
DANGEROUS LOVE

Priceless Love - Book Three

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

It all came together for him when his newborn son was placed in his huge hands. The baby was small, not much bigger than a puppy, and it fit nicely into his palms. Dom held him as he squirmed for a few seconds, then, apparently feeling quite safe, as well he should in his father's care, he wobbled a fist to his lips and began to suck greedily.

No one who knew the fierce gangster would have recognized the look on his face – it was one reserved only for those who touched that staunchly protected heart of his – his wife, Bridget, his mother, and now this little scrap of humanity, born of the incredible magic of their love.

Bridget lay sleeping not two feet away from where her two men were getting more acquainted. Dom leaned forwards a bit to adjust her covers, noting the splotches of broken blood vessels that marred her otherwise flawlessly creamy complexion. They were badges of honor hard won while bringing little Domenic Junior into the world. The nurses had been scandalized at the idea that he refused to be a nice little expectant father and wait in the waiting room for news of the birth, but there wasn't a person on staff who wanted to tell him no – his

reputation preceded him, even here. Dom had insisted on being with his wife through the entire thing, holding her hand and encouraging her when she grew exhausted from her efforts. His son competently held in one arm, he stroked his love's brow gently, then, alert to any change in the sound of her breathing, he turned his attention back to his wondrous offspring.

Dom thought his heart was going to explode inside him as he stared down at the little cuss that had been trying to kick or elbow his way out of his Mother's belly for the past three or so months. He and Bridget almost always slept spoon fashion, and Dom could feel the baby's escape attempts every night against his arm. Never having been this close to a pregnant woman before, Dom was amazed at the sheer strength of the blows she endured from within, taking it upon himself to chastise his child for his or her bad manners in beating up his or her mother and speaking directly to the huge mound of her stomach on more than one occasion.

"Listen here, young one –"

"Young?" Bridget had interrupted with a chuckle. "He hasn't even had a birthday yet!"

Dom glared up at her ferociously, which just produced an ego-deflating series of giggles. One of the few people in this world that he had no hope of intimidating was his diminutive but fearless wife. He cleared his throat in a loud, masterful manner – which only garnered more giggles – and addressed the occupant of her impressively swollen tummy in a low, soft tone. "Now hear this, little son or daughter: this is your Father speaking. I want you to stop –"

The side of Bridget's stomach bulged out violently, sending her into another fit of laughter.

Dom continued valiantly as more bumps and ripples appeared. "Stop doing that to your mother –" He had sighed heavily, pulling himself up to deliver a smacking kiss to her

lips, commenting wryly, “The baby already takes after you – it doesn’t listen to me, either.”

Dom smiled as he remembered his sometimes whimsical conversations with the baby he now held in his arms. One big foot set the rocker to rocking, and, after a long, comfortable silence, he began to speak to the baby quietly that deep, rumbly voice, telling him a bedtime story of how his parents met and fell in love.

It had begun with an unexpected phone call from a good friend – Kit Jackson, a disreputable former gentleman who had recently married a mail-order-bride despite a load of good advice against the maneuver. But he had looked out recently on several accounts: apparently he had finally struck oil on his desolate run-down property, and he had definitely believed he had found a keeper in his little wife Mary. They were taking a belated honeymoon. Kit was calling to see if Dom would like to get together and have dinner with them.

“Of course, of course, *paisan*,” Dom leaned back in the big leather chair. “You sound as if marriage is agreeing with you – you always were a great gambler.”

There was absolutely no hesitation in Kit’s response. “Damn straight. I got very lucky when Mary came into my life – she’s a wonderful woman, great cook, smart as a whip, beautiful –”

Dom chuckled, truly glad for his friend. “I shall be honored to meet such perfection. When are you coming?”

They arranged a time to meet several weeks later – and although they certainly didn’t need the charity, Dom made sure that they were staying in one of the hotels he owned in the Chicago area, so he could personally make sure that they were taken care of. Kit’s Mary did live up to his friend’s

flowery praise and the two were almost embarrassingly in love. Every time Dom looked at either of them he wanted to smile – and that was an entirely unnatural urge for him.

