
Chapter 1

Michael

I'm not a mobster but I am in the Russian mob, specifically the Valesky crime family. I'll owe them my allegiance until I die. For me, my death can't come soon enough.

Frustration tightens my chest, making it hard to breathe. My shoulders and neck burn from anger I have to suppress. It's either that or walk away from what I'm expected to do for the 'family' then have the unthinkable happen to my mother and siblings.

Unwilling to consider that shit, I enter Cyrus Davenport's office on orders from my stepfather Dimitri Valesky.

Despite Cyrus's assistant announcing my presence, he doesn't acknowledge me, his reading glasses perched on the edge of his fleshy nose, his gaze on whatever he's reading. For no other reason than to make me cool my heels. I quickly learned US Senators are legends in their own minds. The dumb fools believe they have power and the law on their sides. I know better.

It's not graft that makes the government run. It's who has the biggest balls. The lawmakers or those who expect favors from them, especially lobbyists like me.

In a battle between us, I'm not betting on Cyrus.

At last, he looks up and blinks slowly, his green eyes blood-shot, which betrays his five-martini lunch. "Michael. I haven't had a chance to read the portions of the bill you've—"

"Reading it isn't necessary, as you well know. Vote 'yes' on the thing and we'll call it a day."

Red patches blossom on his puffy face. He draws his eyebrows together. "I'll pretend you didn't say that."

"Do whatever you want as long as you vote for this bill." I keep my voice down, but do step closer to his desk, my youth, size, and determination meant to intimidate. "It's expected, and you damn well know it."

He presses back in his chair. "Other considerations have come up."

To say I don't care is the understatement of the century. In my world, you do what Dimitri wants. For the moment, it's getting this bill passed for one of his legitimate businesses. With it, he receives millions in tax write-offs and even greater subsidies. This, while most Americans struggle to feed their families or face homelessness.

When I don't comment, Cyrus sighs loudly. "When I initially agreed with what was in the bill, I didn't realize the repercussions involved."

"You mean a better offer for your vote you'd now like to take."

At my observation, he squeezes his pen, his knuckles blanching. However, his faint smile betrays his thoughts. "You are aware I have the deciding vote in this matter. It's up to me, no one else, to make it law."

If he's expecting praise from me, he'd better not hold his breath.

As the silence grows uncomfortable between us, he looks away. “My constituents sent me here to do a job.”

“I don’t need a lesson in civics. You’re here to grift as much as possible from the system. If that weren’t your goal, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Now just hold on.” His complexion flushes a deeper red. “I’ve done nothing wrong. I always vote my conscience.”

“Bought and paid for by CEOs, tech giants, and people like Dimitri. He was your mistake. Unlike the others, who’ll get you primaried or fail to fund your next campaign, his kind never take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Cyrus lifts his chin. “He may have to in this case. As I’ve said, *I* am the lone senator this law depends upon. Do you have any idea how powerful that makes me?”

“In what world?” I offer a sympathetic smile. “You’re from what could charitably be called a flyover state. One of those places where there are more livestock than people, especially those who couldn’t care less about this bill. They’ll never live in the luxury condos Dimitri intends to build. If you lose your seat in the next election, you won’t be able to buy any of those units either.”

His intercom buzzes. “Sir,” his assistant says, “you have a meeting in ten minutes.”

I put up my hand to keep him from responding. “Tell her you need to cancel.”

His eyes widen. “I can’t do that. I won’t.” He frowns. “I have important work to do with—”

“Another lobbyist whose client is funding your reelection?”

Sweat breaks out on his temples. His kind can bluster with the best until someone calls them on it. Then they’re as pliable as clay, molded into whatever their current owner wants.

His offense at what I’ve said evaporates. He lifts his hands in supplication. “Look, I’m being primaried, as you stated earlier, by those idiots on the other side.”

In other words, good people who are tired of the cesspool this country has become, which they're forced to pay for through their taxes.

He slumps. "My donors are having trouble keeping up with the money those fools are raising."

"Aren't they doing it twenty dollars at a time? Doesn't sound like much until you have millions of people pitching in because they hate what you stand for. Looks like your turn for blowback has come."

"Which is why I'd like some assistance here." He grips his desk. "I'm running behind in campaign funds. I need another—"

"When it comes to my stepfather's generosity, the well, as they say, has run dry. This particular vote has been bought and paid for. It's time for you to do as you're told."

A vein pulses on his temple. "Are you threatening me?" He sniffs. "What are you going to do if I vote this bill down? Break my legs? Shoot me in the head?" He barks a laugh. "That'll be the day. You goons can't do anything to me. I'm a fucking US senator."

"That doesn't make you immortal." I finger an ornate letter opener on his desk. He stares at the pointed end that resembles a knife blade. I rap the desk to get his attention. "If push comes to shove..."

His intercom buzzes again, his assistant's voice following. "Sir, you should get ready for the meeting."

He eyes the opener. "Cancel it and reschedule."

"Yes, sir."

What do you know? Even without breaking his legs, shooting him in the head, or stabbing him, he's doing precisely what I want. Not that I would have used physical force. I'm not a mob enforcer. I prefer strategy learned during my days at Georgetown Law. Being an attorney is far more effective than wielding fists or weapons. Not that I'm opposed to intimi-

dation when it comes to pricks like Cyrus. In that, I guess I am the typical mobster.

