

A man with dark hair, wearing a dark blue t-shirt, is looking down and to the right. A German Shepherd dog is sitting next to him, looking forward. The background is a grassy field under a blue sky with clouds.

DEEP SECRETS.
DEADLY TRUTHS.

 FEDERAL K-9 SERIES

ABOVE 'N'
BEYOND

TEE O'FALLON

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To my readers around the globe, this is it—the final book in the Federal K-9 series! Your support and enjoyment of my books over the years always pushed me to make the next one even better. It has been my absolute pleasure to write these K-9 stories for you!

Chapter One

Five months. Two weeks. Three days.

Port Authority K-9 Sergeant Jamie Pataglio, aka Jimmy Santoro, aka inmate number 22A5140, had counted off every godforsaken day he'd been here—inside the walls of Sing Sing Correctional Facility.

Getting locked up had been easy. All it had taken was an anonymous call to the police that he'd been carrying a concealed, unlicensed handgun. If things went as planned today, he'd be walking out through the gates in two weeks.

If things went to shit, they'd be hauling him out in a body bag.

Jamie and the other prisoners waited for the guard to open the heavy iron gate that led to “the yard”—the outdoor recreation space where they were permitted to blow off steam for a couple precious hours each day.

After a loud buzz, followed by a *clunk*, the gate squealed in protest as it slid open. Jamie and his neighbors from Cell Block A squinted and shielded their eyes from the blaring sun. Early June in Ossining was already hotter than the muzzle of his service weapon after shooting off a thousand rounds.

Sing Sing, otherwise known as “the big house,” was what Batman had been referring to when he told the Penguin, the Joker, and all the other criminals he and Robin busted that they were going “up the river.”

Jamie followed the other prisoners outside. He drew in a breath of fresh air, enjoying it while he could and welcoming the day he no longer had to suck in the stench of the prison. The rank, stale air, thick with the smells of body odor, urine, and God knew what else, stuck to his skin like a layer of crud he could never wash off.

He walked farther down the line of tables studding the grass, then stopped to retie his sneaker. With his head bent down, he lifted his gaze, methodically searching the yard for his target. Tony Mancuso.

Mancuso was the sole reason he was here.

Jamie sat at one of the picnic tables. Casual and disinterested was the look he was going for. Inside, he was coiled tighter than a barbwire fence.

Rubber balls pounded on the handball court. Metal clanged from the iron pile—the weight area. Jamie had never understood the rationale behind allowing prisoners to bulk up and become strong enough to overpower the guards. Prison bureaucracy at its finest, and for the last six months, he'd taken full advantage of it. He'd never been fitter, leaner, and stronger in his entire life.

All because of what was about to go down. Here in this yard. Soon.

Sweat dampened his T-shirt and trickled down between his shoulder blades. Knowing his target liked to hold court every day as if he were the king of England, he kept searching. Sitting at another table a hundred feet away was a group of men. Tony Mancuso's boys. Nicky "Nails" Bonnano, Paulie "Nuts" Aiello, and Sammy "Sneakers" DiCicco.

Jamie strummed his fingers on the table. What he'd agreed to was risky as hell. With his dad's life hanging in the balance, he had no choice.

Another inmate strolled over and sat next to Jamie. "Aren't you hot with that beard?" David asked. "They're gonna make you trim it. Summer's here. Why not shave it off?"

Jamie grunted, then ran a hand down his beard. "You're probably right." For about a nanosecond. To cover his ass, and in case the FBI screwed up, Jamie had grown his beard right up to the prison limit. One inch.

Before arriving at Sing Sing, he and Special Agent Jenkins had pored through the files on all the current inmates, searching for anyone who might know Jamie was a cop. Even after he was processed in, Jenkins continued that review of every prisoner sentenced to Sing Sing. If the FBI had done their job, the only person here who knew Jamie's identity was the prison superintendent. Not even the other inmate, who was about to play a critical role in this crazy ass plan, knew Jamie was a cop.

David tipped his chin. "Here come da king."

Tony Mancuso ambled from the far end of the yard and headed toward the table where Nicky Nails, Paulie Nuts, and Sammy Sneakers sat waiting.

David snorted. "Court's about to begin."

"Looks like." So far, Jamie had only exchanged a few nods with Mancuso in passing. While he watched Mancuso, he ran down everything he knew about the man.

Tony Mancuso, Mafia capo and only living son of Paola Mancuso, current

head of the Mancuso Crime Family. Six feet tall, brown eyes, brown hair, and two hundred pounds of muscle. And, like Jamie, due to be released in two weeks. Unlike him, Mancuso had been in prison for three years on loansharking and drug trafficking charges.

Another inmate leaned his shoulder against a nearby tree, his hands shoved into his pockets. He didn't know the guy's name but had caught glimpses of him around the cell block. To anyone else, the pose probably seemed relaxed, just another inmate enjoying his outdoor time in the yard.

Not to Jamie. His muscles tightened as he followed the direction of the inmate's gaze—Mancuso.

This could be the guy.

To make it look good, he'd been kept in the dark about which inmate had been paid off to kickstart the next part of the FBI's plan. Thanks to a discreet head nod from the prison superintendent this morning, Jamie knew it would be today.

When the inmate pushed from the tree, Jamie stiffened. With his hands still in the pockets of his jeans, the guy started walking in a direction that would cut Mancuso off before he made it to his throne at the other table.

"Think I'll take a loop around the yard." Jamie stood, hoping David would sit tight, which he did.

The inmate's pace quickened, as did Jamie's pulse. This was it. Had to be.

"Tony," the guy called out.

Mancuso stopped and turned. The other man caught up to Mancuso, engaging him in conversation Jamie couldn't hear.

Keeping his eyes on the inmate's hands, which were still in his pockets, Jamie walked faster, but not too fast. He was twenty feet away and closing in. He'd pick up his pace, but with Mancuso's crew watching, he couldn't take the chance of making it look like this was preplanned. It had to appear as if he just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Mancuso glowered and took a step back.

The inmate pulled his hands from his pockets. Something shiny glittered in one of his hands—a shank. Probably a fork, or a spoon, or some other piece of metal filed to a sharp point.

"Go fuck yourself." Mancuso spat on the inmate's shoes and turned to walk away.

The guy grabbed Mancuso's arm, jerking him around. He raised his other arm, readying to plunge the shank into Mancuso's chest.

Jamie was still ten feet away. If he didn't intervene in time, six months of prison would go down the drain, and Mancuso might very well die in prison. Inadvertently, courtesy of the FBI.

"Hey!" Jamie shouted, sprinting toward them.

The inmate jerked his head around, the shank poised in midair.

Jamie plowed into the man. They hit the ground hard, knocking the breath from Jamie's lungs. He gasped for air, willing them to refill faster.

The inmate raised his arm, about to plunge the shank into Jamie's chest. He grabbed the guy's wrist, holding the shank above him, its pointed tip gleaming in the midday sun.

All around him, people shouted. Feet pounded as guards came running.

Jamie had a good fifty pounds on the inmate, but he was scrappy, slippery with sweat, and Jamie lost his hold on the guy's wrist. The man's arm whipped down. Sharp, stinging pain speared into Jamie's left side.

The inmate was on top of him now, straddling his chest and preparing to stick him again. Jamie slammed his fist upward, directly under the guy's chin, rocking his head back and disorienting him enough for Jamie to shove him away. On his knees now, he plowed his fist one more time into the inmate's jaw. The guy fell face down on the grass and didn't move.

The shank—a sharpened spoon—lay a few inches away, its tip covered in blood. *His* blood. The FBI's carefully orchestrated plan had turned into a shit show.

Guards surrounded them, pushing back other inmates who'd gathered around to witness the latest prison fight. Pain spiked Jamie's side, and with every breath he took, radiated down to his hip and up to his chest. Through the pain-filled haze now clouding his vision, he saw a twenty change hands. The fight had lasted only seconds. That hadn't stopped the other inmates from placing bets. Guards made quick work of collecting the bloody shank and cuffing the other inmate.

Breathing hard and not wanting to give the guards a reason to hit him with one of their batons, Jamie remained where he was, on his knees, holding his hand to his bleeding side. Every breath he took brought with it more stabbing, burning pain, as if someone had jammed a hot poker into his flesh. Christ, he was only thirty-four, but he was too damned old for this.

"Santoro, can you walk?" one of the guards asked over the squawk of radios.

"Yeah," he answered, regardless of whether that was true. His once white

T-shirt was soaked with blood and, with every shift of his body, the red stain spread outward from the penetrating wound.

“C’mon, boys,” a voice—not belonging to one of the guards—ordered. “Let’s get him up.”

Mancuso and Paulie Nuts helped Jamie to his feet. The second he was upright, an even sharper twinge jabbed at his gut. He hissed in a breath. Getting stuck like a pig hadn’t been part of the plan.

“Step back,” a guard shouted. “We’ve got him.”

With their arms looped around Jamie’s back, they walked him inside the prison and up to the medical unit.

• • •

Three hours later, Jamie limped into the mess hall and lined up to eat another bowl of slop that tasted like cardboard and Elmer’s Glue and looked suspiciously like dog vomit. Yet another aspect of the prison system’s master plan. If the food sucked that badly maybe ex-cons would work harder at going straight.

The prison doc had cleaned and stitched up his wound, then given him antibiotics and a tetanus shot. The superintendent, Sean Capra, had stuck his head in the medical unit long enough to discreetly inform him the inmate who’d shanked him had been sent down to “the box,” a small locked cell where he’d spend twenty-three hours a day for at least the next week. Standard punishment for getting caught with a shank or a razor. Capra had also notified Special Agent Jenkins of what had gone down in the yard.

Jamie got his food and headed to his assigned table. Footsteps sounded closely behind him. *Too* close. He gripped the tray tighter, preparing to ram it in the neck of whoever was creeping up on his six.

“Relax, kid,” a gruff voice said.

Jamie twisted his neck enough to identify the man—Sammy Sneakers.

“Tony Mancuso would like a word.” Sammy tipped his head to where Mancuso sat at a table. The chairs on either side of him were empty.

Jamie and Mancuso weren’t assigned to the same chow time. Meaning, someone had paid off the guards to let him into the mess hall while Jamie was there. Even in a maximum-security prison where inmates’ lives were totally controlled, some held a certain amount of power, influence, and authority. Mancuso was one of the biggest shot-callers in Sing Sing.

With Sammy following, Jamie went to Mancuso’s table, noting the guards

didn't make any attempt to stop him.

"Have a seat." Mancuso pushed his tray of food away and rested his forearm on the table.

Jamie set down his tray, then pulled out a chair and sat, grimacing when the movement pulled at his sutures. "You beckoned?" he said with an intentionally distinct edge of sarcasm. Acting like a wimp in front of a Mafia capo wouldn't earn him any brownie points.

Sammy sat in the vacant chair on Mancuso's other side.

Mancuso snorted, his upper lip curving into an arrogant grin. "You've got balls. I'll give you that."

Jamie didn't flinch beneath the intensity of Mancuso's dark stare. "Right now, all my balls wanna do is be left alone to eat dinner."

Ignoring Jamie's irritation, Mancuso pointed a finger at him. "You stuck your neck out for me big-time, Santoro. Why?"

Defending him had been the plan all along, but getting shanked in the process might have earned him an entire tray of brownie points he hadn't figured on. Still, he had to play this cool.

The bait had been dangled. Now the shark was circling the hook, eyeing it suspiciously and trying to determine if it was worth grabbing.

Jamie shrugged. "Seemed like the thing to do at the time." He glanced down at his injured side. "Now I'm not so sure."

"You saved my life." Mancuso thrust out his big, beefy hand. "I owe you a solid."

Not wanting to seem too eager, Jamie looked at Mancuso's outstretched hand but didn't take it right away. After a long moment, he took the other man's hand and shook.

"I hear you're gettin' out in a couple of weeks," Mancuso said, and Jamie gave a brief nod. "So am I. You got work waiting for you?"

Jamie made a disgusted sound. "Lost my job the second I got locked up."

Mancuso nodded. "Figured that. When you get out, look me up. I'll get you some work. I could use a guy who knows how to use his fists. Jimmy 'The Fist' Santoro. Has a nice ring to it, dontcha think?"

"What kind of work?" Jamie asked.

Mancuso shrugged. "I'm in the garbage business." *A euphemism for organized crime.* "Seriously, look me up when you get sprung."

