



CHAPTER ONE

Angelo

Most people don't know they're going to get married the first time they meet. Relationships develop over time. Some men and women weigh up the pros and cons to decide if they can live with someone until death do them part. Others follow their heart.

Not me.

In my family, tradition dictates differently. The decision was made for me a long time ago. That's how the business works. Money is power, and power is everything. Power means survival. It's the most fundamental rule of the world.

Only the strongest survive.

That's why I'm here, why we're driving up the road that zigzags to the top of the hill and ends in a cul-de-sac. A mansion peeks from behind high walls. Beyond, the ocean glimmers in the golden dusk. Below, to the right, the

lagoon is a flawless mirror surrounding the stilt cabins on the island. The town of Great Brak River lies a kilometer inland on the bank of the river, consisting of a supermarket, a post office, an old as well as a new church, a small police station, an art gallery, a gas station, and a handful of shops and restaurants.

Anticipation tightens my gut. The reaction is involuntary. Far from being pure or innocent, it's born from instinct, from the darker, animalistic side of me that needs to claim and procreate.

Survival.

That's why we came all the way from Corsica to this secluded town in South Africa that's no bigger than the point of a needle on the map.

To meet my bride.

I've known for ten years, but twenty or thirty couldn't be long enough to prepare me for the moment. Whereas most human beings take the freedom of dating whoever they like for granted, I see it for what it is. A chore.

Dating is nothing but a tedious process of selection via elimination. There's a certain calm in knowing one woman is destined to be mine. Our union will serve in fulfilling my duty. There's logic in that. It gives stability to life in a world where little and few can be trusted. It gives meaning to existence. No soul searching or introspection are necessary.

It's been decided.

The outcome has been predetermined.

The timing, however, could've been better. We left my mother and sister alone for New Year, but I understand only too well why my father is eager to see this contract to fruition. The reason for his haste eats at me too.

Instead of flying to the nearest airport, we rented a car in Cape Town and drove the four hundred and twenty-eight kilometers to George. My father wanted to see the

Garden Route and stop on the way to buy wine. We took the scenic road along the coast, passing cliffs that broke off into the stormy sea and bays studded with smooth rocks and penguins. Sea bamboo drifting on the dark waters of small coves marked the whale coast. The rugged shores eventually gave way to dunes covered with Aloe Vera, their red flowers like flaming torches in the clear blue sky, and long stretches of white sand where the air smelled of salt and succulent groundcovers.

After booking into a hotel on the golf estate in the neighboring town of George, my father needed a day to rest and recover his strength. The following day, we did a reconnaissance of the area and paid our business partner—my future father-in-law—an unscheduled visit at his office. My father believes in catching his associates off guard. That way, they don't have time to hide any unorthodox dealings they prefer to keep in the dark. "If you want to know the true nature of a man," my father always says, "catch him with his pants down."

My father stops next to an intercom with a camera and pushes the button. The gates swing open without a squeak. We follow the road to where several cars are parked around a fountain on a circular driveway.

Benjamin Edwards appears on his doorstep before my father has cut the engine. I get out and straighten my jacket, taking stock of the surroundings like a soldier scouts a battlefield.

The house is the most impressive for miles around, built on the highest hill. Edwards stands on the porch like a cock crowing on his dunghill. In this sparsely populated part of South Africa, he may be the wealthiest man living in the biggest house. Compared to our property in Corsica, which is nothing short of a castle, the house that defines Edwards's status is unsubstantial. Inconsequential.

Much good all that money does us. Like Edwards's pretentious residence, our stronghold and landscaped gardens are for show. It's like putting a scumbag in a fancy suit. The centuries-old stigma still clings to our name. We come from a long line of vicious pirates and uneducated scoundrels. We're not welcome in the circles of the refined, religious, and elite.

That will change soon.

Edwards descends the steps to meet us.

"I'm glad you could make it," he says, shaking our hands, but his fake smile says otherwise.

