

VII. Sample Chapter

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Three years later, October 2007

On Thursday night, near the end of her shift, Susan Sorella perched on a stool at a counter in the kitchen at Gabriella's, filling saltshakers. She was wearing blue jeans and a white blouse, all the uniform the restaurant required. Her father Lorenzo emerged from the walk-in refrigerator with a towel in his hand.

"Can we talk about next week's menu?" he asked.

Mike, one of the waiters, burst through the door from the dining room with a frown on his face and grabbed Susan's father by the arm. "Enzo, there's somebody here to see you," he said.

"Who is it?" her father said.

"You better go see," Mike said.

Her dad put down the towel and entered the dining room, leaving the kitchen door ajar. Susan peered through the opening. *Jesus Christ*. Twenty feet away, alone at a table with his back to the wall, sat Frank Romano. He looked exactly like the picture *The Boston Herald* always ran of him when they did a story about organized crime. Tall and trim, he sat erect in his chair, wearing a dark gray suit, with a gray shirt and a burgundy tie. No jewelry, except for black sapphire cufflinks. Hair combed straight back. Deep-set eyes. They said Romano was a ruthless crime boss who presided over loansharking, gambling, drugs, fencing operations for major thefts, and the violence to keep everyone in line, including murder. What the hell was he doing at their restaurant?

Her father walked slowly across the room. He had a slight limp from an accident on a motor scooter when he was a teenager in Italy. "Hello, Frank, how are you," he said, as they shook hands. Susan grabbed the doorjamb. The fucking godfather walks in and her dad is like, hello Frank? Her dad was a gentleman from the old school, who addressed adults other than his close friends as mister and missus and used their last names. She didn't know he'd ever met Romano.

They lowered their voices, and she wasn't able to overhear their conversation. Her father waved Mike over. Then Mike came back to the kitchen.

"What's happening?" Susan asked.

"Your father told me to bring him an espresso and some buccellati."

"What are they talking about?"

"I couldn't hear anything."

Mike served the espresso and fig cookies. Her father sat sideways to the table, with one leg thrown casually over the other. Romano made a little tent with his hands, and then gently patted her father's arm as he spoke, like Italian neighbors. They were so familiar. Surely her father could have no connection with Romano's business. Maybe it was something personal. Maybe their families knew each other in Italy. The restaurant couldn't possibly be a front for the mob. Susan's mind raced.

Her parents started the business a few years after they came to America from San Gimignano

in 1977. They didn't have enough money for her mother Gabriella to stay at home or to hire someone for more than a few hours a week to babysit. The restaurant became Susan's daycare center. As an infant, she basked in the wonderful aromas of slow-cooking tomatoes, garlic, capers, and anchovies. The smell of baking bread filled the restaurant all morning. She sat in a little corner of the kitchen that was her own, from which she safely watched the cooks preparing food and the waiters bustling back and forth from the dining room. In the early mornings, her father would take her in the stroller to the market to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. All the vendors knew her. She never left without her own little basket of treats—cherry tomatoes, bite-sized balls of mozzarella, slices of prosciutto, and always a sweet, maybe biscotti, or a little box of torrone.

Her mother died from a brain tumor when Susan was four. She grew up with her father. He moved them to the apartment upstairs from the restaurant, so he'd always be close by when Susan was home. In the afternoons after school, she'd sit at a dining room table near the kitchen in the restaurant doing her homework. Later, she worked there—at first on the door, then waitressing, and finally as a line cook during the summers when she was home from college. After she came back to Boston, she went back to waitressing all year. In her final semester at Suffolk Law, she was still at it. She needed the tip money.

Her dad got up from the table and headed her way. She stepped farther back away from the door.

"Frank Romano wants to talk with you for a moment," he said.

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"He wants to talk with you."

"You can't be serious."

"It's about some case."

Susan stepped closer to her father. "How do you know him?" she whispered.

"We can talk about that later, but go ahead and see him. I'm sure it's okay. He just wants to give you some information."

"What kind of information?"

"I didn't ask him."

Susan's head was spinning, and her hands were shaking as she approached the table. She'd never met anyone like Romano. Until this very moment, she wouldn't have been able to imagine herself speaking with him. What sort of information could he want to pass on? And why to her? She was just a law student. She couldn't believe her father was okay with this.

Romano stood up, gave a slight bow, and pulled out her chair.

"Good evening," she said quietly as she sat down. "I, uh, I don't think I've ever seen you in the restaurant before."

"Well, your father and I have known each other for a long time."