For a long moment, Jamie locked gazes with him. "I'll think about it."

Mancuso leaned in. "When you're done thinkin', come find me."

“Where?” Jamie asked. In truth, he knew exactly where Mancuso would go. To Upper Nyack, New York. To the pricey home where his mother, Paola Mancuso—the infamous Godmother—lived.

“Nyack. Ask for me at Bianco’s Bistro. If I’m not there, they’ll let me know you’re looking for me.” Mancuso sat back and grinned. “Now. Let’s enjoy this fine meal and give thanks that soon we’ll be dining on my cousin’s fine Italian cuisine with a kick-ass bottle of Chianti.”

Mancuso and Sammy Sneakers dug into their food as if it were a gourmet meal. Jamie pretended to do the same. Inside, all he could think was that the shark had swallowed the bait.

Game on.

Chapter Two

Four weeks later

Bella shoved a hand through her hair, wishing the day were already over. The Thursday lunch rush at Bianco's Bistro was a madhouse.

Customers' voices carried on the air, punctuated by laughter and the occasional clinking glasses. The "Boccherini Minuet" played softly in the background. Behind her, Lou called out, "Tomato caprese up. Linguini with clams up." People loved watching Lou through the big kitchen window.

The smells of garlic and basil wafted into the dining room as one of the temp waitresses carried trays of plated food past the bar. Bella's mouth watered. In the interest of losing a few pounds, the only thing she'd eaten today was a small baggie of baby carrot sticks. So unsatisfying.

Her empty stomach took that moment to protest loudly, gurgling enough to make her cringe and pray no one heard the noise that sounded like a tiny dog growling. *Womankind is not meant to live on rabbit food.* Owning an Italian restaurant...not helping. Like, *seriously* not helping.

Bella poured glasses of Chianti and set them on the bar. Her regular bartender had banged out for the next couple of weeks to help care for his father, who'd fallen and broken his hip.

Sierra, another waitress and Bella's best friend, set down her empty tray and began transferring the glasses of Chianti Bella had put there. "Three more house Chianti, two Pino Grigio, and Tony wants another bottle of that Pierazzuoli Chianti Montalbano Riserva."

"Of course he does." Considering the Pierazzuoli was one of the priciest bottles the Bistro offered.

Sighing, Bella grabbed another bottle from the locked cooler behind the bar where the finer wines she'd handpicked on her last trip to Italy were stored. Where Tony and Paola were concerned, she didn't bother hiding her sarcasm

from Sierra and her husband, Lou. They were the only ones she could safely voice her concerns to without fear of retribution. Paola and Tony might be her blood, but for all they really cared about her, she might as well be an orphan.

As she cut off the wrapper, Bella glared at the corner table in the back of the dining room where Tony and his crew enjoyed yet another meal on the house. Since getting released from prison, her cousin had been dining at the Bistro nearly every day and sucking down so many bottles of her best wine, she'd lost count. In her mind, all she saw were dollars flying out the window.

"You're happy he's finally out, though. Aren't you?" Sierra asked.

Tony caught her gaze and held it for a moment before winking.

Bella sighed again as she twisted in the corkscrew. "Of course I am." She really had missed him. If nothing else, he was a bridge between her and her aunt.

Years ago, she and Paola had been close. When Bella's parents had died, Paola had stepped in as Bella's mother. Now that she fully understood who and what Paola was, their relationship had become strained.

She pulled the cork from the bottle with a loud *pop* and set it on Sierra's tray. "There you go. More profit down the drain."

"Cheer up. At least we're still in the black." Sierra hefted the tray and headed for Tony's table.

"Right," Bella whispered to herself. "In the black." But was that because of the restaurant she'd created, or was it due to her aunt's mystical reputation as "The Godmother"?

Once the rumors had taken hold, Paola had become a celebrity, much like John Gotti, attracting people who sucked up to her to the point where they looked ready to get down on one knee and kiss that enormous gaudy ring she wore.

Bella picked up a cloth and began wiping down the bar. A customer at the far end, a man with slightly curly reddish-brown hair, held up his empty beer glass. She pulled a clean glass from beneath the bar and flipped down the beer tap. While the glass filled, she looked around the dining room and couldn't help but smile.

The Bistro was hectic, loud, and downright insane at times, but she—*not* her aunt—had created it, designing every single component from the ground up, including the elegant menu.

A faux paint treatment made the walls look like aged, ochre-colored

plaster. Tables with white cloths and red napkins were crammed closely together on a classic black-and-white checkerboard tile floor. For two of the walls, she'd commissioned a local artist to paint Italian landscapes with bright red poppies and sunflowers for vivid pops of color. The back wall was original exposed brick, against which stood stately wood and wrought-iron wine racks, along with the small oak bar.

To give the Bistro a luxurious atmosphere, she'd sewn heavy red velvet drapery to flank the entry and kitchen doors. Strategically placed reproduction iron streetlights arched over the tables. An occasional ficus tree provided a bit of privacy, and several devil's vines that had grown to more than twenty feet long had been hooked here and there on the ceiling and walls. The overall look was not only bright and cheery but gave the Bistro an outdoor feel she'd been striving for.

The Bistro was beautiful, and it was hers. At least partly. *She* was the one who'd studied hard at culinary school in Italy. *She* was the one who, along with Lou, created the ever-changing menus using fresh, locally sourced produce and other products. And she was the one who'd put her heart and soul into the Bistro, hired the staff, managed the place six days a week. Still, it wasn't hers. Not solely, anyway. What had Paola ever contributed?

Money.

When the Bistro's primo location in Nyack had come up for sale, Bella was short the funds to buy it. Now that she had enough saved to buy out her aunt, Paola kept refusing to sign over her share like she'd once promised.

Beer spilled over the rim of the glass, dripping everywhere and creating a wet mess. *Like my life.* She poured off the excess, then wiped the glass dry.

She delivered the beer to the customer, then grabbed a dry rag to clean up the mess she'd made. Raised voices came from a table Sierra waited on. The group of suits from one of the local banks was getting more unruly and louder with each glass of wine they pounded down. The customer was always right. Well, most of the time.

She wasn't against cutting them off, but alcohol wasn't their only problem. They were obnoxious, entitled guys who enjoyed throwing their weight around, even at the expense of the waitresses. Sierra's lips twisted into a frown, and she stepped back from the table. Or tried to. One of the men put his arm around her waist, preventing her from escaping.

Bella threw down the rag. This was fixing to be one of the moments when the customer *wasn't* always right. She headed for the rowdy table when the

front door opened.

A man stood on the threshold, his intense gaze scanning the dining room. The guy was tall. *Really* tall, with only a few inches between the top of his head and the door casing. Broad shoulders nearly filled the rest of the doorway. Thick dark-brown hair hung to just below his ears, and a short, slightly pointed beard graced his chin. *Satan* was the name that came to mind. The urge to touch such a handsome face warred with her instinct to keep a healthy distance from that kind of brutal masculinity.

Completely absorbed in eyeing the man, Bella practically slammed into a ficus.

“Let me go,” Sierra gritted out, trying to extricate herself from Mr. Smarmy’s tight arm around her waist.

When Smarmy’s wandering hand slid to Sierra’s ass, Bella was ready to slam a tray over the guy’s head.

“Okay, hot stuff.” None too gently, she grabbed Smarmy’s fingers and yanked them away. “I think that’s enough sleazy groping for one day, don’t you?”

Smarmy’s brows lowered. What little she could still see of his eyes was shooting sparks. She’d embarrassed him in front of his friends. *Tough*.

Smarmy remained seated but turned to face her. “We were just getting to know each other. Weren’t we, sweetheart?” He grinned at Sierra, an arrogant smile that made Bella want to scrape it off with a cheese grater.

Sierra backed farther away and gave a quick shake of her head to confirm she wanted nothing to do with this guy. Not that Bella needed confirmation. It wasn’t the first time a customer had hit too hard on one of her staff. Sadly, it wouldn’t be the last.

“My waitress disagrees,” she shot back with a patently false smile of her own. “So how about you all finish up the rest of your meal quietly? And while you’re at it, keep your hands off my employees.” *Or I’ll cut them off and shove them down your throat*. Yeah, too bad she couldn’t say that. That was more Tony’s style.

“Whatever happened to Italian hospitality?” Smarmy’s words slurred.

“It went down the toilet when you assaulted my waitress.” From the corner of her eye, she caught Tony and his crew eyeing the situation, ready to leap to her aid if necessary. One of the busboys had stopped to listen in, also watching, in case things went completely down the crapper. Conversation in the restaurant had quieted as other customers watched.

“Now, if you apologize to my waitress, then sit back down and enjoy the rest of your meal quietly, I’ll comp you all dessert and coffee.”

Smarmy crossed his arms. “I think you should comp our *entire* meal.”

“Knock it off, Sean,” one of Smarmy’s friends whispered.

“I’m so curious, I have to ask. Given your sex offender behavior, why would I do that?” A guy like this had to have a string of women he’d assaulted in his past.

Sean stood, towering over her five-foot-three frame. “To reimburse my friends and I for your rudeness.”

“I don’t think so.” She chuckled. “If you’re going to behave like an animal, then you can eat like one.” She grabbed Sean’s plate of linguini with clam sauce and set it on the floor at his feet. “Buon appetito.”

One of Sean’s friends snorted. The other laughed outright.

Sean curled his fists. “Why you little bi—”

“Think carefully before you finish that sentence,” a calm, deeply menacing voice interrupted. Not Tony. Not any of his crew.

The man who’d just walked into the Bistro—Satan—stood a few inches behind her. She’d never really thought of brown eyes as having a piercing effect. His not only did, but they radiated a lethal intensity, like he was itching for a fight. Waves of power mingled with obvious irritation, judging by the firm set of his jaw and the way his nostrils flared, poured from his huge body. And yeah, it was huge.

Bella had thought that sleazeball, Sean, towered over her, but this stranger had several inches on him and about thirty pounds more muscle straining against the fabric of his black, short-sleeve Henley. She’d never seen such bulging biceps and forearms before. And what was that cologne? *Mmm*. Whatever it was, she could take a bath in it, it smelled so darned good.

“Everything okay here, cuz?” Tony had sauntered over with one of his men, Marco Ianetti, backing him up.

“You know this is Paola Mancuso’s place,” a woman at one of the adjacent tables whispered to her date. “They call her The Godmother.”

Bella fisted her hands, resisting the urge to scream at the moniker thrown around the Bistro at least once a week. It always made her feel as if people came here because of Paola, not for the great food, friendly service, and warm atmosphere.

“Well?” the deep voice said from behind her. “What’s it gonna be, fellas?”

“Yeah, um. I think we’ll be going.” One of Sean’s friends stood, then

fished out his wallet and dropped a wad of cash on the table. From the size of it, enough to cover all three of the men's meals, plus a hefty tip Sierra deserved.

Sean was practically dragged from the Bistro, barely sidestepping the plate of linguini. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer," he shouted over his shoulder. "I'll sue you for discrimination."

"Good luck with that." With all these witnesses, she could easily call the police and have him arrested for sexual assault. That would only be more disruptive. Still, she really ought to install those tiny cameras she'd bought months ago to monitor the inside of the Bistro. They could have provided recorded evidence in case this jackass actually made good on his threat.

Bella waited until they'd hauled ass out the door before picking up the plate and setting it none too gently on the table.

Clapping came from all over the dining room.

"Attagirl, Bella," someone said.

"You tell him," a woman from the far corner shouted, raising her glass of wine in tribute.

"Nice goin'," Tony said. "Making him eat off the floor like a damn dog."

"Hey, I like dogs," she countered. "No, I *love* dogs. This guy was a misogynistic beast."

Tony stared at the dark-eyed, bearded stranger. "That was fuckin' ballsy."

The stranger shrugged his broad shoulders. "Not really."

Bella had to agree. Whoever Satan was, he looked strong enough to pound Smarmy's head through the wall with the merest flick of his finger.

Satan held Tony's gaze rock steady, something most people in this town didn't do, knowing who her cousin really was.

Tony grinned and held out his arms. "Come here, Fist."

Bella widened her eyes as Tony and the stranger embraced in a manly hug tight enough to squeeze the air from a buffalo's lungs.

"About time you showed up." Tony clapped the man now known as Fist heartily on the back. Mobsters were big on nicknames, so...

