

COSA NOSTRA by Emma Nichols



Chapter 1

Maria Lombardo entered her parent's villa and inhaled the aroma. Warmth spread through her as she sighed deeply. Her mother never failed to put a smile on her face with the feast she cooked. She removed her jacket and the Smith and Wesson 637 Magnum holstered at her side. She placed the weapon carefully on the sideboard next to her mother's Beretta .357 Magnum. The difference in their choice of weapon mirrored their life choices. Her mother's sense of cultural loyalty had drawn her to the traditional looking Italian manufactured gun with its long nose, whilst Maria preferred the smaller snub-nose weapon that she could easily conceal and forget she was wearing. She sighed. *Maybe someday I won't have to carry the damn thing at all?* She followed her roused senses. As she entered the kitchen, her smile broadened. Her stomach rumbled as she moved closer to the source of the aroma. "That smells so good."

Her mother turned and smiled as she continued to stir the lightly bubbling liquid. "You're early, *tesoro*."

"I missed you, *Matri*."

Her mother waved her hand in the air. "Pah! You lie too convincingly." She chuckled. "Anyway, what are you looking so happy for?"

"It's been a good day." Maria had spent the afternoon reaffirming her commitment to create a future outside the business, beyond the shores of Sicily where she could be with a woman without retribution, but now wasn't the time and place to have that discussion. And she would rather her father was present to help her mother to understand.

"Don't tell me, you found a nice young man to settle down with? Make a family?"

Maria smiled. It was a question her mother asked frequently, and one she always answered in the same way. "Matri, you know that's never going to happen."

Her mother mumbled in Sicilian as she stirred the pot. "You find a good girl?"

She smiled. Her mother's disappointment with her life choices always paled. Love had that kind of power. If only... "No *good girl* wants to be associated with the business, Matri."

COSA NOSTRA by Emma Nichols

The reality of her life and the tricky situation with Patrina that was about to become more complicated brought a wave of sadness that washed over her. Patrina certainly wasn't a good girl. Not even close.

Her mother's head snapped up, a mild look of indignation present before it gave way to a tender smile.

She reached up and stroked Maria's face. "Your matri was one of the good girls, tesoro. You remember that. And your father, he is a good man too."

Maria smiled and kissed her mother on the cheek. She did know that. "You are the best, Matri."

Her mother went back to the stove. "Catena will be late."

Maria shrugged. "She's always late." She had learned to live with her sister's irritating inability to keep to a timescale or a schedule of any kind. Vittorio, her husband, was another matter. She couldn't tolerate her brother-in-law's tardiness. Actually, there was a lot she couldn't tolerate about him, not least the fact that he was stupid. She tilted her head and stretched out the tension that his name created. A lack of attention to detail got those you love killed in this business, and he certainly demonstrated that particular trait a little too regularly for her liking. But Catena loved him, and she loved Catena, so she bit her lip at her sister's choice of husband and pushed her distrust of him to the back of her mind.

She kissed the top of her mother's head, leant over the pot, and dipped her finger. The taste of oregano, sweet onions, and freshly made tomato sauce caused her stomach to growl, and she closed her eyes. "That tastes good."

"You always say this, tesoro. This's why you come to your matri."

She stroked and patted Maria's cheek. The fragility and affection in her mother's touch stabbed her in the chest, triggering the emptiness she knew would one day reside there. *I love you, Matri.* She kissed her mother's flushed cheeks. "You will always make the best pasta, Matri," she whispered.

Her mother inched away from Maria, her discomfort at the affectionate gesture apparent in the stiffening of her posture, and she shifted back to the bubbling sauce.

"Now, I cook. You are in the way."

Maria chuckled at the abruptness in her mother's tone that only partly obscured the depth of her feelings. Her mother was never one for overt displays of emotion, but no matter how hard she tried to suppress her affection, Maria never doubted her love. She knew what it was like to live behind a mask, to deny those you loved to protect them, to protect herself from an inevitable broken heart.

A knock at the door distracted her. Her mother looked at her with a quizzical gaze. They weren't expecting company and unannounced visits often meant trouble. "I'll get that."

"There is plenty food for more guests."

Maria laughed as she went to the door. Her family didn't get their reputation for being the best hosts in Palermo without it having been earned, but tonight was a family only affair.

She opened the door and locked eyes with Capitano Rocca Massina. The intensity in the officer's eyes, her thin lips set in a tight jaw, and the fine lines carved around a concerned expression caused Maria's heart to pound. The Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA) never visited their home without an invitation and not at this time of the evening, and the capitano certainly wasn't on the guestlist for their private family dinner. She swallowed, her chest constricting with increasingly shallow breaths. "Capitano Rocca, what can I do for you?"

Rocca stared across the shallow threshold. She lifted her arm, seemed to hesitate, and then lowered it to her side again. She broke eye contact and inhaled deeply. She didn't smile.

COSA NOSTRA by Emma Nichols

“Maria. I am sorry to disturb your evening. I need to speak with Lady Lombardo...and you.”

Maria’s heart thundered, and a sudden rush of weakness left her feeling exposed. She glanced at the weapon she had discarded earlier, hoping the news wasn’t going to incite her to have to use it, then gave Rocca her attention. “Please, come in.”

Rocca followed Maria into the kitchen.

“Matri, it’s Capitano Massina to see...us.”

“Good evening, Lady Lombardo,” Rocca said, bowing her head as she addressed her.

Her mother smiled, though her eyes didn’t. “Capitano, good evening.”

Maria recognized the lack of inviting resonance in her mother’s voice.