The garden is buzzing with the commotion appropriate for a rich girl's sixteenth birthday party. Staff wearing black uniforms and white aprons are running up and down between the house and a cool truck parked in the far corner of the garden. White and pink flower wreaths decorate the balustrades, and a silver balloon arch frames the doorway. The breeze carries the notes of string music from the front of the house.

Edwards leads us to the lounge, which is similarly decorated with flowers and balloons. Bouquets of lilies and roses perfume the air. A round table in the center of the room is piled high with parcels wrapped in pink with white ribbons and vice versa. Did they specify the color of the wrapping paper like a fucking dress code on the invitation? I won't be surprised if Edwards introduces his daughter by marching her down the stairs in billows of white and pink voile.

What does she look like? I resisted the urge to look her up on social media. A part of me, the darker, more deviant part that can resist neither gamble nor dare, wanted to walk into this unprepared and let the surprise take me wherever it would. Shock me. Please me.

I'm about to find out which.

My father takes the box wrapped in golden paper from his jacket pocket and leaves it with the mountain of packets on the table. He's gone to a great deal of trouble to select a fine piece of craftsmanship from one of the best jewelers in Italy.

The sliding doors are open, revealing the green lawn that sweeps to the edge of the dune and the sea that's visible all the way to the convex curve of the horizon. The party is already in full swing. Guests mingle around cocktail tables, their droning conversations audible above the music. The string quartet is set up under a pine tree, the musicians expertly keeping the volume on a level that allows for chatter.

The women are decked out in their best, some of them sporting hats you'd see at the Derby, and, like my father and Edwards, the men are dressed in tuxedos. Personally, I prefer a style less universal. I opted for a modern European look with a designer jacket, a fitted shirt, and tailored pants.

"Welcome to my humble home," Edwards says, waving a waiter closer. "Can I offer you a glass of champagne?"

"Maybe Scotch first," my father says. "While we talk business."

Edwards glances at the top of the stairs and then at his watch. "It's hardly the moment."

My father's smile is indulgent. "It won't take long."

Our host doesn't have a choice but to comply. Our family is an important *service provider*—for lack of a better word—in his business. Although, from our impromptu visit to his office yesterday, I got the impression he wasn't ecstatic about our presence.

As manners dictate, my father asked about the welfare of his family and specifically about news of his youngest daughter. I could almost see the gears turning in Edwards's

head, questioning the unlikely coincidence of our uninvited visit that happened to fall on the date of his daughter's sixteenth birthday. He couldn't do otherwise but to tell us about the party. The town is small. News travels. It would've been rude and politically incorrect not to invite us. We traveled across the whole of Africa after all, going to considerable efforts and expenses to call on him. Of course, my father accepted the invitation gracefully.

Judging by Edwards's reaction yesterday, I won't be surprised if my bride-to-be has no knowledge of my existence. Edwards isn't a good actor. He couldn't hide his aversion. He barely endured shaking my hand. People either fear or despise me. Mostly, they do both.

Too bad.

Benjamin Edwards may think he's better than us where morals are concerned, but we put him on his throne. He may sit there with a lily-white conscience and pretend his empire isn't built on blood, but I'm not scared to face the truth or to roll up my sleeves and get my hands dirty.

Edwards shows us into a study with leather couches facing a coffee table in the center of the floor but indicates the visitors' chairs in front of the desk.

My father shoots me a look as we take our seats. It doesn't take a psychiatrist to understand that Ben Edwards is scavenging whatever power he can, even if said power comes from hiding behind a desk.

Edwards pours Scotch at the wet bar and offers us each a drink, omitting one for himself.

He sits down and folds his hands on the desk. "What can I do for you, Santino?"

My father takes his box of cigarillos from his pocket and holds it out to Ben. Ben shakes his head.

"It's time for Angelo and Sabella to meet," my father says, measuring Edwards.

Edwards keeps a poker face, but he sits up straighter. "Why?"

"Sabella will be eighteen in two years."