Tony rubbed Fist's back in a seemingly affectionate gesture Bella had seen her cousin and his crew use many times before. There may indeed be some affection there, but mostly her cousin was doing it for an entirely different reason. He was checking for recording devices. Was there anything nice anyone in her family did without a hidden agenda?

No. She'd learned that firsthand.

“Bella, this is Jimmy ‘The Fist’ Santoro. He’s the guy who saved my ass in prison.”

Ah. That guy.

Tony had regaled her and Paola with the story, practically a local legend at this point, of how someone had tried knifing him in prison, and if it hadn’t been for another inmate stepping in, he’d be dead.

Jimmy Santoro turned that piercing brown gaze solely on her. For a stupidly and embarrassingly long moment, she couldn’t utter a single word, so mesmerizing were his eyes. She shook her head and blinked twice before realizing a very large, very tanned hand was extended in her direction.

“Nice to meet you,” Jimmy said, his deep voice sending a not terribly unpleasant shiver racing up her spine.

“Um. You, too.” She placed her hand in his, and when his fingers closed around hers, her entire hand seemed to disappear. His smile deepened a fraction, and the corners of his eyes crinkled just a hair, like he’d found something amusing but was being polite and keeping his mouth shut. And speaking of his mouth, those lips were—

Nope. Don’t go there. Any friend of Tony’s is a mobster. I don’t do mobsters. Not even ones with incredible eyes, lips, and sexy, bulging muscles.

A corner of his mouth lifted higher, making her wonder what he really looked like beneath all that satanic facial hair.

“Thank you for helping out,” she managed to say when her brain blinked back on. “Lunch is on the house. I’ll start you off with bruschetta, tomato caprese, and arancini.” The last of which was her absolute fave appetizer, one she’d sworn off until her aunt got off her back about losing that weight. Those yummy little fried balls of rice, ham, and cheese had a tendency to go straight to her ass—*both* cheeks. *Arancini ass.*

“Grazie.”

“Do you speak Italian?” Not everyone with a vowel at the end of their last name actually did.

“Not really.” He smiled fully, revealing a nice set of white teeth. “But I do speak Italian food.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place.” Turning to leave, she realized she couldn’t. Their hands were still firmly clasped. Heat flamed her face, trekking at light speed down her neck to her breasts. If only she weren’t wearing a thin silk blouse. “You’ll have to excuse me.”

When he released her hand, she spun and got a faceful of ficus, the same one she'd barely missed face-planting into when she'd first glimpsed Jimmy Santoro in the doorway.

Uttering an audible groan, she straightened, wishing and pretending a restaurant full of customers hadn't just witnessed her tragic collision with a plant.

As Bella flew past the bar to fetch the appetizers, Sierra grinned as she filled water glasses. "He's hot." Her grin broadened.

"He's a mobster," Bella shot back quietly over her shoulder. Okay, so he was a *hot* mobster. Hot, cold, tepid...*still* a mobster.

A few minutes later, she returned to the dining room with the appetizers. She set the plates in front of Jimmy, noting the sour look on Marco's face as he glared at the other man from across the table. "Have you decided on an entrée?"

Jimmy looked up at her, only slightly. Even sitting, his eyes were practically level with hers. The same attractive smile turned up the corners of his mouth. "What's good today?"

She parked a hand on her hip. This guy was about to regret his question. "Do you really think I would serve something in my restaurant that *wasn't* good?"

Sammy made a scoffing sound. Nicky rolled his lips inward, and Paulie chuckled. They knew her well.

"Fist, my man." Tony clapped him on the back. "I hate to sound like a lawyer, but you might wanna rephrase your question before my cousin makes *you* eat off the floor."

The rest of the men snickered. Except for Marco.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to insult your culinary skills." Jimmy handed her the menu and inclined his head to the chalkboard special on the far wall. "I'll have the eggplant rollatini."

Bella looked at the chalkboard, which had to be at least thirty feet away. Even she couldn't read it from this distance. The guy must have laser-sharp hawk eyes. "Good choice." She turned to put his order in.

"Bella, wait." Tony grabbed her arm. "Jimmy's looking for a place to stay. All the apartments that aren't filthy dumps are either too expensive or don't allow dogs. Jimmy's got a dog. Didn't you say your tenant just moved out? And you did say you *loved* dogs." Her cousin smirked.

"Uh..." She gripped the menu tighter. The last thing she needed or wanted

was one of Tony's friends living on her property. "It's not ready yet. I haven't had the chance to clean it since my tenant left."

Jimmy draped a long arm over the back of his chair. "I don't mind cleaning."

Shoot. These guys were backing her into a corner. "It's too small for you *and* a dog." Unless he had a Pekinese. *Not a chance.* This guy definitely wasn't the Pekinese type.

"C'mon, Bella," Tony prodded. "You've got a fenced-in yard. Perfect for a dog. Let him stay. As a favor to me."

A favor? Disbelief had her jaw dropping. He had to be kidding. With Nyack taxes being what they were, she needed full rent from her next tenant.

"Tony," Marco interjected. "If she doesn't wanna rent her place to the new guy, she shouldn't have to."

Her cousin's head swiveled faster than a weathervane in a hurricane. The glare he shot Marco was a frightening reminder of what her normally affable cousin was capable of. Nobody overruled Tony Mancuso, not even his lieutenant, which was what she'd heard Marco was to him.

"My mistake." Marco threw up his hands. "Just looking out for your cousin."

"I can look out for myself just fine. But thank you, Marco." She sent him a grateful smile. He always seemed to be watching out for her. She readdressed Tony. "It's not a good idea. I need a *paying* tenant."

And there was something about Jimmy Santoro she couldn't put her finger on.

Yeah, I can.

He scared her. Not for her personal safety, yet there was something about him that warned her to keep a distance.

"Bella." Tony crossed his arms. The unyielding look in his eyes was cool, frosty. *A warning.* "He saved my life. I owe him. The *family* owes him."

She closed her eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath, trying not to scream. The Bistro wasn't hers. Now the choice of who to allow into her own house had been stolen from her, as well. As she let out her breath, she glared at Jimmy, deeply resenting a man she'd known for less than ten minutes. "Fine," she snapped. "But you're going to pick up every single nugget of dog poop on my lawn."

Chapter Three

Jamie parked a block from the meet location—a 1970s tract house in Yonkers. He'd been told it was a vacant safe house set up for him to meet, as needed, with Special Agent Jenkins. Jenkins didn't know it, but after tonight, Jamie had no plans to go anywhere near the house again. This assignment was risky enough without him being seen by the wrong person.

He turned off the engine, then stepped outside, inhaling a deep breath of warm midnight air, the scent of freshly laundered clothing, and soap. Real, honest-to-goodness soap, not prison soap, which was no better than a block of waxy sandpaper that abraded his skin raw. His first night as a free man, he'd basked in the glory of a hot shower for a full thirty minutes, grateful his timed, five-minute Sing Sing shower days were behind him. Despite the hot summer air, he'd kept his beard. For now, anyway. Not because he thought he'd be identified. He'd gotten used to it.

After locking up the Tahoe, he headed down the sidewalk, sticking to the shadows as much as possible. The five-year-old maroon SUV he'd purchased yesterday with undercover funds might be a waste of the FBI's money. If the Port Authority didn't give Jax back to him, he'd have no specific need for an SUV. When he'd told Tony he had a dog, he'd been telling the truth. He *had* a dog. Didn't mean he still did.

He hadn't seen his K-9 in six months. Even though he and Jax had worked together every day for three years and gone home together after every shift, Jax didn't belong to him. Jax was a law enforcement asset, the property of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. As such, while Jamie had been in prison, Jax had been reassigned to someone else.

His guts twisted to the point of nausea. There was no guarantee he'd get Jax back. Ever.

As he walked the short block to the house, he scanned the road and

sidewalk ahead, periodically glancing behind him. Just in case any of the Mancuso crew had miraculously managed to follow him. Speaking of the Mancusos...

He'd already read the FBI's file on Bella Bianco. Still, she definitely wasn't what he'd expected.

Her eyes were as vivid as the blue cornflowers in the field behind his parents' house. The short, spiky blond hair totally suited her, another thing the FBI file had missed—the woman's snarky, spitfire personality.

He admired the way she'd stood up for her employee. Not all restaurant owners would have done that and certainly not with the same spunky flair. If she hadn't set that jackass in his place, he would have, and probably would have broken a few pieces of glassware and plates in the process. It had been far more entertaining to watch Bella in action. In many ways, she was his type of woman, but 1000 percent hands-off.

Jamie continued down the sidewalk. It was nearly eleven p.m., dark out, with only a few lampposts and a sliver of moon illuminating the mid-July sky. The steady hum from the nearby thruway reminded him of where he'd grown up. His hometown, Plainview, New York, was only a stone's throw from one of the country's biggest parking lots—the Long Island Expressway, the same highway he'd commuted to work on for most of the fourteen years he'd been assigned to JFK Airport.

Before turning up the path leading to the house, he searched for vehicles that screamed "U.S. Government." He'd gotten so adept at picking them out he could spot them two blocks away. Probably because being a criminal came easily to him.

His CO, Captain Washington, joked that she didn't know which job Jamie was better at—being a cop or being a felon. Only Jamie wasn't laughing. Considering all the shitty things he'd done after his dad was arrested, maybe he really was a chip off the old block. With his family history, he worried one day he'd get in so deep he might never come back. So he'd begun declining UC requests. Until last year, when he'd been approached by an FBI agent named Barry Jenkins. The FBI had done their homework. They knew just what strings to pull.

His father had been diagnosed with leukemia and wasn't due for parole for another two years. Time was of the essence, and Jamie wanted to give his dad a fighting chance. When the FBI made him an offer he couldn't refuse, he'd taken the deal. Get in deep with the Mancuso Crime Family and the FBI

would get Jamie's father paroled early.

Too bad the deal required a six-month stint in hell.

Wherever Jenkins and Captain Washington had parked, their vehicles were nowhere nearby.

He took the stairs to the front door two at a time, eager to hear the agency's decision about returning Jax to him but not feeling optimistic. He'd been out of jail for four weeks already, waiting for the decision to come down from the top. If Captain Washington had good news to share, she would have done it over the phone.

Sadness gripped him like a vise around his neck. Even if he'd known for certain losing Jax was part of the deal, he would have agreed to the FBI's plan. His dad needed better care, and he wasn't going to get it from the prison system.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Jamie rapped lightly on the door. When it opened, Jenkins stepped aside, then closed the door behind them. The man was nearly six feet tall and as lean as a bean pole. Two seconds later, Jamie had the answer to the question that had been eating him up inside for over half a year.

Ninety pounds of German shepherd galloped from the kitchen, then leaped through the air. Jax's front paws nailed Jamie in the chest. The hit was so hard and powerful, the back of his head slammed against the door. His vision blurred, although he couldn't be sure if it was from the head whack or from the wetness stinging his eyes.

He wrapped his arms around his dog, letting Jax take him to the floor, then straddle him as he licked Jamie's face again and again and again. Jamie's heart pounded with so much joy he thought it would fly out of his throat. He laughed, trying to turn his head to the side so Jax couldn't French-kiss him.

Jax let loose with a series of keening, high-pitched whines and yowls. Keeping his arms wrapped around his partner—his *friend*—Jamie buried his face in Jax's thick fur. Vaguely, he heard Jenkins and Captain Washington chuckle.

"Damn," Washington said. "My wife's never been that happy to see me. Not even on our wedding day."

"Mine, either," Jenkins agreed.

Jamie remained where he was, lying with his back on the floor, a giant German shepherd full on top of him with his head pressed to Jamie's chest. Jax weighed so much Jamie could barely breathe, and he didn't care. His

dog's breath warmed his neck. Both their chests heaved, and he didn't want to move, preferring to soak in the complete and utter relief rolling through him.

He had Jax back. His world was now solidly repositioned on its axis.

Finally, Jax lifted his big black-and-brown head and gazed down at him with pure, unconditional love. His mother always told him he should never marry a woman unless she looked at him the same way.

Jax landed one more lick on Jamie's bearded jaw before he pushed his dog's muzzle away. "I missed you, too, buddy." Understatement of the century. Being without Jax was like missing an arm or a leg.

Woof.

Slowly, Jamie got to his feet. Jax pressed tightly to his side, like he was afraid of letting go. *Same here, buddy. Same here.*

After swallowing the basketball-size lump of emotion, Jamie nodded his thanks to Captain Washington. He was still too choked up to utter anything remotely coherent.