Domenic Adriano Martinelli, Junior – although only someone with a death wish would ever call him “Junior” – was a dark, serious, somber little boy who turned into a dark, somber, powerful, merciless man. He’d made his bones by the time he was fifteen with the deadly and accurate use of a no-fuss, no muss Colt 45 his father had handed down to him, adding a silencer as a stealthy advantage. By the time he was twenty-three, he’d certainly earned his lethal reputation – and the nickname “the Hammer” - carrying out hits on various of his father’s – and thus his own – enemies. He’d assumed his pre-destined position as his father’s right-hand man, even after taking time out to earn a business degree from the University of Chicago. When his father died, Dom slid naturally into the role he’d been born to fill, applying bits and pieces of his business knowledge where it worked best, but always willing to fall back on brute force to further expand or consolidate his power. At thirty-six, even the man on the street in faraway London knew of and feared the ruthless head of one of the biggest, most efficiently run crime families in the United States.

For all of his influence and command of life and death situations, Domenic still lived with his mother, Angelina – although not in the house he’d grown up in. Although Dom Senior had done well for his family, his son had expanded the family’s holdings triple-fold. About five years ago, after his father’s death, Dom had had a huge mansion built, well away from the bustle of the city, moving his feisty but flighty mother into a wing of her own, complete with servants – which she drove at least as mercilessly as he browbeat his *capos*. The house itself was almost Victorian in design, but he’d had every security measure he could think of and some he hadn’t known

about until the builder – who owed Dom a favor for getting a shark from another family off his back – had made some suggestions about the house itself as well as creating a large compound with a huge wall and gate as well as several hidden traps about the grounds. The compound had at least as much security as Fort Knox.

It was to that most secure fortress that Dom insisted Kit and Mary come for dinner so that Mama could see Kit – whom she considered another son – and get a chance to meet Mary. He even picked them up in his limo for the drive out of town. As vicious as he could be – and that was plenty vicious – family was family. Dom treated his mother like a queen. He had no brothers or sisters, so he was closer to his friends and extended family than he might be, most of who were in the “business,” although there was never any conflict about who was in charge. Dom loved children, and had stood godfather to a record number of his adopted nieces and nephews, and he always kept pieces of taffy and hard candy in his pockets for when the little ones visited. Many a nervous parent had nearly had an apoplectic fit when his toddler was put down in the foyer only to make a bee-line for the big man himself, running full speed ahead and launching themselves into huge, open arms, utterly certain of his or her welcome.

The dark, brooding man would heft the child against him, a hard arm securely supporting a chubby butt while fishing in his pocket for a sweet, which he would only surrender for the price of an inevitably wet, slobbery kiss as the parent stared in rapt wonder at his transformation from hardnosed Mafia boss to doting pseudo-uncle. At family gatherings and holidays, when he appeared, babies were pressed into his arms as readily as their mother’s; Dom had a way with kids and could generally quiet the unhappiest baby. It was as if they sensed his supreme self-confidence, that, as the master of all he

surveyed, he was the man who could save them single-handedly from the perils of diaper rash and colic.

Yet he had no woman of his own, much to his Mother's unhesitatingly voiced distress. She wanted grandbabies, and Dom was not cooperating in the least. Angelina was always shaking her head full of rapidly whitening hair; he was just like his father – stubborn and opinionated and strong as an ox – in constitution as well as musculature. Oh, he had women all right, but none of them the type that he would ever present to his mother.

Looking across the expanse of the limo, seeing his friends so happily married – not only Kit and Mary but Will and Frances Rose Genrette in Tennessee – made Dom somewhat wistful – for about five seconds. With his life the way it was, he didn't know that he wanted to drag some poor innocent woman into it – to say nothing of the fact that anyone he associated with was in tremendous danger. For that reason, he stuck to fairly short, sweet liaisons with women who knew exactly what the score was. No wide-eyed innocents for him – women like that stirred far too many protective instincts within him. They were much more dangerous than staring down the muzzle of a machine gun by far.

But, actually, any woman created those feelings in him – his strong, dominant father raised him to be naturally protective of the fairer sex. Dom Senior had drilled into him his responsibility – especially as he grew up and up and up, fairly towering over his smaller father at almost six-foot-four and nearly two hundred fifty pounds by the time he was in his early twenties. Dom's great size and strength was a definite asset to the business, but his father would never, ever tolerate him using his physical abilities against *any* woman, even the prostitutes on the family rosters.

Now, this did not mean, his father had counseled him, that a man let a woman rule him under any circumstances. That

should never be allowed to happen. Women were to be coddled and cherished and treasured, but never spoiled. Just as a man would never tolerate disrespect from his child, Domenic learned at his father's knee that he should never accept it from a woman, either – girlfriend, wife, daughter – they all need the loving, firm guidance of a man, some times to the point of physical correction, but never, ever to the point of violence or beatings.

