

AN NYPD NEGOTIATORS NOVEL



LOCKDOWN

SARA DRISCOLL

CHAPTER 1

A teenager darted off the sidewalk directly in front of Gemma Capello's car. She shot one hand out to grab the cake holder on the passenger seat a fraction of a second before she hammered the brakes, throwing her upper body sharply against the seat belt as she jammed her precious cargo against the chair back. Filling the air with colorful Italian commentary, she pushed her curly, shoulder-length brown hair away from where it had tumbled into her dark eyes, and then tracked the boy as he sprinted across the street to join the pack of kids waiting for him on the opposite sidewalk. They greeted him with hoots and back slaps before strolling off down the street, secure in their coolness.

Gemma narrowed her eyes on the group. "If you crushed my *cassata* because of your need to impress your friends, I'm *not* going to be happy." A horn blasted behind her, and she tossed up a hand gesture that would have made her brothers proud—angry Brooklynite meet irritated Sicilian—and hit the accelerator.

She glanced quickly at the container. After the long hours she spent putting it together, her cake had better be intact. Today was the twenty-fifth anniversary of her mother's murder, a day already bowing under the weight of grief, even all these years later. There was no need for the universe to add anything negative to it.

Knowing time didn't heal all wounds and today would be full of bad memories, she'd wanted to do something nice for her father, and through him for the rest of the family, because if she knew her brothers—and she did—all four of them would find a reason to drop

by the family home today. So she'd spent the entire previous evening making a traditional Sicilian *cassata*, one of her father's favorite desserts.

Liqueur-soaked sponge cake, ricotta, and marzipan . . . what's not to love?

She'd certainly had a hard time keeping her youngest brother, Alex, out of it. They lived in the same Alphabet City apartment building on the Lower East Side, and he spent much of his free time in her larger and homier unit. The whole time she was baking, he'd been perched at her breakfast bar, chatting, playing with her cat, Mia, and stealing bits of sponge cake while he sipped her liqueur.

He didn't fool her for one moment. While Gemma was worried about her father and how the following day would impact him, Alex was worried about how it would impact her. Because twenty-five years ago, Maria Capello hadn't been the only one standing in line at the bank when everything went to hell; her ten-year-old daughter had been with her. When the robbery had gone wrong and suddenly become a hostage situation, they'd been trapped together. Until Maria had tried to talk the two gunmen into releasing the hostages, including her own daughter, and one of the men had silenced her with a bullet to the brain. Then Gemma, blood-splattered and terrified, had been alone.

It was a nightmare of a day for Gemma as well, but she was determined to stay occupied, which meant taking care of her father. He'd taken the day off knowing he'd be distracted—it was never a good situation when the NYPD Chief of Special Operations wasn't on his game. But spending the day alone was sure to sink him into a funk, so she'd also taken the day and was going to arrive on his doorstep first thing with the proposition of a spontaneous trip to his favorite hole-in-the-wall pub in a few hours for lunch. Later, there would be dinner and cake with the family as they gradually drifted home. It would mean a lot of cooking, but that would also help distract her today.

When the heart hurt, surrounding yourself with family was the best way to make it through.

Sometimes her family drove her crazy; today they would be her refuge.

The second youngest of five, Gemma was the only daughter. Like three of her four siblings and her father, she was an NYPD officer; only Matteo had broken with family tradition and had joined the FDNY. First response was hardwired into them, even if they hadn't all followed Tony Capello straight into the NYPD. Detective Gemma Capello had been on the force for fourteen years and was now one of the lead negotiators on the NYPD Hostage Negotiation Team.

Her early experience with hostage takers hadn't prescribed her career, but it had certainly contributed.

She braked to a stop at the intersection of Beverley Road and Coney Island Avenue and had a few seconds for a closer inspection of the cake carrier, only to relax when no smear of lemon frosting was visible against the side. The light changed, and she continued on her way toward Flatbush and the family homestead.

Tony still lived in the house in Brooklyn that had once held all seven of them. Though "rattling around" the family home might be a more apt description—since she and Alex had moved out years ago, Tony had lived alone in the big house. She'd once brought up the idea of selling and her father had been so definite he wouldn't leave Maria's home, she'd never suggested it again. In many ways, she understood. There were so many memories there, he couldn't bear to leave that tenuous connection to his beloved wife behind. And if Gemma was honest, she'd struggle with it, too. At some point, it would have to happen, but part of her was honestly relieved it was still some distance in the future. Maybe in three years, when her father took mandatory retirement, he'd consider it. Maybe, by then, she'd be ready, too.

Her phone rang through her car, and her gaze flicked to her dash screen. *Alex*. She pressed the button on her steering wheel to accept the call. "I'm not there yet. You know what Brooklyn traffic is like at this time of the morning. Give me another fifteen. Maybe twenty."