"Good to have you back, Jamie. Especially in one piece." Washington thrust out a large hand that matched her six-foot-plus frame. With a full head of gray hair, she was pushing fifty, but still hit the gym every morning with the younger cops, one of many reasons he respected the woman. "You doin' okay?"

Again, Jamie nodded.

"Uh, yeah." Jenkins cleared his throat as he, too, held out his hand. "Sorry about what happened."

Jamie hesitated before taking Jenkins's hand. He'd known the man was a driven, highly motivated agent, and as they locked gazes, he wondered if the FBI had actually told that inmate to shank him, to make things more believable.

Would they really do that?

Yeah, they might. Because no one the FBI had sent to infiltrate the Mancusos' operation had ever actually succeeded. Through his own contacts, Jamie had learned the last of the FBI's paid informants had died trying.

Finally, he shook the man's hand. To his credit, Jenkins didn't look away. "You better have paid that inmate enough to keep his trap shut," Jamie warned. Otherwise, he was a dead man. Jamie *and* the inmate.

"He was very well compensated," Jenkins assured them. "And he has no idea who actually paid him. The money came down through so many hands

inside the prison, no one will ever be able to trace it back to us.”

“Let’s hope so,” Captain Washington said in a deadly voice, reminding all of them of just how risky this plan was.

If word ever reached Tony Mancuso that the fight had been staged, it would come back to bite Jamie in the ass.

Washington indicated they should sit in the living room. “Let’s get down to business so you can get out of here.”

Which suited him fine. The less time he spent in the company of other cops, the less chance his cover could be blown.

Even though the shades were drawn, Jamie chose an overstuffed armchair that would have been out of the line of sight if they’d been open. Jax lay at his feet, groaning as he rested his head on the tips of Jamie’s boots.

Jenkins and Washington sat on the sofa, then Jenkins pulled out a stack of file folders and handed them to Jamie. “We’ve updated these since you last saw them. I wanted you to look through them before you make first contact at the Bistro.”

Jamie held back a snort. In typical federal government fashion, the FBI’s timetable had been stupid-slow. Jenkins didn’t need to know he’d flushed that timetable down the toilet and not only made first contact but found a place to live.

He flipped open the top folder. Stapled to the inside cover was an enlarged surveillance photo of Paola Mancuso taken in front of Bianco’s Bistro. Hair that had once been dark and was now the color of steel surrounded an elegant face with high cheekbones and few wrinkles for a woman in her early sixties. “Anything new on her since we last spoke?”

Jenkins shook his head. “Other than this recent photo, nothing substantial. But we, uh, don’t have a snitch on the inside anymore.”

Jamie already knew that, but Captain Washington didn’t. When the agent quickly glanced away, Jamie shared a skeptical look with his captain.

Washington narrowed her eyes. “What aren’t you telling us?”

Jenkins licked his lips, then cleared his throat, something Jamie had learned was his *tell* when he was withholding information or about to relate bad news. “Six months ago, the last snitch we sent in wound up dead with a bullet in the back of his head.”

Jamie ground his teeth. Regardless of the fact he’d known this before Jenkins had said anything, it was a critical piece of information that should have been relayed to him *before* he went into Sing Sing. For all the

importance Jenkins gave it, he might as well have been discussing the weather.

Washington leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees. “If this happened six months ago, don’t you think you should have *told* us about it six months ago?”

“He was a low-level drug dealer that got scooped up by the DEA. He was peeling time off his sentence by working for us. With him out of the picture, the only thing we keep hearing on the street is that Paola’s primary goal is to move up the chain in the Mafia ranks, and that she’s planning a ‘big splash.’” Jenkins hooked his fingers into quotation marks. “But we have no idea what that splash is.”

“*Bosses in Skirts.*” Jamie recalled the articles he’d read about the growing movement in Italy.

In a slew of Mafia raids, Italian authorities had recently rounded up nearly four hundred mobsters. With their husbands and sons either in jail or stuck at home wearing ankle bracelets as they awaited trial, women were rising to command positions within the Mafia. After Paola’s husband, Angelo Mancuso, and her eldest son, Angelo Jr., were killed in an FBI sting operation, she’d taken over the family business. Tony, her younger son, hadn’t been involved in the shootout but was sentenced to three years in Sing Sing for other crimes.

Jenkins nodded. “There are currently no women in positions of power in any US-based Mafia family. Paola wants to be the first. Our snitch, who knew Paola before her husband died, said she was always a tough, controlling woman. Now she’s addicted to power and wants more. She’s smart enough to know in order to make that happen, she’ll have to impress the big boss, Salvatore Palumbo.”

Jamie leaned down to scratch Jax’s ears. The Mancusos were an offshoot of the Palumbos—the most powerful crime syndicate on the east coast. It would take a helluva lot to impress Salvatore Palumbo. “You want me to find out what ‘the splash’ is.”

“Yes. And we have more information on Isabella Bianco, Paola’s niece.” Jenkins handed him another file. “We already confirmed the Bistro is co-owned by Isabella *and* Paola with both their names on the deed. Recently, we learned both of them have access to the Bistro’s bank accounts. That gives our suspicion Paola is laundering cash through the Bistro some serious meat. That’s another thing we want you to verify—the money laundering. Once

you do, we can add the Bistro and the prime Nyack real estate it's sitting on to our list of property seizures."

"I thought you said your snitch was dead," Washington said. "Who's your source?"

Jamie held up his hand. "I don't want to know." If he didn't know the identity of the FBI's new snitch, it would keep any conversation he had with the man—or woman—more realistic.

"This person is on the fringes of the Mancuso operation. Not nearly close enough to get the detailed information we need."

"Does he know about me?" Jamie asked. If Jenkins had told his snitch he was an undercover, Jamie would walk out the door.

"No." Jenkins shook his head adamantly.

"Keep it that way." Again, Jamie wondered just how far the FBI would go to make their case. That inmate might not have known Jamie was UC, but he was still a weak link in the chain of Jamie's anonymity. If he squealed, Jamie would ram his size-thirteen boots straight up Jenkins's ass. That was if he was still alive to do it.

He stared at the DL and surveillance photos of Isabella "Bella" Bianco. The photos didn't come close to doing her justice. She was prettier in person. *Much* prettier.

Jax sat up, then rose to rest his paws on the chair's arm and push his muzzle into Jamie's hand. He looked into his dog's golden-brown eyes and swallowed the lump in his throat. He really had missed the big furry guy.

Captain Washington reached for Bella Bianco's folder. "Does co-ownership of the Bistro put Paola's niece on the target list?"

"Probably." Jenkins nodded. "We know where the Bistro's bank accounts are, but we still have to firm up her knowledge of the money laundering scheme to charge her. At a minimum, she'll lose the Bistro."

Again, Jamie looked at the photo. Didn't matter how pretty Isabella Bianco was. If she was up to her eyeballs in Paola's operation, he'd happily slap the cuffs on her wrists himself.

Jax licked his hand, dampening the photo of Bella Bianco, then settling again on the floor at Jamie's feet.

For the next hour, they reviewed files on the rest of the Mancuso family, including, among others, Tony, the three guys Jamie had met in prison, and Tony's lieutenant, Marco Ianetti. Somehow, Ianetti had eluded getting scooped up in the same raid that had landed Tony and the rest of his crew in

Sing Sing.

“When are you heading upstate to Nyack?” Jenkins asked.

“Tomorrow.” Jamie lied. He didn’t fully trust Jenkins. Maybe never would. When he stood, Jax leaped to his feet, tail wagging as he pressed his body to Jamie’s leg.

Jenkins stuffed the files into his backpack. “Where are you staying?”

“Not sure.” Another lie. Tonight, he and Jax would be staying at “the shack,” his family’s summer house on the Jersey Shore in Manasquan. Starting tomorrow, they’d be bunking in Bella Bianco’s apartment. But Jenkins didn’t need to know that. Yet.

Jenkins zipped up his backpack, then stood. “I want a check-in by phone every day, and an in-person meetup with you once a week.”

“Not happening.” He and Jax headed for the door.

Washington followed him.

“What do you mean, not happening?” Jenkins asked, his tone incredulous.

Jamie paused with his hand on the doorknob. Jenkins’s brows had risen to his hairline. “A phone call every day is too much. When I’ve got something, I’ll call. And unless it’s an emergency, we will *never* meet in person.”

Jenkins began shaking his head. “My SAC said you need to—”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what your boss said.” Beside him, Jax lowered his head, eyeing Jenkins warily. “It’s *my* neck sticking out here. Did you ever stop to think that too many check-ins are what got your snitch killed?”

Jenkins didn’t answer. Instead, he looked at Washington, as if expecting Jamie’s captain to side with the FBI. Jenkins had no idea who he was dealing with.

“Not only do I agree with him”—she nodded to Jamie—“but you should know I’ll back him up every time. So, I suggest you let his UC experience and instincts guide you on this.”

Jenkins took a deep breath, then let it out. “Fine. But as for the dog—”

“As for the dog,” Jamie cut him off. “Jax stays with me. He’s my partner.”

“What if he starts acting like a cop? He could blow your cover.”

Washington rolled her eyes. She knew what Jax was capable of. She also knew Jamie wasn’t about to leave Jax behind again.

“When we’re off duty, he’s a dog, with the same needs as any dog. He wants to eat, sleep, and play. Most importantly, he’ll do what I tell him to do.”

Jenkins narrowed his eyes. “How can you be sure?”

“Jax, do you want me to leave you behind?” Subtly, Jamie moved his fist right then left.

Jax shook his head.

“What do you think about Special Agent Jenkins’s suggestion I work this case without you?” Jamie pinched the bridge of his nose.

Jax lifted one paw and rested it on his nose directly in front of his eyes, as if clapping a hand to his face in disbelief. When Jax lowered his paw, Jamie used his hand to pretend pointing a gun. “Bang.”

Jax dropped like a stone to the floor and lay on his side, not moving.

Jamie leveled a meaningful look at Jenkins. “You’ve got something I want.” The authority to get his dad released from prison. “And I’m the only one who can get you what you need. But you’ve gotta give me the space to do it. So back the fuck off.” Without waiting for a response, he reached for the doorknob.

Jax twisted his body to an upright position and bolted to his feet.

“Wait!” Jenkins pulled a slim plastic case from his pocket. “Take this. We’ve got consensual monitoring approval from the U.S. Attorney’s Office.”

Jamie eyed the body wire kit like it contained cyanide, which it basically did. It would get him killed just as quickly. “Forget it. The Donnie Brasco days of strapping on a tape recorder are over. They’ll pat me down, and they’ll do it more than once. And they’re not as stupid as you seem to think they are. They have high-tech equipment to scan for bugs.”

“We *need* recorded evidence.” Jenkins made a move to step closer, then thought better of it when Jax lowered his head and growled. “It’s the only way to get a court order to plant bugs inside the Bistro and at Paola’s house.”

“Not gonna happen.” Jamie rested his hand on Jax’s head before his dog made a late-night snack out of either the body wire kit...or Jenkins. “I’ll get you probable cause, but *not* by wearing a wire. Your snitch was wearing one. *That’s* why his body was found floating in the Hudson River. The wire was shoved down his throat.”

Jenkins’s face twisted into a mask of indignation. “That’s classified information. How do you know that?”

“I’ve got my sources.” Inside the FBI, truth be told.

One of Jamie’s best friends—Dayne Andrews—was a K-9 agent with the Bureau. Too bad Jamie had to get saddled with a guy like Jenkins. Jenkins was no Dayne Andrews.

Dayne would always have his back and had given Jamie the real scoop. But

he'd never reveal his source to Jenkins. "Sending your CI in wired was a mistake. One I won't make. When this case is over, I'd like to come home. And not in a pine box."

He yanked open the door. Jax followed him from the house, leaving Jenkins to stew things over.

Washington caught up to him on the sidewalk. "Say the word, and I'll pull you off this assignment any time."

"I know, thanks." For his dad's sake, he had to see this through to the end, and he had to do it fast.

Then he'd have to pray the FBI made good on its promise.

Chapter Four

Jamie followed Bella's black-and-red Mini Cooper as it turned left on Broadway. Jax's snout rested on his shoulder, his big tongue barely an inch from Jamie's head.