No, his father had lectured while teaching his son the facts of life, that women – not unlike children - needed to know where the line was drawn, and that there were consequences to their actions, for any disrespect or disobedience - physical consequences, applied to their plump, white derrieres until they were sobbing and incoherent and truly repentant. Only then could the comforting begin, which, he'd said with a wink, was the best part of the whole thing.

As a result, Dom treated every woman he chose with such respect and caring it was as if she was a duchess, always speaking softly, never raising that low, rumbly tone, paying particular attention to her needs and wants for whatever time they were together. When Domenic's sights settled on a woman - which happened with distinct irregularity considering the rampant sex drive he kept as ruthlessly in check as he did his legendary temper – he made her the center of his attention – family was the only thing that could drag him away from her, and Dom did his best to minimize those pesky interruptions. He never hesitated to spend money on his mistresses as long as it was not expected or demanded in any way – that type of spoiled brat behavior he would not tolerate. His last lover, who was the well known film actress Lorna Leigh, adored jewelry and even as a parting gift he presented her with a three inch, thirty-five thousand dollar diamond cuff bracelet, as well as matching earrings and necklace. They parted quite amicably, and that was what Dom wanted.

Although he liked his women feisty, both in bed and out, he detested the highly public, overwrought, emotional scenes some women favored.

It happened, though, that the right rear tire on the limousine blew out just outside of the small town of Berkleysville, Illinois. There was no jack with which to crank the jack to change it, and, considering the armored plating and bullet-proofing Dom had ordered when the car was specially built for him, they would never be able to lift it on their own. As Mary sat patiently in the back, the three men were just beginning to discuss – somewhat raucously - who was going to hoof it back into town when a ramshackle old Ford clanked and banged its way loudly by, only to pull over to the side of the road a few yards ahead.

Looking back, Dom realized that he was lost the moment he saw her, but he hadn't known it then. He just knew that he liked the looks of the small, delicate woman who unhesitatingly offered her assistance to four complete strangers.

“Is there something I can do to help?” the perky strawberry-blonde asked.

“Do you got a crowbar?” Mario, the chauffeur-bodyguard asked, giving the girl a long, slow once-over.

Annoyed for no apparent reason at the younger man's crass attitude, Dom stepped in front of him, blocking everything from her sight but himself and consciously using his softest, gentlest voice. This little girl looked like a stiff wind would blow her over, and her very ethereal fragility aroused every protective instinct he owned. “Ma'am, if you are in possession of a jack, we would be extremely grateful if we could borrow it.”

Bridget had looked up at him, and their eyes met for only a second before she lowered hers and looked somewhere past his shoulder for the rest of the conversation. “No, Sir, I don't have a jack in my truck, but I do know were you can get one.

I'd be glad to drive one of you into Scarborough, which is the next town —”

“I know,” Dom interrupted gently with a small, friendly smile. “I live fairly near here.”

Fidgeting nervously with the fingers she'd clasped tightly in front of her, she did not return his smile — in fact, he didn't think she even saw it, because she didn't look at his face again. “I — I —” he saw her swallow hard, then straighten herself staunchly to finish her sentence. “I know the owner of a repair shop that would be glad to lend you a jack and whatever other assistance you need.”

Kit tipped his hat to her, then wrapped his arm around his wife, distracting the girl from Dom for a moment. He'd leaned forward and held out his hand. “My name is Kit Jackson, and this is my wife, Mary. We're sure obliged to you for the help, Ma'am.” The young woman shook hands rather hesitantly with the couple, and Dom frowned at this, wondering why — granted, Kit was almost as big as he was, but he looked affable enough in his suit, and Mary looked entirely innocuous and was very elegantly dressed.

“I'm Bridget Sullivan,” she responded quietly, pumping each offered hand.

A quick glance at a slim, empty ring finger calmed an uneasiness inside him he'd never felt before. “Miss Sullivan,” Dom began as he gestured to Mario, who was leaning negligently against the car. “This is Mario Cioffi, my chauffeur. And I'm Domenic Martinelli.” Dom extended his hand to her, and she took it with equal reluctance. Instead of a usual handshake, though, he turned his wrist just slightly to bring the back of her hand to his lips, releasing his captive slowly and only after her eyes darted up to his for a second as he smiled warmly. “Allow me to add my own thanks to Kit and Mary's. We appreciate that you took the time to stop.”

