

# THE COUNTESS OF CHUTZPAH

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Carmella Maltafano ignored the knot in her stomach. Her high-heeled shoes made no noise on the deep carpet in a hallway lined with holographic images of ancient Greek and Roman statues that towered over her five-foot-three height. She carried a spring-loaded holster with a stiletto beneath the left sleeve of her orange blouse. The tunic-length garment also concealed the bulge of the brass knuckles she carried in a pocket of her tan slacks.

She paused when she reached the door to the office of Sergei "Red-Nose" Kosloff, her father's best friend. She took three deep breaths and forced her mind to think positive; she and Sergei Red-Nose would reach an amicable agreement. Her business, and possibly her life, depended upon it.



Carmella pasted a smile on her face and tapped the door frame three times. Sergei, seventy years old and gaunt, looked up from the Financial Times and frowned.

A false smile replaced Sergei's frown. "Come in, my dear." He waved a hand towards a chair. "And how are you holding up since the dreadful loss of Rocky III?" The window behind Sergei's desk showed New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty.

"I've just about recovered from my father's death, thank you."

"I'm surprised you aren't wearing black to show respect for the deceased."

"Really, Sergei. No one wears a black dress these days unless they're going to a cocktail party."

"Traditions never go out of style. All of us Executives agree on that point."

His cold voice sent a chill through her body. *Since when did Sergei and his peers believe in traditions?*

Sergei had three colleagues; Wang No-Nose, a Chinese-American,

Leroy Bent-Nose, an Afro-American and José La-Nosé, a Hispanic-American. The four, a culturally correct amalgam of New York City demographics, were life-long criminals who had bullied and murdered their way to the top. The Executives, as they were known, controlled all aspects of crime in the five boroughs of New York City.

"Speaking of traditions, mainstream crime is a man's job. It is not fitting for any woman, let alone a middle-aged one, to inherit a turf. You must resign."

Carmella heard a roaring noise in her ears, a sign that her blood pressure had shot out of sight. How dare they demand that she ruin her son's future by resigning. And that middle-aged bit? "I'm only thirty-seven!"

"This is for your own good. Women have soft spots in their hearts. That can you get killed in this business."

"That is so much crap and you know it, Sergei." She inhaled deeply. "This isn't the twentieth century any more. It's 2052, and you can't make generalizations like that because we all know they're completely false."

Sergei stared down his red, bulbous nose at her.

Carmella stared back.

Sergei broke first. He jerked his eyes away and ruffled the salmon-colored newspaper. "This has nothing to do with discrimination. It's about protecting you from the vicious world of crime. We Executives will not allow you to control a turf. So resign!"

Carmella felt her face flush. It was happening again! Just like West Point!

Sergei's complexion now matched the color of his nose. She had to defuse his anger. Choking down bile, she gave him an ingratiating smile. "Let's not fight, Sergei. I've known you all my life. I'm sure we can work out an arrangement."

"The only arrangement I'm interested in is your resignation." He crossed his arms on his scrawny chest.

She hesitated, then snarled, "I can't and won't do that." Her anger surged. How dare this old man steal her inheritance. Before he died, her father, Rocky III, installed her as the new boss of the turf that controlled crime on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

"Listen to me." Sergei leaned forward and thumped a knuckle on his desk. "We will not allow you to destroy our traditions."

*Tradition again. What are these people up to?*

He shook his head. "My grandfather told me about the nobility before the Russian Revolution. They believed they could do anything thing they wanted, just like you. And you will come to the same fate as those noble idiots. You will regret this stubbornness."

She pondered the stupidity of these men. Organized crime couldn't get hung up on tradition. It had to be flexible to survive. "Sergei, my great-grandfather, Rocky the First, smuggled booze in from Canada during Prohibition. Once Prohibition ended, Rocky II ran floating crap games and the numbers until the government realized how much money there was in gambling. The state lotteries and legal casinos ended his business. My daddy sold hard drugs for many years and that's a dead business now."

