

Her Guardian Don

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

Lily let herself into the kitchen, as the screen door slammed shut loudly behind her. She took a deep breath. Home smelled wonderful, as usual—garlic, onions—she thought there must be pasta sauce cooking, but she was wrong. "Patty? Mrs. Scalia?" she called, setting the overflowing bags of groceries down on the counter with a groan. She swore that her fingers had permanently cramped into that 'plastic-bag-handle,' claw-like position until she forced them open. "Patty?" she yelled again, sure her adoptive sister and best friend—who had called her to come over for dinner—was probably upstairs, applying makeup to her already flawless skin.

She heard footsteps and turned towards the sound, just as that deep, throaty voice floated to her ears. "They're not home."

Oh, God. It was he. Victor Scalia, six-foot-four, if he was an inch, full head of short, black hair, broadly muscled and strong as an ox. His dark good looks alone made multitudes of women—including Lily—want to swoon at his big, Italian leather shod feet.

Even those who knew who and what he was.

Hell, who and what he was attracted most women like flies to a half-eaten watermelon—but not Lily. Money, power—and more money and more power—was supposed to be an aphrodisiac. But more than he attracted her—much, much more—Scalia scared her—always had, more than she wanted to admit, especially to him.

Still, she loved him. The man who she saw around this house—the man who had been kind enough to take her in when a fire with a rival family had orphaned her—was smart and funny, witty and literate, even. He held both a bachelor's and a master's degree. Victor had assumed the mantle of head of the household as soon as his father died, and he seemed to wear it unconcernedly. He was one of those men who saw what needed doing and did it, quietly, efficiently, and without complaint. Family was of the utmost importance. He was a doting son and brother; his mother and the younger members of his immediate family already lived with him—his brother and sister. They had simply added Lily into that mix. His mother welcomed her with warm, loving arms and immediately became a surrogate to her, just as Patty became as close as any sister could be.

Victor had slipped into the role of mob boss just as easily. When his father died, there was no more question about who was going to run the business side of the family than there was about who was going to run the personal side. Trained by the best, at his father's knee, from the moment he was born, to take his position in life, and he was damned good at what he did.

Too good.

In his hands, the family fortunes had increased triple-fold. Everyone connected to his organization was making money hand over foot, and—thanks to his strong leadership—there was rarely any warfare among the prominent families. They were all too busy making money to kill each other. As long as no one got greedy, there was no reason for bloodletting. Oh, there was the occasional skirmish from young hot bloods, looking to make a name for themselves, but upper management frowned upon such flagrant displays, and those who appreciated the current peace and affluence easily squelched them.

Still, the truths of his chosen profession shone in the depths of his steely eyes. Looking into them made Lil shudder, so she had avoided him in general, at almost any cost from the beginning—even when she was ten. Today, instead of watching him, she began to put the

groceries away. But she knew, with a shiver, that his eyes followed her like a greedy wolf salivating at the sight of a rabbit.

The warm, loud, loving household—raucous though it could be at times—was such a difference from the small, shabby apartment she shared with her father. When she first came here, Lily had been a little intimidated by it all—she was an only child, living with her father and a live-in nanny. Her life had been very quiet and orderly until she joined the Scalia household. Their family gatherings left her speechlessly shy in the din.

Thankfully, Mama Scalia, who had a heart like a marshmallow, especially when she took one look at that thin, pale face, took Lil under her wing. She treated her with loving affection, just as if she were another daughter, although, for some reason, Lily could never bring herself to call her any form of Mother. She preferred, instead, to use the more formal, "Mrs. Scalia." Mama ignored that small snub, praising and scolding and cajoling and gently guiding the straggly little stray that she was, using only her tone of voice and two warm, strong arms to mold the little girl.

In relation to his siblings and their upbringing, however, Victor continued the tradition his father had started. The leather strap that his father had used on him still hung on the pantry wall, and he didn't spare its use on either Nicky or Patty—nor did he ever hesitate to dish out a hand spanking, when one was deserved for minor infractions such as sassing or bad language. Lily—whose bedroom was right next to Patty's—often couldn't help but hear her friend's cries as her brother lit into her for skipping school or staying out past curfew.

But he never once physically disciplined Lily.

