

Chapter One: Dante

I was about to confront my father.

Confront wasn't exactly the right word; this was more like a pitch. But it still made me feel sick to my stomach. Enzo Moretti didn't love change and I'd already disappointed him enough by not doing exactly what he asked of me. It wasn't that I was unable to find a way and settle down—it was just that there were so many other things to do beyond bribery and money-laundering.

I knew our operation could be so much bigger...if only he would listen to me.

I stood in the heart of power, the Moretti study—a sanctuary of dark woods and history etched into every piece of furniture. The walls were lined with memories, each one whispering tales of dominance and ruthlessness. I felt their eyes on me, the silent witnesses to our family's legacy, as I dared to disturb the stillness with my proposition.

My father's fingers were interlaced in front of his face, his eyes dark behind his reading glasses. "I don't know about this," he mumbled.

"Dad, please. Biotech is the future," I insisted, the leather of the chair beneath my hands groaning as I leaned forward. My fingers danced in the air, tracing the outline of an empire rejuvenated by science. My gaze darted around the room, landing on a dusty DNA helix model tucked away on a shelf behind a stack of ledgers.

I picked it up, turning it over in my hands, trying to ground myself with the feeling of the cold metal on my fingertips.

My dad sighed.

"With this, we can mend bone and flesh in hours, not days. We gain the upper hand, no longer just survivors but reigning sovereigns on a battlefield that's evolving daily. Think about it...We might not even have to pay doctors. We might not have to worry about which hospital to go to. I know it sounds like crazy scifi stuff, but beyond practical applications for our op, what about selling this technology to the highest bidder? Presidents, leaders—we'd be rich beyond measure."

Enzo sat across from me, his figure a shadow against the waning light filtering through the window. His face was stoic, chiseled from the same stone as the men who came before him, unyielding and cold.

"Your head's in the clouds, Dante." His voice was a low rumble, a warning bell tolling in the late afternoon quiet of our Little Italy stronghold. "You speak of playing God, but forget the devil we know best. Our strength lies not in meddling with nature but in the bonds of loyalty and fear we cultivate. People give us money to protect them, Dante. They do that for a reason."

"Father, those bonds break, flesh tears. This...this is control like we've never had." My words spilled out, hot and fast, contrasting his measured tone. "We'd be untouchable."

"Or exposed," he countered, his gaze sharp as a knife's edge. "Every new venture comes with risks. And this miracle healing thing? It puts a spotlight on us when we should be melting into the shadows."

"Then let's be the ones holding the spotlight," I shot back, my heart hammering against my chest in a rhythm I couldn't silence. "Let others cower in our light."

Enzo's eyes, the color of storm clouds over the city, narrowed slightly. He considered me, his eldest son, as if I were a puzzle he'd yet to solve—a piece that didn't quite fit the family portrait.

"Passion blinds you, Dante," he said at last. "It makes you easy prey for those waiting for us to falter."

"Or it's the very thing that will ensure we don't," I replied.

My father leaned back, his hands stilling in front of his face. "I wish you'd drop this," he said. "Stop sleeping around with whichever slut falls in your bed and find a nice Italian girl to marry. Why can't you do that?"

"Suitable brides are not the mortar that will fortify our empire, Father," I said, my voice steady despite the unease brewing within me. Enzo's suggestion had struck a chord, one that resonated with defiance. The room seemed to shrink around us, the air thick with the weight of unspoken truths.

"Family alliances have always been our way, Dante. You would do well to remember that," he replied, his tone suggesting that this was more command than counsel.

My fingers inadvertently traced the spine of an old ledger on his desk, the leather cracked and worn like the traditions he clung to. "I haven't forgotten," I murmured, almost to myself as much as to him. Then, almost unconsciously, my hand found the DNA helix model that I'd put down just a second ago—a symbol of possibility. I twisted it slowly, feeling each metal rung turn beneath my fingertips.

"Science is not our world," my father's voice broke through my thoughts, a low growl that spoke of a time when might ruled and questions were quelled with force. His eyes flicked to the helix in my hand, and his disapproval was palpable.

"Times change. We have to adapt or be left behind," I countered, setting the helix down with a resolve that mirrored the steel in my voice. "Our empire was built on discretion and brute strength, yes. But we live in an age where intelligence can be just as deadly."