The only reaction Edwards shows is the twitch of his eyes. "Indeed. What of it?"

My father rolls a cigarillo between his fingers and puts away the box. "She'll be an adult." When Edwards doesn't comment, he continues, "Of marriageable age."

Edwards spares me no more than a glance, his upper lip curling as if I'm an unpleasant sight. "I don't see what that has to do with Angelo."

"She's been promised to Angelo." My father smiles. "Have you forgotten?"

Edwards's face turns red. "I didn't agree to any such thing."

My anger ignites in a second. I know what he's doing, why he's denying the oath he made. We're good enough to do his dirty work, but we're not good enough for his daughter.

"We shook hands on the deal," my father says.

Edwards no longer makes an effort to disguise his anger. "I didn't consent to what you're implying,"

"Where I come from, a handshake is as good as a signature. Giving your handshake is giving your word." My father looks Edwards straight in the eyes. "Lying about it does not only make you a coward, but it's also a slap in our faces."

Edwards turns from red to purple. "In my country, a handshake holds no hidden meaning. Its only purpose is expressing politeness. We congratulated each other on a successful negotiation, nothing more. You get your fair cut every year."

"You seem to have a short memory, my friend." My father leans forward, bracing his elbow on the desk. "Part

of the deal was always that Angelo would enter the business when he graduates from university and that we'd strengthen our mutual interests in blood."

"You're mistaken," Edwards says, his voice rising in volume.

"You act as if being tied to the Russo family is an insult." My father makes that statement like a challenge. "It will only benefit you." He takes a stack of folded papers from his inside jacket pocket and slides it over the desk. "I took the liberty of getting my lawyer to draw up a contract. They'll get married when she turns eighteen, but she can stay with us to acclimatize while Angelo finishes his MBA in Rome. Of course, she'll get a house in her name and a monthly allowance. Provision for the children born from their union, including expenses, education, trust funds, and such, has been stipulated. They won't want for anything. The marriage will be out of community of property, but in the unlikely event that my son decides to leave her, she will retain her property and possessions, and she will receive a handsome compensation." My father relaxes in his seat again. "Take your time to look it over."

Edwards doesn't as much as glance at the contract. "You seem to have it all figured out." He sneers. "What happens if she leaves him?"

"In that case, she gets nothing, but let's not bring them bad luck by focusing on the negative aspects before we've even celebrated their engagement. As you know, divorce is highly unusual in my family."

"Engagement?" Edwards exclaims. "She's sixteen, for crying out loud." He points a finger at me. "You're twenty." Scornfully, he adds, "Correct me if I'm wrong."

"That's right," I drawl. "I'm not asking to marry her straight away. Like my father, I prefer that she finishes school. I believe she's attending an excellent establishment

with a prestigious reputation, and a good education is important to me. Four years may seem like a big age difference now, but once she's an adult, the gap won't be significant. Aren't you seven years older than your wife?"

All but choking on his spit, Edwards pushes back his chair.

We didn't come to the birthday party of a sixteen-year-old girl with guns, but maybe we should've.

When I make to get up, my father exchanges a look with me, wordlessly instructing me to let him handle it.

"They should announce their betrothal as soon as possible," he says in a placating tone, "but the actual engagement doesn't have to take place until she's turned of legal age. In the meantime, it'll be wise to let them get to know each other." My father spreads his hands. "The fact that I'm behaving so considerately and in the best interest of your daughter should reassure you."

The laugh Edwards utters is cold. "Reassure me?"

My father waves at the papers on the desk. "If my promise isn't enough, the figures will surely satisfy you."

"Like I said," Edwards says, balling his hands on the desk, "it's not going to happen. My daughter is independent. She has a free will." He slams a fist on his desk. "She will marry when she's ready and who she bloody well wants."

The patience vanishes from my father's features. He stands. His smile is intact, but the quiet authority of his voice as he towers over Edwards leaves no uncertainty as to the outcome of this conversation. "Take some time to share the happy news with her. I can see it won't be today. What's another few months if it'll help her get used to the idea? However, make no mistake. The wedding will happen. You made the bargain, and I'll hold you to it."