She blinked. Should she pretend that she knew that or not? Better not. She didn't have any idea how they knew each other.

"It's good to meet you," he said. "You bear such a striking resemblance to your mother. You didn't get those blue eyes from her, though."

An oil painting of her mother as a young woman hung in the entrance to the restaurant. Slender, with silky black hair and deep-set brown eyes veiled by long lashes, Gabriella Sorella had been a beauty. Susan wondered, not for the first time, what her mother would be like today if she had lived. What a weight it would have taken off her father to have his wife's help running the restaurant. Maybe Susan should have played that role. Instead, she'd gone to law school. A shadow of guilt crossed her mind.

Romano talking about how much Susan looked like her mother made her skin crawl. She had to find out what his connection was to her family.

"I hear you're doing very well in law school," Romano said. He stared directly into her eyes, taking her measure. She barely managed to meet his gaze without looking away and waited for him to speak again.

He took a small bite out of one of his cookies and sipped his espresso. "I heard you're working with Attorney Coughlin. I hear he's going to get appointed to defend Nicky Marino on the Francini murder, tomorrow. Since I know your father, I came to tell you some things you need to know."

That freaked her out. She'd read about the Francini murder and knew some defendants had recently been charged with it, but she had no idea Bobby Coughlin would do that kind of case. According to the papers, Marino was the one who shot Francini. Coughlin didn't have the skills or the balls to handle a case like that. He was a cop-out artist who never went to trial. She hated working for him.

Now she wanted to hear why Romano was here but listening to what he had to say might get her in trouble. She was about to fall down the rabbit hole. "Wouldn't it be better if you talked to one of the lawyers on the case?" she asked.

Romano shook his head. "Let's just say I think you'll be able to use what I'm about to tell you wisely. A rat named Joseph Brady has been talking to the D.A.'s office. He's admitted to Tony's murder and says he did it with Nicky Marino. He claims my friend Danny Costa ordered the hit because Francini was stealing from me. The truth is we had no problem with Francini. He worked for us, but I trusted him, and as far as I know, he wasn't stealing money from anybody. Costa had nothing to do with his murder and neither did I. If Brady is lying about Francini and Costa, then he's probably lying about Marino too."

Susan held her breath a moment. This man didn't beat around the bush. Coming right out and saying that Francini had "worked for us" was incriminating. Maybe it didn't matter. Everybody in town already assumed it to be true. More to the point, could what Romano was saying about the defendants' innocence be true?

"You understand, I can't go to court with this," Romano said. "The prosecutor would have a field day with me on the stand, and the jury wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Is Brady lying about his own involvement?" Her curiosity outpaced her fear of the rabbit hole.

"What I hear, no he's not. But he didn't do it alone. The cops found Francini's body in front of Rena Posso's condo. Brady could hardly carry it up there by himself. Coughlin has to find out who else was involved," Romano said.

"Do you know who it was?" she asked.

Romano's face remained expressionless. He stood up slowly. "You and the lawyers have to take it from here. It was a pleasure meeting you. Please tell your father the buccellati are as good as ever." Romano turned and left the restaurant.

Susan absent-mindedly picked up one of the remaining cookies and ate it. She was scared, but this could be huge. She'd been thinking of quitting Coughlin's office, but Romano's visit put a whole new spin on the internship. If Romano was telling the truth and Coughlin's client was innocent, working there would be a real crusade. She collected the dishes and headed back to the kitchen.

"Dad, how do you know Romano?"

He looked away, then back at her. "I don't want to get into that. It's nothing for you to worry about."

That didn't sound good. This was the first time she could recall that her father had refused to answer a question from her. She was going to ask again, but the look on his face convinced her not to.

"You haven't asked what he wanted to talk to me about," she said.

"It's not my business. You're going to be a lawyer. I imagine there will be a lot we can't talk

about. Romano is a dangerous man, but you're my daughter. I don't think he'd get you in trouble."

"Can I ask you this? Can I trust him to tell me the truth? Should I believe what he says?"

"I think he'd tell you the truth. Maybe not the whole truth, though. Keep your eyes open."

She cleaned up and told her father good night. It was unbelievable that he knew Romano. A man like that was mythical. You heard things about him, you might read something about him in the paper, but you didn't eat cookies with him. He'd given her inside information about the Francini murder. He said it was because he knew her father. Maybe there was another reason. Maybe he knew what a wuss Coughlin was and wanted to make sure that someone else got the message. That would put her in a tricky position. She'd talk with Coughlin on Monday. Who knew what he was going to make of this?