The temporary K-9 handler who'd partnered with Jax while Jamie was in Sing Sing told him Jax had never stopped looking for him. Since their reunion last night, Jax hadn't let Jamie out of his sight. He'd whined until Jamie finally let him sleep on the bed. One pat on the mattress was all it had taken, and Jax had pressed himself against Jamie's back and stayed that way the entire night.

He gave Jax's chin a good scratching. In return, his dog landed a big ole wet one on his cheek. "You know, buddy, I've never been spooned by a dog before."

Jax uttered a soft *woof*.

The Mini Cooper turned left on 6th Avenue, heading up a steep hill. Last night, before meeting up with Jenkins and Captain Washington, he'd run surveillance on all the players' homes. Bella's house was only a few minutes from the Bistro, and Paola's was a short distance from there, north on Broadway. Since getting released from prison, Tony had been bunking with Paola.

When Bella pulled into a short, paved driveway and parked, Jamie pulled in behind her. Jax's ears went upright as he stared through the windshield, watching her get out of the Mini Cooper.

The house was a small two-story colonial built about ten years ago. He'd known Bella had a tenant in the downstairs apartment but hadn't known the tenant had departed. Tony "suggesting" he stay here presented him with an unexpected opportunity, one he planned to take full advantage of.

By living in Bella's apartment, their paths would cross that much more,

without the prying eyes of Tony or his crew. He'd be in a key position to get more information out of her on Paola and the Bistro. He could also monitor Bella's movements more easily, see who came to the house.

He snapped a leash onto Jax's collar. "Let's go." Outside, he opened the rear door for Jax, snagging the leash as his dog jumped out. They met Bella at the bottom of the front stairs.

The smile that graced her lips at Jax's approach was a stark contrast to the straight-faced look of suspicion she'd given *him* when they'd first met.

In a very un-cop-like fashion, Jax wagged his tail furiously, wriggling his body in a clear invitation.

She held out her hand for Jax to sniff. "He's a big one and so beautiful."

"Jax, bow to the lady."

Jax arched his back, lowering his upper body to the ground then remaining that way for several seconds before standing again.

Bella's smile broadened. "It's very nice to meet you, Jax." She cupped her hand behind his ear, scratching in just the right spot that always made Jax groan with pleasure.

Sure enough, Jax tilted his head into her hand and loosed a groan deep in his throat.

When Bella looked at Jamie again, her smile faded faster than a bolt of lightning. "This is the yard." She indicated a small patch of fenced-in grass about the size of a postage stamp, then leveled him with her cornflower-blue eyes. "Picking up after your dog is an absolute, non-negotiable requirement of living here."

"Yes, ma'am." When Jamie touched two fingers to his forehead in mock salute, her lips pursed, and she arched a brow. *Tough crowd*. He had his work cut out for him.

"I'll show you the apartment." She pulled a set of keys from her pocket and opened the ground floor door adjacent to the yard.

The main room was large and furnished with a brown leather sofa, two red upholstered armchairs, and a large TV sitting on top of a black credenza. A blue-and-red Persian-style rug sat on top of oak flooring that looked brand-new. A couple of seascape prints adorned the walls. Unlike her earlier statement to the contrary, the place looked cleaner than a surgical suite. Nothing out of place and not a speck of dust he could see.

"The kitchen's over here." She pointed to a small kitchenette off to one side. "Bathroom, bedroom. Air conditioning. Take it or leave it."

It was clear from the uninviting way she'd shown him the place that she hoped he'd leave it. She was about to be disappointed.

Jax trotted into the kitchen, did a quick loop, then proceeded directly into the bedroom. Jamie followed, pretending to give the place some thought, even though he already knew he'd be staying there. The bedroom had a queen-size bed and two bureaus. Like the main room, the bedroom was spotless. Bella had been lying her ass off about needing to clean the place.

They rejoined her in the main room. "What do you think, Jax? Is this place okay for you?"

Jax bobbed his head up and down, eliciting a smile from Bella.

"I guess we'll take it," Jamie said. "Shake on the deal, Jax."

Jax stepped close to Bella, then sat and lifted his paw in the air. Again, Bella smiled. Again, not for Jamie. But if Jax's canine charm helped ingratiate him with Bella, he'd let his dog schmooze her all day. She shook Jax's paw, then lifted her gaze to Jamie's and narrowed her eyes. "There's one other rule."

"You're big on rules."

"I like rules. They keep order."

"What's the other rule?"

"I live on the top level." She flicked her gaze to the ceiling. "I don't want you bringing trouble into my house."

"Why would you assume I'd bring trouble here?"

She pressed her lips together and gave him a *duh* look. "If you have business dealings, you don't conduct them here. I know who you are." He seriously doubted that. "I know *what* you are." He seriously doubted that, too.

"What exactly am I?" he pressed, amused by the banter.

"Tony's boy."

"And that's a bad thing because..." *He's a mobster?*

She pressed a hand to her forehead and shook her head. "Never mind."

Jamie pulled a thick wad of cash from his pocket and slipped off the gold money clip. No self-respecting mobster carried credit cards. Too traceable. He began peeling off C-notes.

"I can't take your money." Stepping back, Bella held up her hands, palms facing out.

"Why? Tony's not here. He'll never know." The look on her face when Tony had essentially ordered her to take him in rent-free had been obvious.

Offering her cash behind Tony's back might earn him some points with her.

"I'll know. First of all, like I said—you're Tony's boy. Second, my cousin and I don't agree on much, but he was right about one thing. You did save his life, and that means something to me."

Interesting. His something-is-off meter was pinging into the WTF zone.

The affection Bella had for her cousin appeared genuine, and yet, clearly, she didn't want Jamie—a mobster—living here. That didn't jibe.

The FBI had identified the Bistro as ground zero for Paola Mancuso's money laundering scheme and the geographical focal point of her entire operation, so why would Bella care if he was part of the Mancuso crew?

"You really don't want me living here, do you? And it's not just because Tony ordered you not to take any rent money." Something else was at play here, and he intended to find out what.

Rather than answer his question, she pulled the apartment key off her keychain and handed it to him. "I have to get back to the Bistro. I'm down a bartender for the next few weeks." She headed for the door.

"Wait," he said, another idea crystalizing. "I can tend bar. If you can't take money from me, at least let me help out."

Again, her eyes narrowed, glittering with distrust. Compared to her, Tony was an open book. The woman was suspicion personified, and he wondered why. "What's your experience? Serving juice boxes in prison doesn't count."

"Ouch." He grimaced, feigning indignation. "I helped out at a friend's bar for years. It's been a while, but I'm assuming beer taps and corkscrews still operate the same."

She twisted her lips, calling attention to the fact that she wore a shade of pale pink lipstick that accentuated the full curve of her lower lip. "Can you start tonight?"

"Absolutely."

"Fine." She headed for the door again, turning before opening it. "Dinner starts in two hours. Be at the Bistro by four, and I'll show you where everything is." After exchanging cell phone numbers, she left. Moments later, the Mini Cooper's engine fired up.

"What do you think, Jax?" Jax snorted. "Yeah, me, too." He gave his dog a quick pat on the head.

The only thing better than getting the information the FBI wanted was getting it faster. Working with Tony to find out what Paola was planning was still at the top of the list. Helping out Bella at the Bistro would position him

perfectly to get evidence the FBI needed to seize the place and charge anyone involved with money laundering. A two-pronged assault. One he couldn't have planned any better.

Through a window, he watched the Mini Cooper back onto the road and pull away. He stood there until the car disappeared from view. For a long moment, he couldn't put his finger on exactly what was bothering him.

Playing Bella Bianco and worming his way into her life and her home had been as easy as breathing because he was good at undercover work. Better than good, actually. Half the time he was just being himself. A bad person.

Somewhere along the line, being a fine upstanding citizen and cop had become exhausting, and he was getting tired of trying to be something he could never be. The harder he worked at it, the worse it made him feel. Some days it seemed easier to just go over to the dark side like his father had and become what his father was. Or at least used to be. A criminal.

So why was he questioning the morality of what he was doing? *Lying to people*. This time, it bothered him because on some inner level, he liked Bella. Liked her snark and her guts.

But that wouldn't stop him from doing whatever it took to nail the Mancusos—*all* of them, if necessary, including Bella—and get his father released from prison.

Chapter Five

Bella stared out the front door of the Bistro, watching the tall anvil clouds forming in the sky, a sure sign late afternoon thunderstorms were on the way. Speaking of storms...

She looked up and down the sidewalk, tapping her fingers on her crossed arms. It was four fifteen. His first shift on the job, and Jimmy was a no-show. Typical mobster, already thinking he could come and go as he pleased with no obligation to anyone. Except for Tony. But for her, *yeah right*.

After showing him the apartment and half hoping he wouldn't like it, she'd thought he would be right behind her. Already she was regretting her decision to let him work off his rent at the bar. The only thing she didn't regret about the hulking man staying at her place was his dog.

How did a criminal wind up with such an awesome dog as Jax?

And he'd saved Tony's life. She meant what she'd said. That *did* mean something, and it elevated Jimmy Santoro in her estimation, whether she liked it or not. If only he wasn't easy on the eyes, too. No man should have that kind of devastating good looks and a body to match. But that was only a shell, a coating, like the pretty fondant on Lou's petit fours that hid hundreds of evil calories. God knew what danger and violence lurked behind Jimmy's handsome facade.

Bella watched as the last lunch customer paid their bill. The Bistro was quiet, the blessed post-lunch lull, during which they cleared away dishes and re-set tables for the dinner rush.

She smiled at the last customers. "Thank you for coming." She held open the door, closing it as the couple left, holding hands.

When was the last time she'd held hands with a man? So long ago she couldn't remember.

Sierra set a tray of clean napkins and silverware on one of the window

tables. “Who were you looking for?”

“Jimmy Santoro.” Bella began folding the napkins into the Bistro’s traditional pyramid shape.

“Why?” Sierra asked as she set out the silver.

“He’s bartending here for a couple of weeks.”

“Seriously?” She looked up, a fork poised in midair. “You’re letting one of Tony’s boys work here?”

Bella shrugged and started on another napkin. “I can’t take his rent money. At least I can squeeze time out of him.” That was if he ever showed up.

Rebecca and Lori, the Bistro’s two regular waitresses, strolled arm in arm from the kitchen. “We’ve got this.” Rebecca grabbed a stack of napkins and took it to the other window table. Lori carried a tray of silverware to the same table, leaning over to kiss Rebecca on the lips.

Bella sighed. “Love is in the air.” *Just not for me.*

“They do make a great couple.” Sierra nodded to the other waitresses, then sniffed. “And do you smell that?” She pointed to the kitchen. “Lou’s testing out a new gnocchi Bolognese.”

Bella took a deep inhale through her nose. Meat. Lou’s famous rich red sauce. Garlic. Thyme. “What’s new about it?”

“He’s using beef *and* pork. Just make him happy and take one bite. See if you prefer it with the added pork.”

Bella shook her head. One bite always led to two, then two to three, and before she knew it, she’d finish the whole darned plate of calories.

Sierra held up a hand. “Don’t look at me like that. One bite, then he’ll make your boring salad for dinner. And for the last time, you *don’t* need to lose weight.”

Bella groaned. At times, she knew Sierra was right. But one tiny, passive-aggressive comment from her aunt, and any sound reasoning flew right out the window. It had become an insecurity now, hacking away at her self-confidence.

“Hey, Bella! Got something I want you to try.” Through the kitchen window, Lou waved her over. At only five-foot-four, the man was built like a tank and obscured most of the kitchen behind him. Even at this distance, the smile he gave her revealed his gleaming gold incisor.

The front door opened, and Jimmy Santoro walked in.

Adrenaline shot through Bella. The surprise—that *must* have been what sent a surge of energy thrumming through her blood—apparently showed on

her face.

“What?” Jimmy held out his arms. “You did want me to come back. Right?”

“Uh, yeah. I—”

“Get out of here!” Lou bellowed. “Get *out!*” Lou had spun, his back to them now. Gripping a long-handled wood spoon, he held it over his head and shook it in a menacing gesture.

Jimmy took off, racing through the dining room, heading straight for the kitchen. Bella took off after him. Lou was normally as jolly as Saint Nick. For him to exhibit violence—of *any* kind—meant whatever was happening in the kitchen was dire.

