncle has to be sent a message. He will see what happens when he tosses his friends aside. Don Montovani has no loyalty and needs to be reminded who his friends are.” The man had his hand behind his back up until that moment and he brought it around, producing a knife that he waved in Alfredo’s face.

“I’m going to enjoy this.” He used the knife to remove the hair stuck to Alfredo’s forehead. Then he touched it with his fingers. “Too bad, pussy,” the man said. “You and I could’ve had a lot of fun.”

And with that, he plunged the knife into Alfredo’s neck, causing him to groan in agony and his body to convulse. The man ripped the knife out and wiped the blood onto Alfredo’s blood soaked shirt. After that, he stood up and looked at his victim with the glee of a lunatic, licking his lips as the blood spurted from Alfredo’s neck until he was motionless.

The man could feel his erection. He always grew hard after the rush of a kill. This was what he loved most about his business. He pulled his erect dick from his pants and stroked himself until he moaned out in ecstasy, his seed spilling all over the blood soaked concrete floor. Then he carefully stuffed himself back into his pants, walked over to the door, and knocked one time. When another man opened it, he waved him toward the lifeless body of Alfredo Montovani.

The other man pulled out his phone and got up close to the dead man. He began to snap photos of the man’s marble brown eyes and the other distinguishing features that showed who it was. Then he pressed send, delivering them to his boss across cyberspace.

Karisma Montgomery sat quietly, patiently listening, and closely watching, as her husband Paolo stormed through their bedroom ranting and

raving like a lunatic. She pulled her legs in to sit cross-legged as she scooted back against the tufted fabric headboard. She sighed and folded her arms across her chest as he marched from one end of the room to the other, socking his fist occasionally, breaking into Italian sometimes, and cursing the situation and everyone involved, a lot.

“Paolo, sweetie, why don’t you come on and get in bed, you’ve been pacing for over an hour now.”

He moved a little slower and focused on her face, which had been freshly washed and cleaned of all make-up. She yawned and nestled her head into a comfortable spot on the headboard, which made Paolo raise a brow at her and drop his hands on his narrow hips. He cracked his neck first to the left and then to the right and exhaled audibly.

“Fuck,” he said, deflated.

She patted a spot on the bed next to her and smiled. He absolutely loved that smile. He went to where she sat beckoning him with her index finger.

Flopping down on the side of the bed, he peeked at her over his shoulder.

“You think I’ve lost it, don’t you?”

She pulled the covers back and rubbed his strong arm, fingering the new tattoo he’d come home from the Crimine with. It was an eye looking out from a pyramid. She thought it looked a little creepy. “Nope, not at all.” Lie down; we have to be up early for our morning run.”

He lay down and she tugged the fragrant Egyptian cotton sheet over him. Staring at the ceiling, he folded his hands on his stomach.

“Do you think I’m wrong, Kari?”

“Wrong for being pissed that your dad had a secret son you never knew about, no, you’re not wrong. I’d be pissed too. But you’ve been back from that Criminal Convention for a week now—“

“Why do you call it that? It’s the *Crimine*,” he said, peering over at her with one blue eye.

“Oh, my bad, baby, the *Crimine*,” she whispered back with mock reverence. “Turn out the light, please,” she said, snuggling against him.

“Your feet are cold,” he replied, as he flicked off the lamp switch.

“They’ll warm up,” she promised, rubbing them up and down his hairy legs. His arm went around her.

“That damn Cavell, or whoever the fuck he is... I’m going to get rid of his ass.”

“Get rid of him? What do you mean?” she asked, a massive frown contorting her unblemished face. “Get rid of him how?”

He thought he heard panic in her voice. He smirked at her and kissed the top of her head. “Hold on, Songbird, I’m only talking about sending the meth-head back to Manhattan.”

She poked his washboard flat belly. “Only Raffaello can call me Songbird, Mr. Montovani.”

“Only Raffaello, huh? Why does he get special privileges, huh?” He tickled her.

She rolled away from him, laughing. “Stop, Paolo!”

“Tell me I’m the only one—that no one else can have the pleasures that belong to me!” He teased as he continued to tickle her.

“Before or after I pee on you? Stop!” He stopped and raised a brow at her.

“*What?* We’ve never played like *that* before,” he whispered as he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“That’s nasty Paolo!” She pushed him off.

“You said it,” he chuckled.

She snuggled in close again. He kissed her lips.

“Hey, why don’t you want to get to know your brother—”

“He’s not my brother.”

“Your dad says he is, Paolo.”

“Well I’ll tell you what, beautiful. After I get rid of that phony we’ll never have to see that simpering mug of his again. We can go back to not knowing him.”

She giggled. “Simpering mug? He looks like you.”