Enzo met my gaze, his skepticism a fortress wall I had yet to breach. There was a chasm between us, widening with every word, every idea that strayed from the path he had trodden for so long.

"Your ideas are dangerous, son," he warned, though I could hear the undercurrent of fear in his voice.

"Only to those who fail to see their potential," I shot back, unwilling to let his doubt become mine.

"Then prove it," Enzo challenged, his voice a gravelly test of my convictions. "Show me how this 'new world' business can strengthen the Morettis without betraying what we stand for."

I inhaled deeply, the weight of legacy pressing down on me. My reply came not as an eager son but as a man ready to lead. "I will. I'll bring us into the future, even if I have to drag us there kicking and screaming."

"And if you don't?" The Don's words hung heavy in the air between us.

"Then I'll do as you say," I conceded with a reluctant nod. "I'm nearly thirty; I'll choose a wife." The prospect loomed over me, yet another chain to bind me to tradition.

Enzo nodded, satisfied with the hedge he'd built around my ambition. But our standoff had only just begun. The old grandfather clock in the corner ticked away the time, each beat a heavy footstep marching toward an uncertain future.

"As you know, my concern is that biotech sounds like a beacon that'll draw unwanted eyes to our operations," Enzo said, his voice carrying the weariness of battles fought in shadows.

"Perhaps," I allowed, standing up to pace slowly before the vast expanse of his desk. "Or perhaps it's a shield that mends our wounds faster than our enemies can inflict them."

My frustration grew, a thorny vine wrapping around my resolve. How could I make him see that standing still was no longer an option?

"I'm serious, Dad. This could change everything."

His silence stretched out, suffocating, his gaze holding mine. His eyes, once the sharp edge of a blade, now looked like they carried the weight of all the years he'd been at war – with other families, with the law, and perhaps with the relentless march of time itself.

"Fine," he said finally, his voice low, "give me the details."

I leaned forward, bracing my hands on the polished mahogany that had borne witness to countless Moretti decisions. "It's simple. We start small, an off-the-books

project with minimal investment. If it doesn't pay off, we cut our losses—minimal damage to the family."

Enzo's eyes narrowed, considering. "And if you're wrong?"

"I'm not," I replied, my confidence unwavering. "But if I am, you'll have your scapegoat."

A muscle ticked in his jaw, the only sign of his internal struggle. I pressed on before doubt could poison the ground I'd gained. "Think of the advantages, Father. We're not just talking about patching up after a fight quicker. Biotech might be able to enhance our men, I don't know. I do know that it'll make us rich beyond measure."

The air turned thick as my words settled around us, mingling with the scent of old books that lined the walls. The very essence of power and possibility seemed to seep into the room, wrapping its tendrils around Enzo's old-world caution.

"I don't know," he said. "How can you make sure this op is discreet?"

I had to use the ace up my sleeve.

"Arturo Caruso would love nothing more than to see us falter," I said, my voice steady but edged with urgency. His eyes met mine, a silent battle waged in the space between us. "He's a shark smelling blood in the water. If we don't evolve, he'll tear us apart." The truth of my words hung heavy in the room as I watched my father process the gravity of the situation.

Enzo's features hardened, the lines on his face deepening with the weight of decades spent defending our name. "The Carusos have always been vultures waiting for scraps," he spat, his distaste for our rivals clear as day.

"Then let's not give them the satisfaction," I countered, pressing the advantage. "We can't let our guard down now. Not when there's so much at stake."

I could almost hear the cogs turning in Enzo's head as he mulled over my proposition. His next move was critical; it would shape the future of our family and either cement our legacy or herald its decline.

"Other families are adapting, embracing the new ways," I continued, sensing the moment to drive my point home. "They're pulling ahead while we cling to old methods. We need to innovate, or we'll be left in their dust."

Enzo's gaze remained fixed on me, searching for the conviction behind my words. He seemed to be weighing every possible outcome, every risk and reward. Then, slowly, the edges of his mouth twitched—a reluctant acceptance that change was inevitable.

He was silent for a long time, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Proceed with this trial. But Dante," he said, his voice heavy with a warning, "don't forget who we are. Don't forget the blood that runs through your veins."

"Understood," I said, straightening up.

"And son? If you fuck this up, you won't just need to find a new wife," he said. "You'll have to find a new job, a new place to live. I've given you enough chances, Dante. It's time for you to step the fuck up. Now get out of my office before I change my mind."