Lily snapped out of her remembrances. Her voice was ultra-soft. "Thank you. She called and asked me to come over for dinner. She must've been on her cell. I'll leave when I'm done putting away the groceries. Please have Patty call me when she gets home, and I'll come back over."

Frowning, Victor raised an eyebrow at that cold suggestion—as if she were a stranger and hadn't grown up in his house. Hell, he wouldn't treat any of Patty's friends that way—make them go home and come back—much less a woman everyone considered to be a part of his family—except her. She was always so skittish around him—she always had been, since the moment she'd arrived in the household, standing there gripping Sal Matroni's hand like a lifeline, solemn little face accented by wide, sad eyes. Of course, he hadn't really known what to do with her, from the beginning. Lily's father had been one of his father's cappos. Arturo had married late in life, and his petite wife had died, bringing Lily into the world. The old man really hadn't known any better than Victor had what to do with the child, beyond engaging a nanny. So she seemed to have grown up quietly and alone, for the most part, and with very meager possessions. Victor guessed that his loud, boisterous, extended family, who sometimes got into what seemed like life or death arguments around the dinner table, must have seemed quite alien to her as a little girl.

But he had loved her—platonically—on sight. She was a small ten-year-old—almost eleven—very petite and ladylike and endearingly shy. Her cheeks were always blushing red about something, and that very delicacy made him feel extremely protective towards her.

Appalled at the fact that her only possessions seemed to be one small valise of clothes, Victor had made sure she had everything a little girl could want. Whatever Patty had, Lily got. A big, white Italian Provincial canopied bed and matching furniture and pretty pink, ruffled bedclothes, as well as plenty of stuffed animals and toys, and clothes enough to stock a children's boutique.

Although they got along famously and were extremely close to this day, Lily and Patty were two very different girls. Patty had grown up having everything handed to her—she had come to expect that she would receive her due, materialistically, one way or the other—from someone in the family—especially being the youngest and the only girl.

Lily had never had much. Even though her father had certainly done well, it was as if Arthur resented that his daughter had lived, when his beloved wife had died. Or, perhaps, he just couldn't bear spending money on her, because, as she grew, she began to remind him of his wife. Victor didn't know which of those theories was right, but his jaw clenched whenever he thought of how she had been living and with no good reason. Since adopting Lily into the family, his opinion of Arturo—which had been extremely favorable, based on his father's thoughts—had taken a radical turn. Victor heartily wished he had Arturo in front of him, one last time, so he could beat him to a pulp for how neglectfully he'd treated his daughter.

Unlike Patty, who always seemed to approach him with her hand out, Lily had never asked him for anything monetary or material. Ever. Since she and Patty were the same age, he'd given her the same allowance as Patty, the same curfew, the same bedtime. But Patty was always coming to him in his office, slipping in when she shouldn't have, to climb surreptitiously onto his lap for a cuddle in a none-too-subtle attempt to wheedle something out of him—more money, usually, so that she could buy clothes or records or candy. Lily never came to him unless she absolutely had to, usually because Mama didn't want to give permission for whatever it was and sent her to him. Even then, he had known—as she stood before him, staring at the ground and fidgeting like a naughty child when she had been nothing but perfect—that she wished she were anywhere but there at that moment. She never, ever, asked for money and was always home by curfew. The two or three times she hadn't been able to make curfew, she'd called and explained herself beforehand and asked permission to be late or explained why she was going to be. Patty would take her chances and come home in disgrace, knowing she was going to have an appointment with the strap either that night, if her brother was still up, or the next night. And he'd probably ground her, too.

Patty was a party girl—not a bad girl, but one who loved nothing more than to socialize. Lily was her opposite in that, too. She went out, never seriously with a boy, though, while Patty went through boys as if they were Kleenex. Generally, Lily preferred to read, more so than anything else. One could always find her with her nose in a book—any book that someone put down was fair game, as far as she was concerned. He had even noticed her picking up his business magazines when she was still a teenager and the occasional *Sports Illustrated* when she was desperate for something to read.

And if she wasn't in her room or some other hidey hole with one of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, then she was down at the stables, or lying on the grass staring up at the clouds, with a menagerie of dogs and cats all around her.