"In all those instances, the turf leaders were men, not women." Sergei shook his head. "Resign! It's for your own protection."

Carmella realized that it was hopeless to argue with Sergei. She stood up and walked to the door where she paused and looked back. "The only protection I need is from you old bigots." Her voice dripped with venom. "Your traditions are nothing more than an excuse to defend the status quo and to flaunt your power."

"You're finished!" Sergei shouted as she left the office.

"This is no different than West Point," she shouted back. In her third year, she found herself pregnant. The Commandant demanded that she have an abortion since administrative rules only allowed seniors to have babies. She told the Commandant what to do with the rules and she was expelled for insubordination. On her way through the gates of the Academy for the last time, she vowed to never again allow a male to control her life.

Carmella's hover-limo headed uptown along the Avenue of the Americas. Even with the windows closed and the air conditioning on, the sounds of the heavy traffic and the never-ending construction penetrated the vehicle. She tried to hold her rage in check, but that was like trying to stem the tide during a full moon.

"This will get ugly," she told Julio, her second-in-command. She clenched and unclenched her fists while she briefed him, yelling part of the time so he could hear her over the noise.

"I don't think they'll get violent." Julio had glossy, black hair, an olive complexion, a wiry build and stood an inch taller than Carmella.

"I hope you're right." Carmella twisted a lock of brown hair so hard she flinched.

"I asked around," Julio said. "None of the other families are bothered that you're a boss, but I've heard the Executives planned to auction off your father's turf. You took it over, and now no one will put in a bid. So you cost them a ton of money."

Comprehension flooded her mind. Sergei's interest in upholding traditions provided the 'good' reason for his actions while the 'real'

reason -- making money -- remained hidden. "Greed!" She grinned at Julio. "This whole affair is about greed. Good. I can handle greed."

Julio accelerated to move past a bus.

Carmella laughed. "We're gonna beat these old guys." A bunch of men weren't going to drive her from her chosen profession. Not a second time.

A week later, Carmella sat in her office chewing on the back end of a pen while staring at a computer monitor. The chart on the screen showed that sales, revenue and profits had all taken a nosedive. The numbers from her basic lines of business, loan sharking and crime-themed tourist souvenirs, had dropped somewhat, but her three biggest money-makers -- marijuana, tobacco and bootleg prescription drugs -- had tanked.

A Mozart piano concerto played in the background but failed to sooth her nerves.

She called up her father's sales histories and examined data going back to when he took over the turf. Nothing like this had happened in the past. Of course, his early results included sales of cocaine and heroin. It wasn't until the 2120's that the Feds made those two drugs a government monopoly. Fortunately, the government outlawed tobacco sales at the same time because of second-hand smoke. This gave the crime families a replacement product. Mainstream crime existed because the public wanted products and services the government said the public couldn't have.

She tapped the pen against the table top. People hadn't stopped smoking or popping pills, therefore, they were buying their stuff someplace else, like the neighboring turfs. People wouldn't travel to buy their stuff unless they could save money. Since the prices were fixed by the Executives, the other turfs could only charge less if the old men said so.

She picked up a stiletto from a collection on her desk, held it by the tip and hurled it across the room at a dart board covered with pictures of the Executives. The knife landed in Sergei's left eye. "I know you bastards are behind this."

The actions of the Executives jeopardized the twin goals in her life. First, she wanted to run a user-friendly operation that satisfied the needs of the public. Second, she wanted to turn over a healthy business to her son, Rocky IV, now a junior in a private prep school. If she couldn't accomplish these goals, Rocky IV would have to go into a different business. He could end up as a lawyer. Or a politician. Either one would besmirch the family name.

Julio knocked on the office door. She looked up from the monitor. The expression on his face made her stomach flip.

"We just got our weekly supply shipment." Julio sat down in front of her desk. "We only got ten percent of what we ordered."

Camella's mouth dropped open. The turfs sent their product requirements to the Executives' staff who bundled the requests, negotiated prices and arranged for delivery.