“Hell if he does. He’s a dope fiend, couldn’t you tell?”

“Of course I could, he was tweaking.”

“Shh...He just better not try any shit like that again. Coming around you. I mean that.”

“I know what you mean. And everyone else does too. You *really* lit into the goonies.”

“They *really* deserved it. They better not ever let another asshole walk up on you like that. Next time, and there better not be a next time, they won’t be so lucky. Next time, I’m not talking.” He closed his eyes.

She raised her head to look at him in the dark. “That sounds ominous.”

“Their job is like that of the secret service, baby, to take a bullet for you and keep motherfuckers away from you. That’s all they have to do. If they can’t do that, I don’t need them.”

“They’d be banished to Manhattan too?” she asked, hoping that’s all he meant.

Paolo grunted and Kari stared at his silhouette. He was as handsome as he was dangerous. And for some reason, even though she knew she should feel some repulsion for what she knew was his nefarious intentions toward her guards if they screwed up again, she found it sexy as hell. They hadn’t been married long, but she’d learned to read between the lines when he said something. She was getting good at decoding the true meanings behind his words. He didn’t always come out and say the things he knew would freak her out, but she understood him.

“Well as long as you know my guys are off limits. They work for me, Paolo, not you.”

“They’d better do their jobs, then.”

“They do their jobs very well, thank you. Don’t blame them for that Chase person getting into the building.”

“They were there, weren’t they?”

She raised herself up on her elbow and looked at his face. “Paolo, look, you worry about your employees and let me worry about mine, okay?”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. “Your safety is non-negotiable Kari. Get your guys in order so I don’t have to.”

“What the hell? I think you need to check yourself, Paolo Antonio Montovani. I won’t have you threatening my bodyguards. They’re loyal and competent. Now you *have* lost it. Getting all alpha-gangster on me. You’re trippin’—”

“I’m just saying that anyone who’s going to protect my wife had better be damned capable of handling the job. They need to keep their guard up at *all* times. What if Cavell had been an enemy of mine? Who’s to say the

asshole isn't? I don't know him. I respect your guys, but I'm holding them to the same standards that I hold the others to. Be pissed if you want, but you're everything to me, and I won't fuck around with your wellbeing."

They glared at each other a while until he broke the standoff by kissing her mouth in an all out sensual assault that left her wheezing and wet with desire.

He pulled back to whisper to her, "Anyone who can't keep you safe, will find that there's no place on this planet he can go to be safe from me."

"Then maybe I should fire them all to keep them safe," she whispered into his mouth.

He licked her tongue in quick, teasing laps, before saying, "They're fine—for now."

He winked at her and began his descent down her body, which made her shiver, until he reached the sweetness between her thighs, and after a few minutes, she arched her back and shuddered in pure orgasmic pleasure.

"Tina! How much longer are you going to give me the silent treatment?" Raffaello approached his wife on the staircase and stood in front of her, his hands in his pockets, jiggling the coins inside.

Cristina glared at him as they stood face to face, then she raised her hand.

"It has been a week, when are you coming back to our bed?"

"I told you that I wouldn't have that Chase disrupting our lives, Raffaello. You wouldn't listen! You must always do things your own way! Now, every last son of yours is angry with you, even Armando! Even our saintly son the priest can't fathom how his father could lie for nearly thirty years about the existence of another son! And we won't even talk about how

Paolo and the twins feel. Dear, sweet Rafie is the only one who's still talking to you."

"He's the only one still living here," Raffaello said, wryly.

"Not for long, he's marrying soon," Cristina said.

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm not sure about this marriage. He meets Don Eduardo's daughter at Paolo's wedding, and he's coerced into a marriage to her. I don't like it. He's different than the others, Tina."

"He's allowed to lead a normal life, Raffaello."

"You think I don't want him to? I want our son to be happy, too, Tina. But there's more at stake here than a damn love match. I'll talk to him—"

"Leave him alone, Raffaello!" Cristina interrupted. "The one you need to speak to is that Chase! He causes all sorts of drama for himself and you constantly bail him out." She glared at her husband and smoothed her dark hair from her forehead. "Raffaello, I'm very upset that you've brought that boy into our lives with his drug addiction and thieving ways. I don't want him here, and that's just all there is to it!"

She turned and walked out, her purse strap swinging at her side. Raffaello watched her as she hurried down the stairs, disappearing in her blue pantsuit as she rounded the corner.

Raffaello walked down the stairs, nodding to the housekeeper, who asked, "Would you like a cappuccino, Don Raffaello?"

"Café," he replied and headed for his office. Met there by his ever present bodyguard, the enforcer known as "Old Man", who opened the door to let him in, he asked, "Has Antonio arrived yet?"