Although she adjusted to the family—its loud "discussions" and overly enthusiastic aunts and uncles and grandparents—she had always remained just a little aloof—a little removed from it all.

Most especially him.

If pressed, Victor mused, he would have to say that he didn't think she liked him very much, the exact opposite reaction he was used to experiencing from females in general. From the time he was a baby, every woman he knew fawned all over him, and as he grew, that immediate attraction grew, as well. When he was an adolescent, most women threw themselves at him, even those who were his mother's contemporaries. Now, the very young, the very old, and everyone in

between softened in some mysterious way upon seeing him or, at the very least, came to him with this favor and that, all the while offering him casual treats—usually food, but not uncommonly their bodies and selves. All of the women of his family sought him out, either platonically or with something else on their minds—his cappos' wives, his father's friends' widows...it seemed that someone of the female persuasion was always tugging at his sleeve for something.

But not Lily. And she could probably use a favor or two from him more so than anyone else, who never hesitated to ask one of him. That was probably what intrigued him most about her. As she'd grown—once she'd become an adult—his attraction to her had matured, also, and became that of a man for a woman. But Lily didn't seem to know he was alive and did her out and out best to be absolutely nothing but polite to him.

Which, of course, aggravated him to no end.

His jaw set as he looked down his not-inconsiderable nose at her. "You most certainly are not going to go home just because Patty is out right now. First of all, you are home, even though you never seem to want to accept that fact."

Lily flinched inwardly, but kept her face serene.

"And secondly, I don't bite."

But you do spank, came the snappy, thankfully, silent retort from the back of her mind. Lily closed her eyes tight, hoping to banish the errant thought. She didn't want to think of him spanking her. She didn't. Really. Truly. It was a bad, bad, bad thought...but one that occasionally reared its ugly head. Like now.

In the middle of a perfectly innocent conversation, she'd start to think of what it would be like if he did what she'd seen him do to Patty on occasion, when the other girl had sassed him. Patty had always had a bit of a mouth on her, and when she got fresh with Victor, he never hesitated—no matter who was around—to tug her over his lap.

Lily always behaved too perfectly to deserve that kind of punishment, of course. But that hadn't stopped her from fantasizing about it when she grew up enough to realize that it was just what she'd been missing, and that Victor Scalia was the perfect—but perfectly wrong—candidate to deliver it.

He'd tug gently on her arm, so as not to hurt her. Victor did not go in for gratuitous violence...at least as pertained to women, anyway. His lap would be warm and broad, but hard beneath her stomach, thanks to lots of tennis and a daily five-mile run. She knew that he would pull her further over his legs than she would normally lie, making sure that she was off balance and that her toes didn't touch the floor, forcing her to be that much more helpless during the spanking. He would catch her wrists with one of his big hands—firmly, but causing no pain. Then his free hand would lift her skirt, baring her pink panty-clad bottom and making every inch of her flesh flush hot and red...some more than others...

Would he take her panties down? No question, most especially if they were alone. He would always paddle her on the bare bottom, not wanting her to have any sort of protection from his efforts. At first, Victor would be looking at her creamy, round rear, and then his palm would cover it, patting gently as he spoke soothingly in that deep, sexy tone of his, telling her what she'd done wrong and that he loved her and that if he didn't love her, he wouldn't bother to spank her...

Then he would begin to swat her—and it would be horridly painful, she imagined, but at the same time wonderfully intimate...

"And it would be nice if you wouldn't treat me as if I had leprosy." Victor waited for her to respond—even just to nod her head. But she was just standing there, with a can of crushed tomatoes in her hand, staring off into space dreamily. It was completely unlike her, and Victor's brow furrowed in concern. "Lily?"

Lily's face flamed as she snapped out of it and realized where she was, what she was doing, and in front of whom. "Uh, yeah, I'm fine." Luckily, the pantry took her a ways away from him, to where she could give herself a mental shake to clear her head and straighten her back. God, if he ever—ever—found out about what she was just thinking...a delicate shudder ran through her.

"Did you hear a word I said?" he asked, leaning his pinstriped hip against the counter and folding his arms over his chest expectantly.

She hadn't, of course, and her face blared the fact, but Lily managed to mumble something to the effect of, "Yeah."

"Well?"