“Lady Lombardo. Maria. I have bad news. I am sorry to tell you, but Don Calvino was killed in a traffic accident...earlier this evening.”

No! No! No! The screams in Maria’s head became one with her mother’s gasping sobs and then faded behind her spiralling thoughts. Calmness slowed her, and her focus narrowed. “You must be mistaken, capitano,” she said evenly. She kept her posture neutral, giving nothing away, while the torturous assault ripped her heart to shreds with teeth of diamonds, then gnawed at the pulsing flesh until her senses became silent. Numbness quickly consumed her.

Rocca looked at Maria, her head at a slight angle. “I’m sorry, Maria. There is no mistake.”

“What happened? How? Where?” her mother asked.

Maria ran her fingers tight to her scalp then clenched her fist around her hair, pulling the roots.

Her mother clasped the kitchen surface, mumbling prayers as she made the sign of a cross against her chest. With an imploring look at Maria, shaking her head back and forth, tears fell onto her cheeks.

Maria pulled her mother into her arms and held her tightly to her chest. “It’s okay, Matri. It’s okay,” she whispered. The words rang hollow. *It wasn’t okay.* Her shirt became wet, and her mother’s frail body shook in her arms.

“Our understanding is that this was an accident. The car swerved and collided with a lorry about two miles from here, along the beach road.”

Maria shook her head. “I need to see my father.”

Rocca averted her gaze, hesitated, and then cleared her throat. “I would not recommend that. The car caught fire instantly, and because of a road block it took longer for the emergency services to arrive at the scene. The body...your father...he is not what he was. Of course, if you wish to see him it is your right to do so.”

Her mother choked. “Did he...feel anything?”

Rocca shook her head. “No. It was instant.” She reached into her pocket and held out a ring. “I believe this is Don Lombardo’s?”

Her mother clasped her hand to her mouth, stifling her moans. She lifted the ring with trembling fingers and stared vacantly at the familiar crest, scorched and misshapen by the heat it had been subjected to.

Maria stared at the gold ring, the symbol that now marked her father’s death. Slowly, she closed her eyes. Jumbled images and competing thoughts flashed into her awareness, none of which could be made sense of. Everything she had dreamed of became dark and distant; her plans, her future slipping away into a void. She couldn’t grasp them. They were gone. And in that moment, it was as if she too had died. She stared at her mother.

“I am so sorry for your loss.” Rocca bowed her head to the two women and turned away.

COSA NOSTRA by Emma Nichols

Maria followed Rocca to the door.

Rocca turned and placed her hand on Maria's arm. "If there is anything you need, Maria, please call me."

Ice chased the length of Maria's spine and she shivered. She shook her head, her thoughts with her mother, her sister, their life without her father. The weight in her chest became dull and dense. "Thank you, Rocca."

She walked into the kitchen and held her mother's stiff body in her arms.

"Oh, no, tesoro. Tell me this is not happening. Please?"

She shook her head and stared into her mother's pleading eyes. No words could change the facts or turn back the clock and start the day again. But for a different decision, the door would be opening now, and her father would walk in with a warm smile and a comforting hug. They would be dining together as planned, chatting, and laughing. Nothing could be done to soothe the rawness of the pain that tore her heart into shreds. "He's gone," she whispered.

Her mother took a deep breath and released it slowly. Then, it looked as if she had flicked a switch and the death of her father had been buried somewhere, anywhere, so that it didn't need to be accepted. She resembled Patrina when she had just ordered a hit. Focused. Intense. Dissociated. And then she saw regret in her mother's eyes.

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "You know what this means, tesoro?"

"Yes," Maria said.

"I am so sorry, tesoro. I know you didn't want this." Her mother leaned into Maria's chest. "You will be expected to lead at least until the election, Maria."

"Yes." *That's eight months away.* Anything could happen in eight months. She would make sure someone else could take over from her then. Giovanni was the obvious choice.

Her mother lifted her head and looked at Maria. "The men will want you to go for re-election, you know that. You are the Lombardo future, Maria."

Maria couldn't focus that far ahead. It would destroy her soul to accept that everything she had wished for was now lost. "I know." *I can't accept that. Please, Matri, stop talking to me. I love you, but please stop.*

Her mother stroked Maria's face. "Oh, tesoro, what will we do?"

Maria looked into her mother's red-rimmed eyes, tears spilling freely onto her puffy cheeks, and her own heart ached painfully. She would not cry. She could not cry. Consumed by emptiness, she had no words of reassurance that might console her mother. There was no comforting her own grief either. A sense of profound loss, beyond that which she had expected possible in the event of her father's death, released an unfamiliar emotion inside her. Anger. The title she had no desire to hold, *Donna* Maria, drove a chill through her so terrifyingly potent it rooted her to the spot. Her new role as CEO of the Lombardo construction business she had never wanted to run left her feeling hollow. Her role as boss of the mafia clan she had never wanted to lead made her heart race. She had been trained by her father, yes. But she'd never thought she would ever need to lead. She had always expected Giovanni would be elected, and that would have been with her blessing. He had been the son her father had never had, an older brother to her, but out of loyalty he would never stand against her. She would have to work hard to convince him to put himself forward. *Donna Maria Lombardo.* Who was she? Who would she become?

Find out in Cosa Nostra...

COSA NOSTRA by Emma Nichols



Will Maria choose loyalty to the Cosa Nostra or will she risk it all for love?

Get your e-book copy at getbook.at/cosanostra

Get your paperback copy at getbook.at/cosanostrapbk

Thanks for reading! I look forward to your reviews and feedback.

With love.

Emma x