"Not yet, Don Raffaello, but he called to say that he'll be here shortly."

"Bene."

Sitting behind the smooth desk of fine ebony wood, Raffaello opened a mother of pearl cigar case and took out a vanilla flavored Cuban cigar. Retrieving a lighter, he lit the Havana, puffing on it until the smoke filtered throughout the room. He sat back in his chair and swiveled around to gaze at his garden. It was autumn now and he and Cristina would have to replant his vegetables soon. He loved the fall; it was his favorite time of year. Everything memorable always happened to him in the fall. He and Cristina married in the fall. Three of his sons were born in the fall. And he made the biggest coup of his life in the fall.

Ever since he was a child, he knew he was meant for greatness. He had never been afraid to challenge authority or the status quo, and he knew how to get what he wanted. The supine figurehead position of the *Capo Crimine* was supposed to be a title given to a man who wanted power but was too weak to take it, instead settling for his name written in a history book that underworld organizations like his would never share with the rest of the world.

But Raffaello, unlike the numerous men who had preceded him, had found a way to become king – a powerful king – one who would be merciless in his compulsions and piteous in constraint. The scepter he wielded would eventually crush his enemies, keeping them forever buried beneath its golden tip.

Also, his sons had been promoted. Paolo had become il Maestro di Giornata—the Master of the Day. He would serve as his father’s right hand, his role to carry out his father’s orders.

Underneath them were their Colonels, Daniel, the Maestro Generale—the General Master. Davit, would serve as the Capo Societa, or the Head of the Society, and Rafie would be his father’s Contabile, or Accountant. This

had been an honor for Rafie, as he had never had an official role in the family business. However, with his mind for numbers, it made sense. Armando would remain the Vangelista (Holy Man). But Raffaello had bigger plans for his son, the Priest, as well.

Therefore, when he made his move on the title of *Capo Crimine*, it wasn't for reasons others' expected—to garner a little extra respect from men who lived their lives by a code of honor. It wasn't for a footnote when the most powerful men in Mafia history were mentioned. No, when all was done, there would never be any doubt as to who the most powerful leader in the Ndrangheta was. Figurehead? Capo Crimine would no longer be. A one-year term? No, the job was his, now, and until he was parted from it by death.

The knock on the door came at four in the morning. Paolo sneezed and Kari woke up, looking from him to the door.

She poked him in the ribs. “Did someone knock, or was that you sneezing?”

“I sneezed,” he groaned.

“Bless you, baby,” she said, throwing a smooth bare leg over his. They both looked at the door when the knock was louder this time.

“What?” Paolo yelled, as Kari rolled away from him and pulled the covers over her bare breasts.

“Boss, someone's at the gate to see you,” Ghost Boy answered from the other side of the wooden door.

“Who is it?” Paolo asked as Kari got up and dragged her naked body over to the en suite.

“Chase Cavell.”

“What the fuck does he want?” Paolo exploded, sitting up and looking for his sweatpants.

“He says you invited him to see you today, Boss.”

Paolo grabbed the pants from the floor and stepped into them. “Wait a minute!” he yelled out to Ghost Boy.

When Kari walked out of the bathroom, Paolo passed by her on his way in, cupping her face in his hand. She ran her hand down his side.

“What does he want?” Kari asked on her way back to the bed.

“I’m going to find out, and then I’m going to roundhouse kick him in his damned head for coming to my house.”

“I know you didn’t invite him over here?”

“At four in the fucking morning? Hell no. I told him to meet me at my office at nine.” He was now washing his hands and face.

“He must be on something,” she said, as he walked out and took a hoodie from a hook on the door, throwing it over his head. *How ironic*, she thought. *When did she become such a hypocrite?*

“Pop probably told him where to find us. Fucking ridiculous! You go back to sleep, because if that asshole did come here high, I’ll be delayed in the back digging a hole to dump him in, cause I will have killed the motherfucker.”

“Paolo, chill. You shouldn’t say things like that.” Kari felt a chill of her own run through her and shivered.

“Hmph,” he mumbled, putting on a pair of black Nike running shoes. “I won’t be long. I’m just going to get rid of his ass.”

“Don’t look for a fight, Paolo, just get rid of him,” she said, twiddling her thumbs. She brought her knees to her chest and ran her hand through her tangles.

“Yep...Go back to sleep. I’ll wake you at 5:30 for our run.”

“You know I’m not going back to sleep, I’m too noseey. Hurry back, Don Corleone.”

He chuckled and kissed her lips. “I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse,” he said in his best Marlon Brando impersonation and walked out.

Kari giggled and lay back down.

“Who’s on the gate this morning?” Paolo asked Ghost Boy when they were in the hallway.

“The new hire, Maximino.”

“Tell him to let him in.”