"Well, what?" Oh, God, what had he been saying when she came out of it? If she'd known there was going to be a quiz, she would have listened...maybe. Maybe not...

His sigh didn't make her feel any less nervous. "What did you think about what I said?"

Luckily, she remembered he had mentioned something about him having leprosy and deduced the rest from there. "You're exaggerating." More for something to do—something to keep her hands busy—she continued to put away the groceries. His position—standing there like a statue of an Italian God—forced her to move around him, bend down next to him and reach up near his head, declining his belated, murmured offer of assistance and drawing in the occasional whiff of expensive, spicy cologne.

He smelled too damned good for her concentration. She wanted to ask him to repeat the things he said during the course of their conversation, because his nearness was so distracting to her. It had been that way since the summer of her sixteenth birthday, when she'd come to realize that she was a woman and he was a man, and exactly what that could have meant, in another lifetime...in another world.

It was then, she realized he was the man she wanted in this life. No one else would do. She knew him well enough to realize that he would be a loving, doting, charmingly old-fashioned husband, who would believe in indulging his wife to a point but also would subscribe to the ancient philosophy that a man needed to keep his woman in line—and that would definitely include spankings. Lots and lots of them—some fast and hard and unbearable, and others slow, to build the heat in the both of them and in both her back and her front sides.

But she was in love with a cold-blooded killer, and that thought always kept her from acting on any impulse she might have.

But that didn't mean she stopped having them. "I am not exaggerating," he repeated back to her with what sounded like real anger, revealing the extent of his exasperation. Victor almost never let anyone get him mad. Instead, he got even. "You've always —"

The shrill trill of his cell phone forever interrupted his next summary comment about the way she treated him. "Yeah, what?" he answered impatiently.

Lily was glad she wasn't the poor unfortunate on the other side of the phone.

"They what? When? Where? Well, find out—now!"

She had never seen quite that expression on his face—he looked like he was about to implode. A chill ran down Lily's spine. "What is it?"

Victor, who was already halfway across the room, stopped in his tracks and looked back over his shoulder at her. She almost wished he hadn't, after hearing what he'd had to say.

"Someone's kidnapped Mama and Patty."

Much to Victor's annoyance, Lily never left his side after that little bombshell announcement. She followed him into the inner sanctum—his office at home, where few men and even fewer woman had ever tread—as if she belonged there, not hounding him with questions but just being there. Because she didn't pester him, but rather just sat close to him and touching him voluntarily for the first time, her small hand on the cuff of his suit near his wrist, he found himself telling her more than he would have if she had been talking non-stop.

"The call was Giani. Someone shoved them into a car, in the mall parking lot. Some of his guys were there, but it all happened too fast for them to do anything about it. The only thing they saw was the direction it was driven off in, which wasn't much help."

The police—whom he had never expected to welcome into his home, and even now, he was a little hesitant to allow in—arrived in record time and milled around, arranging to record the incoming calls on his residence and cell phones, which had Victor catching Lily rolling her eyes. He had to agree about the irony—as if they weren't already doing that on a regular basis.

They were anticipating that he would be getting a ransom call fairly shortly, but in the meantime, everyone he knew was also checking in, and the first thing he had to say to everyone was that the cops were there listening in, to remind them subtly not to say anything they shouldn't about the family business.

It didn't help that the detective in charge—a Lt. Moore—was a little too-smart-for-his-own-health sort who sidled up to Lily immediately, setting Victor's jaw even harder than it already was. If there was something in this world that he hated, it was someone cozying up to his Lily.

Just before he was about to physically confront the scum-sucking bastard—as he'd already labeled the cop in his mind—his cell rang again.

This time, it was no friend or business associate.

"We have your mother and your sister. We want twenty-five million dollars, in small, unmarked, non-consecutive bills..." It was a good thing they were recording this, because Victor zoned out a little. Until now, it had really been only rumor and innuendo. He had still half-heartedly expected to see Mama and Patty coming through the door, any minute, loaded down with bags and boxes, from having spent way too much of his money.

Then they'd all sit down to a wonderful dinner and laugh and talk the night away...

"I'll get it to you," he responded, on automatic pilot.

"No. Not you. We want the other sister to deliver it."

For a moment, he was befuddled. And then, it struck him.

Lily.

They wanted Lily to deliver the ransom.