

## CHAPTER

# 1

“SEE THAT?” TOMMY BURNS asked Johnny Mauro.

They were having coffee in a diner on Park Avenue South across from Union Square Park. Burns pointed at a middle-aged couple arguing outside. The woman flailed her hands in an angry fit. The man pulled up the collar of his short leather jacket and turned his back to a strong gust of wind. When he turned around again, the woman was right there waving a finger in his face. Burns shook his head at the sight.

“You see that more’n more these days, guys catching it on the street like that,” he said. “I see it every day driving the car. It’s the way of the modern world.”

Burns was a short, thin man somewhere in his fifties. He had gray hair and piercing blue eyes. He was dressed in a wrinkled gray sports jacket over a black turtleneck. His hat and gloves lay on the table to one side.

“I imagine you see a lot, driving,” Mauro said. He was still watching the couple. When they disappeared inside a taxi, Mauro sniffled, then sipped his coffee. “How’s that going?” he asked.

“Serves the purpose,” Burns said before sipping his tea laced with milk. “I didn’t have a hook, it’d be another story. These camel jockeys all over the place now. You should see the looks on some of the people, they get in my car. Relieved I’m not wearing my laundry on my head or wearing a robe. At least I get requested a lot more now’n I used to.”

Mauro was thirty-nine, average height and weight. He had a thick head of black hair and dark brown eyes. He was glancing out the

window again and spoke without turning to Burns. "And they fight in the cars, the women yelling at the men?"

"Airport runs mostly," Burns said. "On the way to vacation or a business trip or whatever. They're on edge or it's that time of the month. I had this one couple last week, I picked them up from a luxury building on the East Side, near the tunnel there, and the woman is giving it to the poor SOB from the second they're in the car to I drop them off at Continental in Kennedy. How the guy didn't shove her in fronna a bus, I don't know."

Mauro smiled. "You ever get married?"

"Never once," Burns said. "I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer but I do know when I don't belong. The civil service or a wife, either way, forget about it, not for me. I couldn't take orders from the nuns when I was a kid and I can't take them now. Uh-uh, no, thank you."

A waitress brought both men toasted muffins. Burns scraped jelly from a packet onto half of his muffin. Mauro used butter.

"I just come back and I still got no interest in it, getting married," Mauro said. "Not after this last stretch."

Burns stopped to ask, "What was it, two years?"

"Twenty-eight months," Mauro said. He bit into his muffin and chewed a few seconds. He spoke with his mouth full. "Twenty-eight months, two weeks, three days. And the last thing I wanted, I got out, was a piece of tail. Believe it or not."

"To each his own."

"I was with my girlfriend the night before I surrendered and don't you know it, she's giving me shit the entire time I don't shove something in her mouth," Mauro said. He waved the thought off. "I couldn't wait to go away."

"Still? I mean, since you're out. Nothing?"

"Last night before I go see our friend. I grabbed some kid off the streets. Twenty bucks. No muss, no fuss. It's all I need these days. I give the broad I used to see a try but she's busy, what she says."

Burns was washing down some muffin with his tea. "I hear you. I'm right with you, it comes to that, paying for it. I got me a regular works out the Tavern on Glenwood Road, not far from where you're