Edwards jumps to his feet. He opens his mouth but

wisely thinks the better of whatever he was going to say and shuts it again. He's got money, but we're the ones bargaining with fear. Our threats are never empty.

The door is yanked open, cutting into the tense atmosphere.

A thickset woman with short auburn hair wearing a burgundy silk dress bulldozes into the room. "Sabella hasn't come down yet. I swear—" She stops short when she notices us and quickly schools herself. "Oh. I didn't know you were busy."

Like gentlemen are taught to do when a woman enters a room, I get to my feet. Not that I'm anything of the kind. I just prefer the intimidating advantage of my height.

When she cowers a little, I can't suppress a grin.

My father bows. "We were just done." He takes her hand and kisses her fingers without touching his lips to her skin. "How are you, Margaret?"

"Fine, thank you," she says with a stiff back.

My father extends an arm toward me. "This is my son, Angelo."

I offer her a hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Edwards."

Her fingers are limp in my mine. She pulls away before we've properly shaken hands, regarding me with a downturned mouth.

An awkward silence follows, which she breaks by asking my father, "How is Teresa?"

"In good health." My father inclines his head. "She asked me to congratulate you on Sabella's birthday. She would've come, but this is a business trip for Angelo and me."

The polite exchange is amusing. It's nothing but role play, a practiced stage act devised by civil society. Yet when cut down to the bone, we're all selfish monsters.

Underneath the pretense, we only care about furthering our own agendas.

Margaret pulls her lips into a pinch. "Maybe next time."

"Maybe." My father shrugs. "Who knows? Next time, we may welcome you in Corsica."

She glances at her husband with a question burning in her eyes.

"We've kept you from your guests," my father says. "We should let you get back to them."

"Yes." Margaret looks both worried and relieved. "We better go outside before our absence appears rude."

Edwards comes around his desk and opens a door that exits onto the veranda. "This way."

We step aside for Margaret to go ahead.

"If you'll excuse us," she says when we're outside. "I need a word with my husband."

"I know how taxing these affairs can be." My father takes a lighter from his pocket. "Don't worry about us. We'll make ourselves at home."

Frowning, she takes her husband's arm and leads him down the veranda and through the sliding doors. Before disappearing into the lounge, she looks over her shoulder with the expression of someone who's just stepped into dog shit.

My father lights his cigarillo, takes a drag, and studies the crowd as he blows out the smoke.

Like mine, his calmness is deceptive. Inside, I'm a fucking stick of dynamite with a burning fuse.

No one promises me something and then takes it away.

No one refuses me what's mine.

It's a tactical mistake.

Denying me only makes me want it twice as much. I'll

not only fight ten times harder to get it but also as dirty as necessary.

I can't say I didn't expect resistance after our cool reception at the office. I bargained on some negotiations and modifications of the terms of our contract. What I didn't foresee was Edwards's blunt refusal to honor an oath he'd made to my father. I remember his promise. I was there.

No one fucks us over, and no one throws our generosity back in our faces. Our surname isn't Russo for nothing.

"That's the oldest sister," my father says, waving his cigarillo toward the people milling on the lawn. "The one with the burgundy dress."

I spot her easily. She's an attractive woman by classical standards. According to rumors, she's the beautiful one. When people talk about the sisters, they refer to Sabella as the *other* one.

"Takes after her mother," he muses. "The man at her side is her fiancé. He's not involved in the business."

Meaning he's no one to be worried about. That's not who I'm interested in. My gaze is drawn to Ryan Edwards, Benjamin's first-born.

Like I weigh him, he measures me from across the distance. We only met yesterday at his father's office, and we're already enemies.

"That's who you have to watch out for," my father says, following my gaze. "He's the sole heir of Edwards's business. He won't be happy when he finds out he'll have to share the power."