She ran past the bar and down the short hallway to the kitchen door. Sierra, Lori, and Rebecca crowded in behind her. Pete, the busboy, stood off to one side, covering his mouth with his hand, trying not to laugh. Jimmy leaned against the washing station by the door, stroking his satanic beard and grinning. Lou, on the other hand, looked as angry as she’d ever seen him.

His body shook with rage, his face beet-red as he gripped the spoon like it was a javelin he was about to hurl. Then Bella understood why.

Smack dab in the middle of the stainless-steel prep counter was a plate of what had to be Lou’s new and improved gnocchi Bolognese. Standing on the same counter, with its teeth bared and its face covered in Bolognese sauce, was a tiny dog.

“What *is* that?” Lori asked.

“I *think* it’s a dog.” Rebecca peered closer. “It’s so small. Maybe it’s a puppy.”

“You little rat!” Mimicking the dog, Lou bared his teeth. “Nobody invited you. You can’t sneak into my kitchen and steal my food!”

At Lou’s approach, the dog, which couldn’t weigh more than five pounds soaking wet, let out a squealing *yip*, jumped off the counter, then scampered beneath the bottom shelf stacked with white dinner plates.

“Honey.” Sierra placed a hand on her husband’s back, rubbing in soothing circles. “It’s just hungry.”

Knowing how protective Lou was of the Bistro’s kitchen, Bella understood his fury. To a point. She, too, rested a calming hand on her chef’s arm. “I take it that plate of gnocchi Bolognese was intended for me?”

“It *was*.” Lou got to his knees, peering under the shelf. “Get *out* of my kitchen!” He shoved the spoon beneath the ledge, shooing the dog out from

its hiding place. It scurried into a corner, its little body shaking.

When Lou lunged again, Bella stopped him, grabbing the spoon from his hand. “Don’t. I’ll deal with the little intruder. Sierra,” she said, nodding to her friend. “Why don’t you take Lou to the bar and pour him a nice big glass of something strong?” Before the entire town heard him bellowing.

“There, there.” Sierra patted her husband’s back, ushering him from the kitchen like a child. A very *large* child.

Lou threw one last look over his shoulder. “I’ll have to sanitize the entire kitchen because of that little rat.”

She looked at the poor, cowering dog. Bella didn’t know who was shaking more, the dog or Lou.

Jimmy snorted. Lori and Rebecca giggled.

“Pete,” Bella said, turning to the grinning busboy. “Please get that jug of bleach from the storage closet and start wiping down the kitchen. Once I get the dog out of here, you can mop the floor.”

Bella shut her eyes and took a deep breath. “Never a dull moment around here.”

“I can see that.” Jimmy had crossed his arms and was now leaning back casually, as if he’d been enjoying the show. “Need some help?”

“I suppose so.” She took the plate of Bolognese and walked closer to where the dog was now curled into a tight, trembling ball. She knelt about three feet away, and her heart went out to the little beast.

Its coat was filthy, covered in what looked like mud, dirt, and Bolognese sauce. A few blood-engorged ticks stuck out through the dog’s short hair of indeterminate color. Also sticking out were the animal’s ribs. To stand up against someone as hulking and furious as Lou, the poor thing had to be starving.

“Careful,” Jimmy warned, crouching beside her, several kitchen towels now draped over his thick forearm. “He may be small, but he can still bite, and he could have rabies.”

“I know.” She set the plate on the floor and picked up a piece of gnocchi. “Easy there, little one.” She held the pasta closer, just in front of its mouth. The dog’s nostrils flared, then it stretched its neck and snatched the dumpling from Bella’s hand. When it was done chewing and swallowing, she held out another piece, which it grabbed from her fingertips with equal relish.

Jimmy chuckled. “He’s quite the foodie, isn’t he?”

As close as he was, Bella smelled Jimmy’s aftershave or cologne or

whatever it was that cut through the scents of garlic, herbs, and rich meat sauce.

Citrus? Mint? Lemons? *No.*

Clean. Fresh. Crisp, and with a tiny hint of some indefinable spice. Whatever the scent was, it suited him.

She held out another gnocchi, this one loaded with bits of meat. The dog needed the nourishment. She hoped all the rich food wouldn't make it sick, however. "How do you know it's a *he*?"

Jimmy turned to her, arching a dark brow. "It's a guy thing. Trust me. It's a *he*."

Piercing, dark brown eyes held her gaze, and she couldn't look away. There really was something so mesmerizing about him.

Heat crept to her face, and she quickly returned her focus to the dog. She had to quit staring at the man.

Pete returned with the jug of bleach and a mop and began wiping down the counters.

Jimmy glanced over his shoulder. "We'd better get him out of here before Lou decides to make the next batch of Bolognese out of *him*." He canted his head to the dog, who stood then shook, sending bits of dirt and sauce in every direction.

She elbowed Jimmy's arm, the muscles of which were rock hard. "Don't say that. He'll hear you."

The dog burped, a loud, reverberating sound that had no business coming from so small an animal.

At the same time, Bella and Jimmy burst into laughter, his rich and deep and for some idiotic reason reminding her of equally rich and highly caloric chocolate ganache. She'd only been seriously dieting for a week, and already she was craving the stuff.

She glanced at the clock over their heads. Less than ninety minutes until the doors opened for dinner, and now she had to deal with this pesky little canine problem. "I really don't have time for this. What am I going to do with him?"

"Want me to bring him to a shelter?"

"No!" She glared at Jimmy, surprised at the adamancy of her response.

"Are you sure? I could find a no-kill shelter."

Bella looked back at the dog, who'd lain down again, curled tightly in the corner, his eyes beginning to close. Her heart squeezed. The dog was alone.

No family, or if he had one, they'd abandoned him. Then again, did she really have the time to take on the responsibility of a dog? *No*. Could she really offer it the kind of love and support it needed? *Probably not. Maybe not.*

The dog let out a tiny whimper.

Bella groaned. *I am such a sucker*. "I can't bring him to a shelter. He came here for help, and I won't abandon him." Because she knew exactly what that felt like. To essentially be abandoned by one's own family.

"Okay, then." Jimmy inched closer to the sleeping dog, gently wrapping the towels around its body, then holding it in the crook of his arm. Still, the dog slept, snoring softly. Jimmy stood, smiling down at the animal as if he were looking at a swaddled baby. *His baby*.

For that matter, what did she really know about Jimmy Santoro? He could very well *be* married, with five little bambinos and a bambina on the way.

"Where do you want me to put him?" he asked.

"Um." She cleared her throat, then glanced at the clock again. "I don't have time to do anything with him right now, but we can set him up in one of the closets in the back. Follow me."

Bella led the way to a small closet by the back door of the Bistro, which was slightly ajar, probably how the gluttonous little intruder had snuck in. She opened the closet door, then flipped on the light.

"How about that empty box and some of those linens?" Jimmy asked.

She turned to find him rocking the dog in his arms, again reminding her of a father with his newborn. "Good idea."

In no time, she had the floor of the closet cleared and had stuffed a large cardboard box with a tablecloth bunched up for cushioning. "Here. I'll take him."

As Jimmy transferred the sleeping dog to her arms, his forearm brushed against hers, his knuckles grazing her left breast. Her belly quivered, and as she looked into Jimmy's handsome face, a muscle in his lean jaw twitched.

Carefully, so as not to wake him, she laid the dog in the box. It didn't wake, didn't so much as bat a doggie eyelash. Whatever trauma he'd been through had tuckered the little guy out. "He needs a serious bath and a trip to the vet." She turned to thank Jimmy, but he was gone.

Quietly, she went to the door and closed it behind her, leaving the light on so if the dog woke, it wouldn't be so afraid.

She went into the Bistro's office, which was really no bigger than the closet she'd just come from, then hastily scribbled DO NOT OPEN on a

piece of paper. She grabbed a roll of tape, returned to the closet, and taped the sign to the door.

Cracking the door open an inch, she peeked in on her new guest, who was still sleeping contentedly, full belly and all. Was she making a mistake keeping the dog? Until that moment, she hadn't truly realized she'd decided to keep it. But there it was. A new addition to her nonexistent family.

Back in the dining room, she looked around for Jimmy. They barely had enough time for her to show him the ropes, get him settled, then resume her own duties with the rest of her staff.

Sierra filled salt and pepper shakers at the bar. Lou was finishing up a glass of red wine. Rebecca and Lori continued setting the tables. Jimmy Santoro was...nowhere.

Before asking the question she was pretty sure she already knew the answer to, Bella parked her hands on her hips. "Has anyone seen Jimmy Santoro?"

"The new hot guy?" Using a fork, Lori pointed to the door. "He left a few minutes ago."

"Seriously?" Bella curled her hands into tight fists. He hadn't even started his first shift, and already he'd bailed on her. "Did he say if he was coming back?"

Rebecca and Lori shrugged, both shaking their heads.

"Great," Bella muttered, heading to the bar which, at this point, she'd have to prep and man herself tonight. *Again.*

Disappointment was a steady pounding in her head. Once again, she'd made a mistake by thinking she could rely on someone. Stupidly, she'd thought Jimmy had been sincere about his offer to help. Apparently not. Shame on her for expecting too much. She'd known better, but there was something about him that had her believing he'd be different.

She picked up a clean rag and started wiping down the bar. Believing in anyone had always been a mistake. No one could be trusted to be there for her. Certainly not Jimmy Santoro.

If only the man weren't so handsome.

Bella groaned. She'd only known him for a few hours. There was no justifiable reason for her to keep thinking about him. Or the fact that he was the most intriguing man she'd met in a very, very long time.

Chapter Six

Jamie pushed open the door to the Bistro. Before it had even clicked shut behind him, four pairs of eyes—*female* eyes—pinned him in place.

Bella's eyes narrowed, skewering him like a stuck pig. Looked like he was in the doghouse. She probably assumed he'd skipped out on her. He kinda had. Partly because he'd had an idea, and partly because he'd needed air and a little space.

Crammed inside that tiny closet, standing only inches from her, it had been impossible not to inhale her floral scent. Within seconds, the entire closet had smelled like a florist shop, a mixed bouquet of dozens of different flowers. He also hadn't meant to inadvertently touch her breast, but again, the tiny closet...

She stalked from behind the bar, her jaw set, and still glaring daggers at him. "Why did you take off? Dinner starts in less than an hour, and we still have to—" She looked at the box under his arm, then her jaw dropped and her eyes went wide. Her gaze, which had softened considerably, lifted to his. "You—you..."

"Sorry," he said. Eyes he already thought were the prettiest he'd ever seen shimmered like blue glass in the river shallows. "I probably should have told you where I was going." And that he'd be back. He'd only been gone fifteen minutes tops. Well, maybe thirty.

"No, it's not that. It's—it's..." She pointed to the box.

"A dog cage. I know." She acted like he'd just invented red wine.

"Thank you," she said softly. "You didn't have to do that. I'll pay you back for whatever you spent."

He shrugged. "Forget it." Given his ulterior motives, the last things he wanted or deserved were her money and, least of all, her gratitude. "I'll get this set up for him."

Ten minutes later, Jamie left the dog sleeping in his new cage with a bowl of fresh water and the closet door cracked to let in fresh air. The cage had been a nice touch. If the shocked look on Bella's face was any indication, he was racking up the brownie points. Getting into her good graces hadn't been the initial reason he'd run to the pet store. The more he thought about it, that move was instinctive, and damned if it hadn't made him feel good. When was the last time he'd felt good about *anything* he'd done?

He frowned as he scanned the dining room. The place was warm, colorful, and inviting, an odd contrast to Bella's prickly sarcasm. She might be all snark and spitfire on the outside, but inside there was a hidden softness that had made itself known when she'd risked having her fingers bitten off by a dirty little puppy who'd had the audacity to infiltrate Lou's kitchen.

She stood on her tiptoes to hang wineglasses on the wood rack suspended above the bar. The movement tightened her slacks over her ass and the shirt across her breasts.

He needed to focus. On work. Not on how good Bella Bianco looked or how pleased she'd been by his gifts.

Or how much seeing her so pleased had pleased *him*.

Overall, the last two days had gone well. Jamie already had a good foundation with Tony, and they planned to meet up again tomorrow. Now to dive deeper into the other half of his two-pronged assault.

Bella waved him over to the bar. "This is Sierra, the Bistro's head waitress." She indicated the tall, smiling brunette who could have walked a cover model runway.

Jamie shook hands with the woman.