Looking anywhere but at him, it seemed, she'd answered

in her musical, lilting tone, “Y-you’re welcome, Sir.” Bridget took a step back from the small circle they’d formed. “Why don’t we get going and then you can be on your way?” She turned to walk back to her truck, leaving the decision of who would join her to them.

“I’ll go boss –” Mario volunteered, eagerly abandoning his post holding up the car for a chance to charm his way under that tasty-looking little priss’s skirts. He’d bet she was a hot one!

Dom ground his teeth, almost reading Mario’s thoughts, and waylaid the eager young stud by placing a heavy hand on his shoulder as he shot past him. “I’ll go.”

With a gentle hand at her slight back, Dom escorted Bridget back to the disreputable truck – which he thought to himself with a grimace must have been an original Model T held together by rust and rubber bands. He opened the passenger’s side door for her, offering a hand up that was quietly ignored, and closed it behind her, then climbed in on the driver’s side. The old clunker rumbled to life, the sheer volume of its asthmatic engine discouraging conversation, but Dom was the persistent sort.

“Do you live near here?” he asked casually, turning to watch her as he drove.

Now that they were alone in the intimate confines of the truck cab, she seemed even more nervous and fidgety than before, and it was obvious that she did not appreciate his high-handedness in driving her truck. “Yes, Sir, I live just outside of Scarborough –”

Dom smiled, hoping to put her at ease; he wasn’t used to women reacting so strangely around him. Despite his dark looks and serious demeanor, he thought that most women found him fairly approachable. Apparently that was not so for Miss Sullivan. “Call me, Dom, please. When you say ‘Sir’ I think you’re talking to my father.”

A small smile played about her lips – and beautiful full, bowed lips they were, too, completely devoid of lipstick. In fact, looking at her flawlessly creamy complexion, Dom realized that she wasn't wearing any makeup at all. Nor was there a cloying cloud of overpowering perfume surrounding her. Instead, all he could smell was sunshine and fresh air. Her rusty hair was long and loose and waved almost down to an enticingly rounded bottom. Dom felt his fingers begin to itch, wanting to bury them in that warm curtain right up against her skull as he bent her head back and brought his lips down –

He had to adjust his position slightly at the thought. Dom turned away from her, noting that she seemed more at ease when he wasn't concentrating all his attention on her.

“Then you must call me Bridget.”

“Well, Bridget, what do you do for a living?”

“I'm an assistant librarian for the county public library.”

“Like books, do you?”

She smiled. Dom was glad to see that she was definitely relaxing. “I would hope so! Do you read, Mr.?” He raised an eyebrow at her, and she blushed and corrected, “ - Dom?”

“I don't get as much time to read as I would like, but, yes, I do – mostly the classics, and of course the newspaper. My work keeps me pretty busy.”

“I would imagine so,” she murmured, a wealth of understanding in just that phrase.

Dom frowned, concerned that she was aware of his unsavory reputation. “I own and run a trucking company.”

Bridget turned and met his eyes, saying absolutely nothing for the longest moment. Then her gaze returned to the road. “Okay.”

They were silent for a little while longer, and Dom knew that they were nearing the small town. His chances to see her again were dwindling before his eyes. “I come through here fairly often on the way to my house. I'd love to take you out to

dinner some time.” Since she was hardly his type, his interest and his offer surprised him a little.

“No, thank you,” she answered quietly, deterring any argument about her response by pointing out the turn into a small gas station with several car bays that advertised itself as Eddie’s Garage.

“It looks closed,” Dom commented, circling the front of the truck to help her out, but she’d already crossed the parking lot and was banging on a well-hidden door.

“Eddie? It’s Bridget – can you come down, please?” She turned to explain, “Eddie is the mechanic. He lives upstairs.”

Sure enough, a light came on in the front window of the top floor of the squat little building, and soon Eddie appeared in all of his grease-stained glory, hugging Bridget like a long lost friend and setting Dom’s teeth on edge as he made free with his hands, holding her entirely too close, grabbing her hands in his dirty, chubby ones and practically jumping for joy.

It was then that Dom realized that something was not quite right with Eddie. He never said a word through the whole conversation, and Dom gathered that it was not a skill he possessed.

“We need to borrow a crow bar – or rather he does,” Bridget said, nodding towards Dom.