I'm not worried about Ryan Edwards. He may be six years older, but he's no match for me. He's soft and impassive, a man who doesn't like to get down and dirty when the work gets gritty.

My dad coughs.

I jut my chin toward the cigarillo. "Should you be doing that?"

"Grant an old man the small pleasures he has left," he says, but he does put the cigarillo out in an ashtray on the garden table. "Want a drink? I need something to ease this scratch in my throat."

Looking at the bar where rosé and champagne are cooling in ice buckets, I shake my head. I haven't touched the Scotch Edwards poured. I'm too fucking livid, and alcohol only makes me more aggressive.

"Suit yourself," he says, making his way to the lawn where the waiters are circulating. "In that case, you're driving."

Brooding, I watch his back. I don't like the way he handled Edwards. He should've been firmer with him.

Years ago, Edwards came to my father and asked him to help remove a few obstacles in his business. As an imports and exports broker, Edwards saw an opportunity to make money by letting illegal shipments enter the country via the port of Cape Town. He had the right connections. He had the capital to buy off the government officials and to pay the controllers to turn a blind eye. Our job was to get rid of the ones who stood in his way, the ones who couldn't be corrupted.

The part we contributed, doing his dirty work for more than a decade, made him one of the big players in the industry. Today, he controls everything that comes and goes through Cape Town by sea. Yes, we get our cut, but we don't need the money. Not anymore. We've made enough. What we need is power. Recognition. An open door into circles where those born with the right surname and status pull their noses up at us. We need to be in on the deals. That has always been the objective.

As Edwards's son-in-law, I'll be rewarded shares and a

position on the board of his company. As per the contract, he'll give me a fancy title and voting rights. Of his three children, Sabella is Edwards's favorite. She's been the apple of his eye since the day she was born. He makes no secret of it. He'll never do anything to jeopardize her future. Marrying her is the only sure way of getting my foot in the door and keeping it there. As soon as my seed is planted in her belly and she gives me an heir, war will no longer be necessary. The Edwards family won't kill their grandchild's father. Correction—they won't hire an assassin to do it.

Owning a stake in the company will give us access to information that will make us more powerful than the governments of the countries involved in Edwards's illegal smuggling. It will open a new avenue for us, giving us direct access to Africa. It will guarantee us unequalled leverage in negotiating terms with the companies that currently pay the government bribes to smuggle their illegal arms via the port of Durban in the Kwazulu-Natal province. We can have the government by the balls and secure kickbacks that will earn us a monopoly in Africa. Governments and arms dealers alike will have no one else to turn to but us. They'll be our puppets. The Russo family will rule. Our name will be revered. The only thing standing between that kind of power and my family is a sixteen-year-old girl.

Edwards walks outside, searches the crowd, and heads toward where my father is standing at the edge of the lawn. Despite his bulk, his stride is lithe. I watch him like a tiger, ready to pounce. Once, my father was invincible. He could hold his own in any fist or gunfight. Now, he's old and growing weaker by the day.

They fall into what looks like a tense discussion, but they're not ripping each other's heads off. How long is the

princess going to wait before making her grand entry? As soon as the introductions are out of the way, we can get the fuck out of here. I won't see her for more than a couple of days per year until we move her to Corsica. I'm a devil, but I'm not a creep. I've never been into underaged girls. The getting-to-know-each-other is my father's bright idea. If it was up to me, I'd just go into the whole thing cold turkey.

I plunge a hand into my pocket and fold my fingers around the joint the hotel bellboy slipped me. The overdressed women with their lace, silk, and ostrich feathers bug me. Margaret's snobbish air of superiority where she's mingling with the guests is as irritating as hell. The pretentiousness of the whole lot gathered on the lawn, smiling and kissing Edwards's ass, grates on my nerves.

Fuck, I need to get away.

Making an impulsive decision, I walk down the length of the veranda and turn the corner.

I need to get stoned before I lose my shit and rip someone to pieces.