"And this is Rebecca." She nodded to the slim young blond woman who looked so frail a gust of wind could knock her down. "Rebecca is studying to be an anesthesiologist at Nyack Hospital. And this is Lori." She indicated to another woman. "Lori is on her way to becoming a tennis pro."

"In my dreams." Lori's shoulders shook, and her red curls bounced when she laughed.

"Follow me." Bella led the way into the kitchen. Smells of garlic and sizzling meat made Jamie's mouth water. "You've already met Lou. He's our head chef, the maestro of the Bistro. Lou, this is Jimmy Santoro. He's working here now."

"Nice ta meet ya. Officially, that is. Welcome to the Bistro."

"Thanks," Jamie said as the other man pumped his hand enthusiastically.

Lou's hand was as big as a catcher's glove, engulfing Jamie's, a feat that didn't happen too often.

Jamie nodded in greeting to a kid cutting vegetables and another washing dishes.

When something sizzled and popped loudly, Lou picked up the tongs and turned over a big hunk of browning meat in a saucepan. "Hey, when you take a dinner break, swing back here and I'll give you a plate of my famous sausage lasagna."

"Thanks." Jamie's heart suddenly felt as heavy as an anvil. Lasagna was his and his dad's favorite food. His mother used to make it all the time for Sunday dinner. Before his dad went to prison.

For killing someone.

Sierra glided into the kitchen, looped a graceful arm over Lou's shoulders, then planted a kiss on his cheek. "That's how he convinced me to marry him. One bite of that lasagna, and I was smitten."

Must be true love. Not that Jamie would know.

Years ago, and probably because he'd never dated any woman longer than a hot second, his friends had nicknamed him "Romeo." He enjoyed women, and they seemed to like him back, but between the demands of his job and the crap rolling around his head, he'd remained single.

Lou planted a smacking kiss on Sierra's lips. "For me, it was *colpo di fulmine*, 'the lightning bolt.' Ever watch *The Godfather*?" He aimed the tongs at Jamie.

"Who hasn't?" *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* were two of his favorite movies.

Lou sighed as he gazed up at his wife. "I was spellbound at the sight of a beautiful woman. The one woman meant to be mine."

All of Jamie's friends seemed to have found that one special woman. It wasn't in the cards for him. But Lou and Sierra were totally rocking it.

"C'mon." Bella waved her hand. "I'll show you the rest of the place."

He followed her down a short hallway.

"You didn't seem too excited about the lasagna," she threw over her shoulder.

"On the contrary. I love lasagna."

"You look like you work out enough to burn off all those calories," she said, continuing down the hall.

He did. Before he'd begun working out every day at Sing Sing's "iron pile"

and running as many laps around the prison yard as his outdoor time allowed, he'd worked out religiously in the Port Authority Police precinct's facility at JFK Airport. "I start eating pasta, I can't stop. A good lasagna is worth the calories, even if I gain twenty pounds."

She stopped outside a closed door. "I agree, but I'm trying to shed a few pounds."

"Why?" To him, she looked perfect. Not skinny, not fat. Just...perfect. Not that he was checking her out or anything.

"Oh, please." She turned, a look of disbelief on her face. "You already have the job. No need to suck up to the boss. You should know honesty is something I value highly."

"I'm not sucking up, and I'll be sure to remember that."

Bella arched a blond brow, as if she thought he was doling out a bucketful of crap.

The phone in his back pocket vibrated, and he ignored it. "I'll need to find a place to go run off some calories." And exercise his K-9.

She stopped outside a closed door but didn't open it. "Rockland Lake is only a few minutes from here. There's a three-mile running trail that loops around the shoreline."

"Sounds good. I'll take Jax there." He'd have to run that loop more than three times to get in his daily ten miles. "Do you want to run with us sometime?" He had a feeling once she was outside the Bistro, he could pull more information from her.

"I prefer to run alone." She pulled a set of keys from her pocket. "Besides, I'm sure you could walk faster than I run."

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Okay." Time for a change of topic. "Have you thought of a name for your new dog?"

"No. How did you come up with the name Jax?"

That was a story he could never reveal to her.

All Port Authority K-9s were named after an officer who died on September 11. Jax had been named after John "Jack" Skala, a Port Authority lieutenant who'd been killed that infamous day. "He was named after a friend who passed away."

"I'm sorry." She cleared her throat, then unlocked the door and flipped on the lights. "This is our private banquet room. I'm sure *you'll* be seeing plenty of it."

"What does that mean?" He stepped inside. The room was about half the

size of the main dining room, with no pretense made to give it the same welcoming ambience.

The walls were dark red and devoid of decoration. High shelving just below the ceiling encircled the room. The only decorations on the shelves were a few pots of fake flowers and strands of tiny white lights, some of the bulbs on which were out. Black carpeting completed the somber, secretive vibe.

She humphed. “This is where Tony and my aunt, whom I’m sure you’ll meet soon enough, have their *special* meetings.” There was no hiding the acidic tone in her voice.

The operational, tactical side of Jamie’s brain sparked to life. “What kind of special meetings?” he asked, all the while darting his gaze around the room, surveying it for places he could plant listening devices. But he didn’t have probable cause for that. *Yet*.

“Like I said, you’ll find out soon enough. Let’s go.” She headed for the door.

Again, there was no hiding the icy tone. Something was off here. “You don’t approve of this room being used for meetings?” He followed her back into the hall.

She flipped off the lights and closed the door behind them, locking it. “I always intended to fix this room up and turn it into a place where customers could hold private parties—birthdays, wedding receptions, graduations.”

“Why can’t you do that?”

Bella’s lips tightened. “I’m not the sole owner of this place. My aunt owns half—fifty-*one* percent, actually—and she won’t approve it. I can’t make any major changes without her consent.”

Jamie committed her words to memory for the report he’d have to write up for Jenkins.

She was aware Paola and Tony were holding meetings here and clearly didn’t like it. So was Bella part of the Mancusos’ operation or not? She had to be, had to know Paola was laundering money through the place. But there was a missing component. Like whether Bella Bianco was a willing or *unwilling* participant.

He followed her back to the bar. A cash register sat in the center of the rear shelf, flanked on one side by rows of top-shelf liquor, and on the other, a selection of microbrews. If his friend, Kade Sampson, were here he’d have an orgasm. Beer was pretty much all he and his K-9 friends drank when they got

together. But it was the enormous cappuccino maker sitting on the far end of the back ledge that made Jamie's heart zing.

"Based on what you told me," Bella said, "I assume you know the basics. Pouring beer, opening wine bottles, filling orders brought in by the waitstaff?" When he nodded, she continued. "The good stuff is down here." She pointed to two glass-fronted refrigerators, one stocked with red wine, the other white. Digital readouts indicated both units were temperature controlled. "I'm the only one with a key to these coolers. I unlock them right before we open every day. But no drinking on the job, especially *these* wines."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Besides, I'm a beer guy."

"No drinking beer on the job, either."

"Yes, ma'am." He couldn't help but grin.

Luckily, she'd turned her back to him and missed it. "This is Big Mama." She rested her hand lovingly on the gleaming stainless-steel cappuccino maker. "It takes a while to get the hang of her, let alone make the flower, heart, and leaf foam designs our cappuccinos are famous for. My regular bartender will probably be back long before you have a chance to learn. Until then, either I or one of the waitstaff will cover espressos and cappuccinos. So hands off Big Mama."

"Understood," Jamie lied. He couldn't wait to get his hands on Big Mama. In the world of latte art, flowers, hearts, and leaves were child's play.

"Bella?" Sierra set a tray of salt and pepper shakers on the bar. "Don't forget to go to the bank tomorrow, and the AC is making noises again."

Bella groaned. "Just what I need. Another bill to pay." She glanced at her watch. "It's too late to get a contractor here today, and getting one to show up on a Saturday is about as likely as Paola selling me her share of the Bistro." To Jamie, she said, "If you have any questions, snag me or Sierra."

Another interesting factoid. Bella wanted to buy out her aunt.

"I've got to go check on the AC," she said. "Any questions?"

Jamie shook his head. "I've got this."

As Bella headed for the back door, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and lit up the screen to see who'd called. *Jenkins*. The man had also texted. Hadn't Jamie been as clear as vodka that he'd reach out when he had significant intel?

His phone buzzed with another incoming text, this one from Tony. They'd exchanged numbers yesterday. *Meet at Bistro*.

“She’s not normally so testy,” Sierra said as she filled a tray with water glasses. “Can you get me another tray?”

“Sure.” Jamie grabbed one from behind the bar. “I was beginning to think it was just me.”

“She’s just had a lot on her mind lately.”

“Like what?” he asked, keeping an eye on the door. When Sierra hesitated, he added, “I’m a bartender now. Whatever happens at the bar stays at the bar.”

When she smiled, he could understand why Lou had been struck by *colpo di fulmine*. Sierra was indeed a beautiful woman any man would be spellbound by. Oddly, Bella’s scowling face popped into his head.

Sierra pulled down more water glasses. “All I can say is that every family has its issues.”

He snagged more glasses and set them on the half-filled tray. “True that.” His family was no exception. In a big, big way.

“In fact,” she continued, “I’m surprised Bella hired you. She doesn’t hire anyone associated with Tony or Paola Mancuso—her aunt, in case you don’t know who her aunt is.”

“Why’s that?”

“Why she hired you or why she won’t hire anyone her family recommends?”

“Both.”

Sierra wiped down the inside of a glass. “Knowing you’re in tight with Tony, I can’t say why she hired you, but having complete hiring control was something she worked out with Paola a long time ago. It’s the one thing Paola *did* keep her word about.”

Jamie arched a brow. Plying Sierra for more intel was on the tip of his tongue, but he had to tread lightly. Pushing too hard too fast would look suspicious. “How does she find the people who work for her?”

“As for Lou and I, we went to culinary school in Italy with Bella. When she reached out and told us she was opening a restaurant in a primo Nyack location, we moved across country to help her, and she convinced us to stay on. We all work together on the menus, but she gives Lou all the space he needs to create his magic. She spends most of the time managing the place now.”

“And the rest of the staff?” he prodded.

“Want ads, mostly, and on recommendations.”

The front door opened. A woman in her sixties wearing a pink skirt and matching short-sleeve jacket, high heels, and a thick strand of pearls around her neck strode in.

Paola Mancuso. In the flesh.

Jamie's muscles tightened. He'd recognized her instantly, although he had to pretend he didn't.

Several people followed her inside. Tony came first, followed by Marco Ianetti and the rest of Tony's crew. All were in their forties with dark-brown hair and eyes. Personality-wise, however, these guys were as different as BB gun ammo and fifty caliber machine gun rounds.

The men all wore suits and brand-new Ferragamos. Except for Sammy Sneakers, who sported a brand-new pair of Nikes with his thousand-dollar Armani suit.

"Jimmy!" Tony waved him over.

"Here we go," Sierra whispered, hefting the tray. "The queen has arrived."

Seemed like Bella's friend had no love for Paola Mancuso.

"How'd you get here so fast?" Tony made a show of clapping Jamie on the back as he patted him down again. "I musta texted you five seconds ago."

Paola tilted her head, a shrewd look coming over her features as she assessed Jamie from head to toe.

"I'm bartending here for a while."

"Bartending?" Tony's brows shot to his hairline. "My cousin never hires anyone I like."

"So I heard," Jamie said.

Beside him, Paola snorted.

Marco's eyes narrowed to slits, the same as they'd done when Tony had insisted Bella let Jamie stay in her vacant apartment. Something was brewing behind Marco's glare, something he had to be cautious of. The man didn't like him, that much was clear. Since they didn't know each other, he guessed at the cause.

Bella.

The guy must have a thing for her. Jamie would bet his last bullet on that, but he had yet to see those feelings returned.

"You've got the gift, my man." Again, Tony subtly patted down Jamie's back. "This is my mother, Paola Mancuso."

Jamie knew the protocol and waited for her to make the first move. For a long moment she said nothing, continuing to eye him intensely, as if she were

dissecting his brain. When she finally extended her hand, he took a chance. Gently, and with due courtesy to her stature as head of the Mancuso Crime Family, he took her hand, then leaned over and lightly kissed the backs of her fingers. “A pleasure.” Their gazes locked, and he held his breath.

Go big or go home. Right? She’d either love it or smack him upside the head with her purse.

Paulie spit out a sunflower seed shell on the floor. “Oh shit,” he whispered under his breath.