"I called downtown and the staff flunkies told me there's a bottleneck in the distribution network." Julio shook his head. "Funny thing, though. We're the only turf that got shorted."

"Damn! They're really sticking it to us." She rubbed her hands over her face. "Sergei is getting on my nerves."

"What're you gonna do?"

"I don't know. I have to think about this."

After Julio left, she walked over to a window. Her third floor apartment on Central Park West was between W70th and W71st Streets and overlooked the Park. Her father had rebuilt the brownstone town house during the days of bloody turf wars. The tall, thin bullet-proof windows opened to allow riflemen to fire at attackers. Behind the walls, two-inch-thick plasteel panels provided protection against rocket propelled grenades.

Gold-colored leaves appeared on some trees in the park, while others looked a duller green as the cool nights leached the color out of them. Slightly below her level, a flying bucket drifted north along Central Park West. It had a NYPD logop on its side and carried two cops who observed the traffic.

She recalled the military history she had studied at the Point and the Duke of Wellington floated into her mind. Wellington, the British general who had defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, believed his greatest victory had taken place years before Waterloo, at a place in India called Assaye. Wellington found his small army greatly outnumbered. If he went on the defensive, he'd be overwhelmed. If he retreated, his army would be butchered. With no other option, he attacked. And routed the enemy.

If she stayed on the defensive, she faced bankruptcy. If she retreated, the male authority figures won. That meant she had to attack. How to do that was the question she needed to answer.

Thirty minutes later, Carmella suffered an attack of giggles. She hugged her sides and paced the room, weighing the various considerations of her off-the-wall plan. The downside was that it might be too radical for the Executives to accept. In that case, she

was finished as a turf boss.

She called Sergei. "I have the solution to our problem."

"Good. I accept your resignation."

"Umm. That's not what I had in mind."

"What then?" Sergei sounded exasperated.

"I challenge the Executives to a Meet."

"What! Are you out of your mind?"

Carmella took another deep breath and baited the hook. "If you win, I'll resign and move to Florida."

Sergei coughed. She could almost hear the wheels in his crafty brain whirring at high speed. "We Executives don't have the resources for a Meet." His voice was quiet and soothing, as if he didn't want to scare her away. "We only have office workers, not field operatives."

"Oh please! Hire a champion."

"I'll have to consult my peers."

"You haven't heard the rest of the proposal." Carmella strove to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Go on."

"If I win, I keep my turf and I get a seat on the Board of Executives."

"This is an outrage! The Board doesn't simply hand out seats. The nerve of you! You are the Countess of Chutzpah."

"Besides being a bunch of old farts afraid of change, you're also cowards, scared of a Meet with a woman." She bit her lip. Maybe she pushed too hard.

"I'll get back to you." The phone slammed down in her ear.

An hour later, Sergei called back. "We accept your challenge."

"Have you designated a champion?"

"Not yet. Since you are the challenger, I assume you'll set things up."

Carmella tried not to chuckle as she disconnected. She couldn't think of anything more satisfying than trapping and embarrassing the old men. Custom dictated that the Executives accept the outcome of a Meet and enforce the results even if they disapproved. They would be duty-bound to give her the seat.

She went to the door and called to Julio. When he entered the office, she gave him a big grin and recapped her plan. "We have a lot to do in a short time. First, have someone contact the Parks Department to get a permit for a field. Drop a few bills to make sure we get an early time slot."

Julio grabbed his cell phone, dialed and repeated her orders.

"Next, alert the Meet team and have them strip and clean the weapons. I'll hold an inspection ninety minutes before the Meet. I'll

call all the other turf boss and explain what's at stake here. That'll prevent the Executives from welshing on the deal." She tapped her finger tips on the desk. "What else? Oh yeah. I don't have a thing to wear to a Meet. I have to go shopping."

A man stuck his head in the office. "Tomorrow at five-thirty. I'm goin' downtown to get the permit. I owe a friend down there five big ones."

