

Boss Lady

Stephanie Mariani

CONSOLINA SIPPED ON the bourbon Giuliano had poured her. Their meetings were becoming more frequent now that things were firmly in motion. She never told anyone about the visits and appreciated Giuliano's discrepancy. It was a cool day in Mildura and she'd only just arrived. This time, she'd gone by small aircraft and hoped to be back in Melbourne by the time the sun went down. She needed some advice which couldn't be discussed over the phone.

'I'll pour you another?' The sound of Giuliano's voice startled her.

She looked down at her empty glass, oblivious to the fact she'd finished her drink. 'No. Not yet.'

The house was empty today except for the staff who sporadically entered, bringing plates of food—first prosciutto and provolone cheese, then plates of polenta and sausages. When her belly was full of food, she felt at ease. 'I need your help. I guess that's why I'm back here again.'

'Never apologise for coming and asking for help. Even the best of us need advice.'

'You're very good at reassuring me. I guess that's why I keep visiting.' She thought about Carl, Giuliano's personal doctor, and hoped he'd have been there today, but when she called Giuliano and said it was private, he sent all his people away. Carl would often enter her mind, usually at the most unplanned times and for the most bizarre reasons.

'Tell me how to do it?'

Giuliano had his gaze towards the window. It took him a few moments to turn around and when he eventually faced Consolina his

lips were pursed and his eyes were squinting. 'This isn't your first time, I gather?'

Consolina looked at the floor. 'No, it isn't. But the stakes are different now and I'm a little rusty.'

Giuliano stood up and walked over to the mantel piece which was covered in antique vases and statues of Mary and the baby Jesus. He leaned against the stone with his elbow for a few moments then said, 'Explain to me your reasons again.'

Consolina took a deep breath. 'He disrespected me.'

'That isn't enough.'

'But that used to be enough.'

Consolina felt her face burning and her mind began ticking like a movie reel, filtering all the possible reasons as to why Nick Anderson should be eliminated. She needed to do something to prove to the others she was meant to be the boss. That she should be on top and that nothing the men did she couldn't. She had entered a world where the men ruled and the women were merely housewives. How was she supposed to compete if she didn't do as her peers?

'You know how hard this is for me. There are people talking on the outside, saying I'm not fit for this job. I've got men who should be listening to my word laughing at me.'

'Consolina, don't be concerned with meaningless chatter. You are the boss of the Graziano Family and nothing and nobody is going to change that.'

Consolina placed a spoonful of polenta in her mouth. Despite Giuliano's words, she still felt inadequate and until she proved herself, she couldn't relax. Her stomach was in knots and if Giuliano couldn't give her an answer soon, she'd have to find an alternative. 'What would you do?'

'Lina, you still haven't given me a good enough reason as to why this man should be dead. You know how much I detest innocent killing. I don't see how I can give you my blessing.'

Consolina was confused by his choice of words. And then it came to her. Nick Anderson was trying to defraud her when he used his own men on the building site Consolina owned. Yes, he was trying to make Consolina look like the fool. 'He is using my money for his own personal expenses.'

'And you have proof this is happening?'

'Yes, bank statements,' she lied.

‘I’ll need to see them.’

Consolina was becoming frustrated with Giuliano’s nagging. ‘What is the difference?’

‘Lina, can’t you see you are not thinking rationally? You simply cannot go ahead with this.’

She turned away from him and went to stand on the opposite side of the room. As she played with the curtain, she thought about the time her father had committed his first crime as a family man. She had seen him, sitting in the laundry, washing the blood from his hands. He had scrubbed his hands so hard, soon his own blood was filling the trough. She wasn’t at all sure why that memory had crossed her mind, but the point was this: the more he did it, the more he got used to it. Of course, she didn’t ever want to get used to this, she just wanted to feel as though she could measure up to her male counterparts. And naturally, she would have someone else commit the act because that was the way she did things. Giuliano began coughing and Consolina turned around to face him. His face was pink and he was gasping for air. She reached for a glass of water but he refused, choosing to sit down instead. He wiped his glistening brow with a white handkerchief he had in his pocket. ‘Do you need me to call Carl?’ Consolina sat down next to him. He shook his head and put the handkerchief back.

‘I’m eighty-seven-years-old. I cough like that all the time. I will be fine in a few moments. No need to call the doctor.’

They sat in silence for some time while Giuliano regained his breath. She placed her hand on his and squeezed it. The very first time she met Giuliano, she was ten-years-old. He was peeling the skin from fava beans with her grandmother. It had been an unusually hot spring afternoon and Giuliano and her grandmother were sitting beneath a fig tree, surrounded by long green bean shells. As they peeled the beans, they tossed the shells on the floor and the beans into a round plastic bucket. Her grandmother had called her over, ‘*Viene a consocere questo uomo*, come and meet this man.’ She remembered staring at the red feather tucked inside the rim of his white fedora hat. He put his hand out to shake hers and squeezed it as he held it. She felt an instant connection to him and knew he was going to be someone she could confide in.

‘Okay, I understand you wish for an answer from me. I’m sorry but I cannot agree to this. Consolina, you are like a daughter to me and I am not comfortable with you doing whatever it is you so wish.’

Consolina stood up. ‘What if I told you I have someone in mind for the job?’

‘You know, you remind me very much of your Uncle Marino when you speak like that. He was always looking for the easy way out. Please think of your father. He would never want you doing this.’

Consolina could feel her heart beating through her chest. ‘I thought you granted this for me?’

‘Being the boss of a Family doesn’t entitle you to pull the trigger for no reason. Come back to me when you have evidence and proof.’ With that, Giuliano got up and left Consolina with cold meats, cheese and the smell of bourbon.

Consolina looked out from her balcony window and watched Rocco, the hitman she’d hired, get into his car and pull it away from the curb. She had instructed him to do the very deed Giuliano had warned against, yet, as the blue vehicle quickly became a tiny spec the further it travelled down the street, the old man’s voice echoed through her mind. The message needed to be clear. She was Consolina Benvenuto and Nick Anderson had disrespected her. When Henry Thomas had called her father a *stupid wog* in front of a group of grocery shoppers at the Brunswick market, the man had mysteriously disappeared, only to return washed up along the banks of Coburg Lake, his lips sewn together with fishing wire. From that day, her father had made a noise and everyone heard it. Now it was her turn to sound a tune.

Consolina saw Rocco a few weeks later. She nodded to him as though he were a polite stranger as she passed him along Swanston Street. He would receive his payment within the next few days and soon enough, the men who ruled the streets, the building sites and the gambling houses would see Consolina as their colleague, not as their competitor. In the weeks that passed, she went back to visit Giuliano.

‘You are your father’s daughter,’ he said.

Consolina smiled and wrapped a slice of prosciutto around some cantaloupe. ‘And nobody will ever forget.’