"That's not why I'm calling."

The whip-like quality of Alex's words and the intensity in his tone had the hair on the back of her neck rising in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"A school shooting was just reported. Gem, it's South Greenfield."

Fear slid sinuously like ice water through her veins. "That's Sam's school."

“Yes.”

The oldest Capello sibling, Joe, had two boys, Sam and Gabriel. Gabe was still in middle school, but Sam was a freshman, only a few months into his high school experience, though this was *not* the experience anyone would have wished for. “*Gesù Cristo.*” Gemma’s gaze found the street signs at the approaching intersection, and she calculated her position. “Do we know where he is? Has Joe talked to him?”

“No. It just started. They don’t know anything yet.”

She gauged the separation of traffic, signaled, and squeezed in between a delivery van and a sedan. The driver of the van audibly let her know in no uncertain terms what he thought of her driving. “I’m close.”

“That’s why you’re my first call.”

Alex knew her plans for the day, knew her timing. Knew that while she was off duty, nothing would stop her getting there when family was involved. The badge in her bag was all she needed.

She took a right onto Westminster. “Who reported it?”

“Nine-one-one is being flooded with calls from kids inside the school.”

“Even if only a small percentage of students are allowed to have their handset with them during class, that’s still a lot of active phones.” She hit the gas and shot through the next intersection on the last fraction of a second of a yellow light. “Are they tracking social media?”

“I don’t know. They will if they’re smart.”

“Kids with phones will use every communication strategy they have to get the word out.”

“And to share their experience.”

“That, too. I’m six or seven minutes out, max. Leave Dad off your call list.”

“He’s going to be furious to be kept in the dark.”

“Then tell him those were my instructions and he can be furious at me. Hopefully he’s left the TV off and is lying low today. He’ll find out at some point, but hopefully by then we’ll have Sam already in hand. I don’t like what this would do to his head while it’s ongoing.”

“What about what it’ll do to yours?”

“I walked out of the bank that day. He left something behind.”

“So did you.”

We all did. “I’ll manage. I need to call Joe now and let him know I’ll be on-site.”

If Alex didn’t like her dismissal of his concerns, he let it go. “Keep me in the loop.”

“Always.” She disconnected and then used voice commands to call Joe, allowing her to keep both hands on the wheel as she muscled through traffic.

Joe picked up as the first ring barely finished. “I can’t talk now.” His voice was ragged with stress.

“You can talk to me. I’m nearly at South Greenfield.”

“What? How?”

“I was on my way to Dad’s. Was going to surprise him and spend the day because . . .”

“Yeah.”

“Alex called me and I redirected. I’ll find him, Joe.”

“You think they’re going to let you get close?”

“Do you honestly think they’re going to turn away a hostage negotiator after Platte Canyon and Marinette High Schools?” It didn’t happen often, but those two shootings had turned into hostage situations taking hours to resolve. While both had ended with the death of the shooter, Gemma didn’t mention the student at Platte Canyon High School who’d been gunned down by the hostage taker at the moment law enforcement stormed the room. Joe didn’t need to know details, only that she had a place with law enforcement as they tackled this crisis. “They can try. I’ll set them straight. You’re on your way?”

“Yes. So’s Alyssa.”

Gemma hit Ditmas Avenue and made the turn to the southwest too fast, flying toward South Greenfield.

In the distance, sirens rose as a mournful wail.

“I may not be able to talk, but text me any details you learn. I’ll call as soon as I have him.”

“Gem.” Joe’s voice cracked on the single word, and Gemma’s heart went out to him. Straight-shooting, serious Joe, the responsible older brother . . . the helplessness had to be overwhelming at a moment when he absolutely needed to keep his head. The moment his boy needed him most, and he was across town—might as well have been across planet—and it would likely be over, for better or for worse, before he was even halfway there.

Most school shootings only lasted approximately fifteen minutes. And five of those minutes had already ticked away.

“I can’t . . .” Joe stumbled to a halt. “I need . . .”

“I know.” Gemma understood the impossible mix of emotions he was trying to put into words. She wasn’t a mother, but she was an aunt many times over and she loved her nieces and nephews as fiercely as if they were her own. More than that, as a fellow cop, she knew the kind of evil that could manifest in humankind, just as Joe did, and that had to terrify him as much as it did her. “I’ll be there for him until you get there. He’s ours, Joe.” Her tone went to steel. “They can’t have him.”

“He’s ours,” he repeated, relief ever so slightly lightening his tone that his family was already closing ranks. “Just . . . hurry.”

“Done. I’ll get in touch when I can. Until then, know I’m fighting to get him out.” She hung up, white-knuckled the steering wheel, and pressed down harder on the accelerator.

Get there.