"Good." She punched Sergei's number. When he answered, she told him of the arrangements.

"We have a champion." Sergei paused. "Your cousin, Dominic." He hung up.

Carmella stared at the phone. Blood drained from her face. Dominic had more Meet experience than anyone in the city. His team was battle-tested by a dozen Meets. The turfs had a rule that forbade Meets between close relatives. She grimaced. The old men had a vague concept of 'tradition.'

Her hover-limo entered Central Park at W65th Street and used the Transverse Road to get to the Meet. Julio drove at a slow pace while Carmella rode shotgun wearing a tight-fitting camouflage pants suit and patent leather combat boots. Her family's pole-mounted battle flag stuck through the open sun roof. It showed a white cigarette-smoking dollar sign on a green field.

Behind the jeep, twenty-one shooters marched in a column of threes. Outfitted in camouflage fatigues with a battle flag patch on the right shoulder, each carried a rifle and a knapsack.

Years ago, the turfs had settled their differences by street fighting. The toll of valuable employees wounded or killed along with the cries of outrage about the damage to apartments and cars forced the families to consider new ways to settle their differences. Led by her father, the turf bosses developed a plan that put an end to the street carnage and moved the action to Central Park where the City's Parks Department could officiate.

Carmella had witnessed several Meets, but this was her first time as a field commander. This would be a test of the combat training she had received at the Point.

The anticipation of battle and the risk of losing to the Executives made her mouth taste like it was filled with sand. She took a swig of water from her canteen.

When she reached the four-field softball complex near the Wollman Memorial Skating Rink, Parks officials in yellow vests fanned out and inspected her soldiers to ensure their weapons met the Department

specifications.

She jumped out of the vehicle when it pulled alongside the third base line. She walked to the pitcher's mound carrying the flag and an equipment bag. She dropped the bag and stuck the the flag pole into the dirt, marking it as the command center for her defensive stand. She looked at the adjacent field and was surprised that Dominic's team wasn't there prepping for their attack. By now, both teams would usually be getting on their battle faces by flinging obscene gestures at each other.

Spectators crowded the wooden stands. The other turf bosses filled the area behind the batting cage. They waved and gave her thumbs-up signs. An old-fashioned limo with blackened widows pulled onto the grass and parked near the opposite backstop.

A robotic flying bucket hovered over the field with three cameras to provide network news coverage of the Meet. Two vid-bots prowled the baselines to provide different camera angles of the action. With a five-thirty start time, highlight film clips would make the Six O'clock news.

She faced her troops. Each had a numbered tag pinned to the shirt pocket. Her tag had the number one on it. "First squad! Take the right side."

Seven troopers broke out of the column and formed a front anchored on first base and extending towards second base. They opened their equipment bags and put on their protective gear.

"Second squad! Form up on the first squad. Third squad! Set up as a reserve force." She felt a surge of pride while she watched the well-disciplined troops take their positions.

A roar of engines interrupted her thoughts. She turned to opposite field and stared in astonishment. Dominic and his Meet team drove up to their pitcher's mound. She ran over to the closest Park official. "They can't use hover-bikes."

"Didn't you get a copy of the new regulations? They came out this morning."

A chill coursed up her spine and sweat broke out on her forehead. The Executives had changed the rules! She had a fleeting image of Rocky IV attending Harvard Law School.

Her defensive plans called for long-range accurate fire to thin out the attackers as they crossed the outfield. With hover-bikes, Dominic's forces would cross the field much faster. Too fast for her rifles to do too much damage. She had the classic military problem; infantry caught in open country facing a cavalry charge.

Despite the churning in her stomach and her shortness of breath, she forced herself to concentrate. At Waterloo, Wellington's infantry

survived charges by French heavy cavalry. The English soldiers formed squares and the horsemen couldn't break through the sides of the formations.

"Julio! Re-form the troops into a square centered on the flag. Keep a reserve force in the middle."