When Eddie realized that she was with someone, maybe when he realized that she was with a man, Dom didn’t know, but Eddie immediately pushed Bridget behind him, taking up a protective stance with his fists up that almost made Dom smile at the improbability of the slight, overweight man taking him on. But he appeared to be quite willing to do so, for Bridget.

Interesting. Dom filed this bit of information away for further investigation.

Bridget, meanwhile, had skirted around in front of Eddie,

agitating the poor guy to no end. “No, no, no, there’s no need for that. His limousine blew a tire. Do you have a crowbar for a tire jack, Eddie? I’ll bring it right back.”

Eddie seemed to have to consider his answer quite carefully; Dom wasn’t sure if that was because of his impairment or because the man wasn’t certain whether he wanted to lend Dom anything. Finally, after a little cajoling by Bridget and promises of visits by someone named Bobby – which made Dom’s senses perk - as well as dinner at some indeterminate time, they were able to leave with the jack in hand.

Dom watched Eddie bid Bridget an almost tearful farewell. When they were on their way back to the limo, he asked quietly, “Eddie doesn’t speak?”

Bridget sighed, but took up for her long-time friend as she always did. “No, he doesn’t. But he can fix anything with a motor in it – anything,” she defended fiercely. “He’s slow and doesn’t have ‘book smarts’, but he’s sweet as can be; once he likes you he’ll do anything for you.”

All of that passion in defense of a friend. Dom shook his head. He wasn’t about to cast aspersions at Eddie, and Bridget was fairly bristling at the idea that he might. It was just the opposite, in fact. “Quite a feat for him to own and run a business, then. I admire that.”

She relaxed visibly since he hadn’t attacked Eddie’s shortcomings. “Everybody looks after him a little – he eats with us a lot, and Bobby does his books, Mom sews his uniforms and does – did – his laundry. He grew up next to me in town and got a job at the garage when he was about thirteen. At first all Mr. Pelky would let him do was sweep the floors, but then, when he saw how good Ed was with an engine . . . well, the rest is history.”

Dom seized on the wealth of personal information she’d revealed. “You live with your Mother, then?”

She seemed to hesitate before answering that question, but finally said, “Yes, Mom and Bobby, my brother.”

He heaved a quiet sigh of relief that he didn’t want to explore too closely. “I live with my Mom, too.”

Of all the possible reactions, her high-pitched giggle was the least expected, somehow. It made him turn and consider her carefully as the enchanting sound washed over him. Her nose got a little red, and she snorted a bit, but her genuine amusement pleased him. Dom leaned over a little closer to her and teased with a playful growl, “It’s not nice to laugh at people, you know . . .”

Unsuccessfully trying to stifle more giggles, Bridget put her hand over her mouth, mumbling through it, “Yes, but, *you* live with your *Mother?*”

Dom relaxed back a little away from her, but not much. “What’s so funny about that, Miss Sullivan?” he asked, with mock anger.

She sidled a glance at him with a wry smile and a snort. “You are just about as far from a Mama’s boy as I could *ever* imagine!”

He adopted a pained expression, and she laughed more. “Thank you, I think . . .”

“You’re entirely welcome,” Bridget replied with grave seriousness that was belied by the occasional giggle that escaped through her firmly pressed lips.

They were nearing the place where the others waited when Dom asked offhandedly, “Are you seeing anyone, Bridget?”

After he pulled in just past the limo, she turned to look him straight in the eye, one of the few times she’d done that since they’d met, answering smartly, “That is none of your business, Domenic Martinelli.” Although she was obviously not a native speaker, she gave his name the correct Italian inflections.

Dom reached over and held the point of her chin in his fingers, applying careful pressure. “I wouldn’t be too sure about that, Bridget Sullivan.” He got out of the truck and Bridget scooted over behind the wheel as he stood next to the driver’s side window. Dom fished in his back pocket for his wallet, saying, “We really appreciate how you’ve gone out of your way for us like this. I’d like to give you a more tangible token of my gratitude –” Dom was just about to give her all of the cash he had on him – almost five hundred dollars.

With the wad money in his hand as he leaned towards the window, Dom was amazed when he heard her say angrily as she laid rubber driving away from him – “Keep it.”

So much for ethereal delicacy.

When they were finally on their way again, Mary echoed his thoughts exactly, murmuring that someone ought to do something nice for Bridget, and Dom made it known in no uncertain terms that he would be doing exactly that.