“Glad you’re seeing things as you should, Senator.” I smile briefly. “But enough work talk. How are your kids? Boys, correct? They’re teenagers now, aren’t they?”

He squirms. “What’s it to you if they are?”

“Teenage boys can get into all sorts of trouble. Say underage drinking, driving under the influence, fucking with girls—or boys—they shouldn’t mess with. In the case of girls, there’s always the worry about pregnancy. Problems like that.”

He speaks through his teeth. “My sons are good kids. They don’t do shit like that. Stay away from them.”

“I’m simply pointing out reality to you. No parent knows *everything* his kid’s doing. Then, again, some are purposefully blind. You should take a look at this.” I pull out my smartphone. “I’m sure you’ll find it interesting.”

He won’t take the phone from me. I place it on his desk and hit the video play button. His angelic oldest son is boozing with his friends then driving, or rather swerving, away.

I gesture to the video. “Your boy nearly sideswiped a parked car. Lucky for him he didn’t. However, he hasn’t been so fortunate in the past.”

I bring up a news story on a hit-and-run, the victims are a mother and her two pre-school age children. They were walking home from Grandma’s apartment but never made it to their house.

Cyrus’s features go slack.

If I were strongarming anyone but him, I’d feel bad. He doesn’t deserve sympathy. Nor does his kid. The boy’s a budding psychopath, precisely like dear old dad. At least Cyrus knows to temper his baser impulses so he can screw the American people via his government job. Sonny boy hasn’t learned to use finesse when he’s destroying lives. The kid’s been bragging about the attorney and fixers daddy hired to

make sure no one knew who caused the crime. Eventually, the boy will be a perfect candidate for the Valesky mob. Someday he may be an integral part of the gang.

Cyrus pushes the smartphone toward me. “As long as your stepfather keeps this information quiet, I’ll vote whatever way he tells me to.”

“He’ll be happy to hear it. A little advice though. You’d better get your kid psychiatric help before it’s too late.”

Cyrus’s homely face gets uglier. “He’s a good boy.”

“Good kids don’t kill mothers and babies then brag about getting away with it.”

Honest words but ultimately empty. If I were a better man, I’d tell the cops what I know about the hit-and-run, but I have Mama and my brothers to protect. I don’t want to consider what Dimitri would do to them if I were to spill anything to ruin his hold on Cyrus.

On my way out, I nod to the assistant, an older woman wearing a cross affixed to an American flag pin. She has the crazed look of a true believer who *knows* God called her boss to government service so he’d do righteous work for the people. If I were to bring up how Cyrus sells his votes or that he likes to sleep with guys when he’s not with the wife, she’d never believe me. Not even if I offered photographic evidence, which I also have.

It was my Plan B if threatening him with his kid’s crime didn’t work.

Once outside the capitol, my phone buzzes. The display shows my mother’s picture and name. Worried, I answer. “Mama, are you all right?”

“It’s me,” Dimitri says.

I squeeze the phone, wishing it were his throat. If Mama hadn’t married him... If she hadn’t been desperate about feeding and housing her boys when we were little...

Too late now for regrets. The bastard’s tentacles surround

each of us. Unless, or until, I kill him, nothing will change. Before I speak, I make certain to mask my disgust. If I piss him off, he'll take out his rage on my mother, his nearest and weakest target. "He's voting your way. This time, he won't change his mind."

"*Khorosho.*" Russian for good. "I knew you'd come through for me, Mikhail."

Only because he has the proverbial gun to my head. There isn't one thing I don't detest about Dimitri, including his guttural voice. Despite having lived in the States since he was fifteen, he still has a thick accent.

Wanting to end this as quickly as possible, I lie. "I have another appointment. When I'm through with it, I'll send you details of what Cyrus and I discussed."

"That's not why I'm calling."

Despite the warmish spring weather, my skin goes clammy. "Is Mama all—"

"She's fine, and will stay that way, as long you do what you're told."

I long to call him every vile thing imaginable but keep my tongue. Something I learned as a kid. His beatings were always worse if I cried or cursed him. If I was silent, that enraged him further, but he wore himself out faster. A win for me.

He clears his throat, but still coughs, thanks to his three-pack a day cigarette habit. Innocent kids get cancer, but not him. What a fucking world.

"I have another project for you, Mikhail."

Shit. "What bill is it this time?"

"Not a bill. A woman. Toni Flores."

I'm crossing the street when he says the name. My step pauses. Someone from behind bumps into me.

"She's causing trouble," Dimitri says. "You need to get rid of her."

“What?”

A different person bumps into me. I cross to the other side.

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s causing problems for Stowe.”

Lucian Stowe is another senator Dimitri owns. “What kind of problems?”

“She’s been claiming to the police and anyone else she can that he raped her. It’s not true, but she won’t stop lying about it and she never shuts her mouth.”

I hurry down the street to a less crowded area. “How do you know she’s lying?”

“Because I said so!”

In Dimitri’s world that makes perfect sense. “That’s no damn proof.”

“Even if she is telling the truth, it doesn’t matter!” He’s shouting louder than I did. “I need Stowe in my pocket! She has to be eliminated! I want you to do it.”

My stomach falls. “No. I don’t do that kind of work. *Ever*. Especially to a woman who’s—”

“I don’t care what she is or how you found out about her. I want it done. No arguments.”

Before I can speak, he ends the call.