Dominic's bikes revved their engines.

Her soldiers barely reformed before an official called everyone to attention while a young, heavy-set soprano from nearby Lincoln Center sang the national anthem.

At the conclusion of the anthem, the head official waved his arms to signal the start of the Meet. The time-keeper activated the official time piece.

Dominic pointed towards Carmella and the line of bikes, stretching from first base to the outfield, surged forward.

Carmella felt a pin prick of hope. While driving the bikes, Dominic's troops could only use one hand to fire their rifles. Their shooting would be erratic and inaccurate.

"Prone position," Carmella yelled. She opened her equipment bag, slipped on a protective vest, pushed her face shield into position and crossed herself.

The crowds cheered.

The breeze rippled the flag.

The noise from the hover-bikes grew louder.

The Parks officials shouted to each other over bull-horns.

Carmella walked behind the line of troops facing the onslaught.

"Pick your target."

A few of Dominic's riders fired their weapons and a shot whizzed past her ear.

The bikes came closer.

"Fire!"

A volley of shoots drowned out the roar of the engines. Three riders, their face shields covered in blue, lost control of the bikes and turned them over.

An official yelled into his bull-horn. "Seventeen and thirteen are killed. So is seven."

Seven jumped up to protest. The official glared at him and refused to listen.

"Nine is wounded but can continue," another official shouted.

Bull-horns blared as Dominic lost more attackers to Carmella's paint guns.

The remaining riders continued onward but many wobbled as they tried to drive and shoot.

The crowds cheered louder.

"Fire when you have a target." Carmella had to out-yell the bull-horns that declared one of her troopers dead.

The hover-bikes split into two groups as they approached her square.

Dominic's soldiers stopped driving and dropped down behind the bikes. One group, with Dominic in command, formed between first base and home plate while the other took positions on the outfield grass between second and third base.

A paint ball flew by her head. Carmella bit her lip. Dominic had turned the fight into a shooting contest and her troops didn't have the protection of the bikes. Even though her forces were better shooters, they would eventually get picked off. She couldn't stay in a defensive position and win. She grabbed Julio's arm. "I'll take the reserves and half of the troops between first and second. When I give the word, have everyone else use a rolling fire to keep their heads down while I attack the outfield group."

She snatched a rifle from one of her casualties.

She and three others left the square, ran ten paces and dove to the ground. While she fired at the enemy, three more troops ran passed her. When the second group dropped down and opened fire, her squad jumped up and ran forward.

Her left shoulder exploded in green paint. The pain from the impact surprised her.

"Wounded!" an official decreed.

Carmella ignore the throbbing shoulder. She plopped to the ground, took a bead on a soldier and fired. An official declared him dead. The rest of her squad joined her. Caught between the main force and outflanked by Carmella's squad, Dominic's outfield contingent died quickly.

"Back to the flag," Carmella said to her team.

She rejoined Julio and ordered him to lead six soldiers to the left while she took her squad to the right. Now taking fire from three sides, Dominic's soldiers lasted only a few minutes.

The head official blew a whistle and waved his arms. "This Meet is over," he shouted through a bull horn. "Carmella Maltafano wins by a score of twenty-three casualties to ten. The time is twelve minutes, seventeen seconds."

While she stumbled forward, the crowd cheered. She stole a quick glance at the backstop. Her peers shouted her name in a rhythmic chant.

She discarded her face mask and wiped the sweat from her face with a sleeve. She looked at the sleeve and noted her mascara had run. Resisting the urge to jump up and down, she looked around and

grinned. Her troops crowded around her and she gave out hugs and high-fives.

Dominic, covered in blue paint, grabbed her and lifted her off the ground with a bear hug. "You did great," he yelled in her ear. "I told the Executives the bikes would make a difference."

The other bosses shoved through the mob and patted her back or kissed her cheek.

With squealing tires, the limo drove off.

She hugged herself. She was now Carmella Nose-job, and Rocky IV wouldn't have to go to law school.