Paola’s eyes flared and remained that way for a long moment, one so long Jamie was sure he’d blown it. Then her face pinkened, and a corner of her lipstick-reddened lips lifted and she chuckled. “I can see why my niece hired you. You’re not only handsome as sin, but you’re a charmer as well.”

“Damn, Fist.” Tony nudged him. “I’ve said it before. You’re one ballsy sonofabitch.”

“You saved my son’s life. For that, I’m grateful, and I thank you.” With a flourish, Paola waved her arm and began walking through the dining room, straight past the bar. “Bella?” she called out as Bella walked in. “Bring two bottles of the Pierazzuoli Chianti and seven glasses.” Without waiting for a response, she continued down the hall past the kitchen.

“Wait!” Bella rushed after her. “Paola, I’d like to speak with you.”

Without turning, Paola again waved her hand, this time in a dismissive gesture. “Not now.”

“*When?*” Bella shouted back, but her aunt ignored her and unlocked the door to the private banquet room. Apparently, Paola also had a key to that room.

“C’mon, Fist.” Tony gripped Jamie’s shoulder, urging him forward as he ran his hand down Jamie’s back yet again. “You got a phone on you?”

“Yeah.” Jamie nodded.

“Leave it behind the bar,” Tony said casually.

Casual my ass.

In Sing Sing, Jamie had taken a blade for Tony, but he still wasn’t a completely trusted member of the Mancuso organization.

With Tony watching, Jamie slipped out his phone and tucked it under a ledge beneath the cash register. When he turned, Bella sent him a look hot enough to melt off a tattoo. If he had one. He was supposed to be tending bar, and on his first day of work was ditching his duties without a second thought. Chumming with Paola took priority. He was about to dip his foot into the

shallow end of the Mancuso inner sanctum, and he needed to do everything within his power to wade in deeper. Even if it meant incurring Bella's wrath.

A few minutes later, they were all seated around a table in the Bistro's private meeting room. Sierra had brought the wine and glasses, then left and closed the door.

"To Jimmy." When Paola raised her glass, everyone else did the same, waiting for her to take a sip before they did. It was like watching royalty hold court. Everyone took their cues from the queen.

Marco Ianetti was the only one who didn't drink.

"Now," she said, setting down the glass. "Let's talk business."

Jamie listened to the men's round table discussion of one scam or petty theft after another they had running to bring in money. That's what working for the Mafia was all about. To get in good, you either earned for the family, or you killed for it. As a deputized federal agent, murder was off the books.

Everything Jamie had just heard was small potatoes. Paola wasn't stupid, of that much he was certain. He'd saved her son's life, but unless he earned his keep, she would never trust him enough to bring him all the way into her sanctum and clue him in on whatever "big splash" she was planning. What he needed was something big, and he needed it fast.

An hour later, Paola stood. Meeting over. No preamble, no flowery etiquette. Just over, and Jamie got it. She was a powerful businesswoman, of sorts. Her time was valuable, and she wasn't about to waste it. Before leaving, she whispered something in Tony's ear, then she was gone.

Tony grabbed Jamie's arm. "Fist, my mother likes you. You just got something from her no new guy *ever* has."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"A dinner invitation. Sunday night at her place." Tony grinned, then jabbed a finger at Jamie's chest. "After the big raid a few years ago, our numbers are down. *Way* down, and she wants to rebuild. But you gotta impress her, so *impress*. Bring good ideas to the table. No humps allowed. Understand?"

Jamie nodded. "Understood." A hump was a non-producer. Humps didn't last long.

Tony stood, adding, "You said you had a dog. Bring him along. Ma likes dogs."

He followed Tony out and watched Paola's entourage leave. From behind the bar, Bella threw him a rag that he snagged from the air just before it smacked into his face. "Your nose is brown. You might want to wipe it off."

Jamie frowned. "I'm a lot of things, but I'm no ass kisser."

In return, she pursed her lips. "We'll see about that."

Today was Friday. In less than two days, he had to come up with a money-making scam. Being no stranger to Mafia protocol, he'd figured on that. Just not quite so soon.

He glanced at his watch. The people he needed to contact were back on duty tomorrow. Tonight, he'd do a little more surveillance of the area, then first thing in the morning, he'd make some calls.

His next move was critical, one that could make or break his standing in the Mancuso Crime Family. It would either get him a solid foot in the door, or get his foot cut off.

Literally.

Chapter Seven

Bella pushed through the Bistro's front door, then began speed walking. Last night, she'd set up a milk crate in her kitchen for her new dog, and this morning she'd carried him back to the crate she'd left in the Bistro closet.

Keeping a dog in a restaurant violated half a dozen county health codes, but no health inspector who valued their life would dare cite her or the Bistro. Not with Paola Mancuso's name on the deed.

On Saturdays, the bank closed at two o'clock. She barely had ten minutes to get there and make her deposit before they locked up for the rest of the weekend. Taking care of the dog, who still didn't have a name, had taken up most of her morning, and she still had to give the little guy a bath and make a vet appointment.

She rounded the corner and headed north on Broadway, gripping the zippered pouch tighter in her hand. The sun was shining brightly, the temps soaring well into the eighties, and she was already sweating like a racehorse.

"Hi, Bella!" Lacey, owner of the antique store on the corner, called out.

Bella waved back. This was one of many things she loved about Nyack. There was a real sense of community here, and all the shop owners supported each other.

She picked up her pace. Jimmy wasn't due in until five to work the bar, so Sierra was covering it while Bella did the bank run. She didn't even know where he'd gone last night after the Bistro had closed. The apartment lights were off when she'd gotten home, and his SUV wasn't there. Not that it was her business what the guy did or where he went after closing.

Breathing harder now, she drew in scents from the Thai restaurant around the corner and picked up her pace. Man, she was out of shape. Even a fast walk left her winded. Tomorrow morning, she'd force herself to do another run around the lake. It was so not fair guys like Jimmy Santoro could eat as

much pasta as they wanted and still look fit as a fiddle and with muscles popping out all over the place.

She looked both ways, then crossed the street. When she'd first thought Jimmy had skipped out on his shift yesterday, she'd been furious and yet not surprised. He was a mobster, and mobsters couldn't be trusted. That's why hiring him went against all her rules about having none of them on her staff or in her personal life. When he'd returned bearing doggie gifts, however, she'd nearly fainted from shock at his thoughtfulness.

Bella stepped onto the sidewalk. The shock had deepened when she'd opened the plastic bag to find it contained a small bag of kibble, flea and tick shampoo, and a brush. But would Jimmy show up for his shift tonight? It wouldn't surprise her if he didn't, again begging the question: if she had so little faith in him, why had she hired him in the first place?

As she pulled open the bank's door, she honestly didn't know. Not for sure. Like Tony and the others, he'd done time in a state prison. Not exactly a model citizen, yet there was something different about him.

Blessedly cool air hit her as she went inside. Luckily, there was only one customer ahead of her. Bella tapped the pouch against the side of her leg. The clock on the wall hit two o'clock just as the teller, Misty Morris, whom Bella knew well, finished with the other customer. Misty had dated Tony, in one capacity or another, for over a year. They'd only broken up about three months ago.

"Hi, Misty." She unzipped the pouch and pulled out a wad of cash and a deposit slip already filled out. "Can you squeeze me in?"

"Of course." Misty reached for the pile of cash. "Do you need a balance on the receipt?"

"Yes, please." That was another sore spot in her ever-deteriorating relationship with Paola. The books.

When Bianco's Bistro had first opened, Bella carefully tallied every penny spent on the place, then one day, the digital books mysteriously disappeared. When Bella had confronted her aunt, Paola had sweetly said she had an accountant who would monitor the Bistro's books *en gratis*, thereby freeing Bella up to focus solely on running things. Then she'd begun to suspect the truth.

Her aunt was "cooking the books."

Once upon a time, her life had been filled with idealism and optimism, but with each of her aunt's refusals to sell her share of the Bistro, pessimism and

stark, cold reality had settled deeper in Bella's soul. Along with the heart-aching revelation her aunt hadn't gone into business with her because she loved Bella and wanted to help.

If you let someone in, they'll only hurt you. No way would she make that mistake again.

Turned out her aunt had a hidden agenda all along. Her backing of the Bistro came with strings. She'd done it to use the restaurant as a safe gathering place for her clandestine meetings. And to launder her illegally gotten gains through the Bistro. Bella had been lied to from the very beginning. If she couldn't trust her own family, who *could* she trust?

No one.

"Here you go." Misty handed her a receipt.

"Thanks, Misty. Have a good d—" Bella nearly choked as she read the balance.

There were over two hundred thousand dollars more in the account today than there had been a week ago. And that was *after* Bella had paid the monthly bills.

She turned back to the teller. "Would you mind rechecking the balance on this account?" Bella handed her the receipt.

"Not at all, but I'm sure it's accurate." Misty typed on her keyboard, then compared whatever she saw on the screen to the receipt and nodded. "That number's correct. The last deposit was made three days ago. I processed the deposit for Paola myself."

"Was it a check or cash?" Paola was the only other signatory to this account. Years ago, her aunt had begun making deposits, but never this large. Usually, those amounts were withdrawn the very next day, followed soon after by a new Cadillac in Paola's driveway or a new diamond necklace around her neck. Once, a new boat had even shown up at the end of her dock. When Bella had objected to mingling personal funds with restaurant accounts, Paola had cut her off and wouldn't even discuss the matter.

"This one was a cash deposit," Misty said.

No surprise there. Most of Paola's deposits were in cash.

"Is everything all right?" Misty asked.

"Yes." No. "Thank you." She took back the receipt Misty handed her, not missing the speculative look on the teller's face. Even Misty knew something wasn't right here, but discreetly kept her mouth shut.

Bella pushed open the door and headed back to Bianco's. She crumpled the

receipt in her fist, then crammed it into her pocket. She stopped at the intersection. The light changed, making it safe to cross, but she couldn't get her feet to move. The niggling worry was getting worse every day. This enormous deposit was a red flag the size of a ballroom carpet. Something was happening, something bad. She could feel it in her bones.

If Paola and Tony went down, they could very well take Bianco's Bistro with them, and with it, they'd take Bella's very heart and soul. For that matter, could *she* be charged with anything?

Her aunt and cousin were the ones committing the crimes, but they were doing it through *her* restaurant. Legally speaking, the best and safest course of action would be to walk away and start fresh, but then she'd lose everything she'd worked so hard for. All her money was tied up in the restaurant, and if she did walk away now, she'd also lose Sierra and Lou. They'd have no choice but to either remain with the Bistro or go elsewhere.

She took a deep breath, then stepped off the curb. Tomorrow night was Sunday. Business would be slow. On her way to work, she'd stop off at Paola's. It was time to speak with her aunt again, try to convince her to sell.

Minutes later, she was back in the Bistro. Being Saturday, most of the tables were full, and a few people sat at the bar, including the same red-haired man she'd served beer to yesterday. As she walked past the bar, he downed the rest of his beer, dropped a few bills on the bar, then left.

"Did you make it in time?" Sierra asked, filling two glasses with Chianti.

"Barely." She watched Rebecca lead a group of three women to a table. "We may have to cover the bar tonight if Jimmy doesn't show up."

"What do you mean *if* he doesn't show up?" Sierra recorked the bottle. "He's already here. He's out back with Gnocchi, fixing the air conditioner."

"Gnocchi?"

"The puppy. You haven't given him a name yet, so Jimmy did. Pending your approval, of course."

He'd named her dog without her permission? Then again, given he'd been hoovering a plate of gnocchi when they'd found him, the name suited him.

Bella strode past the kitchen and through the door to the tiny yard behind the Bistro. Still holding on to the door, she froze.

The AC compressor cover lay on the grass. Beside the cover, Gnocchi strained at the end of a long lead attached to a fence post. A shirtless Jimmy Santoro leaned over the compressor, a screwdriver in his hand. His broad, bare back glistened with sweat. The only thing marring his perfectly toned

upper body was an angry red gash on his left side.

So fixated on all those glorious muscles, Bella didn't realize she'd let go of the door until it slammed shut, making her flinch.

Jimmy's head whipped around, his right hand dropping briefly to his side, like he'd been about to grab something on his belt that wasn't there. Any saliva that had been in Bella's mouth instantly dried up.

He'd shaved off his beard. The face staring back at her was still brutal in its masculine intensity yet at the same time breathtakingly handsome. Full lips, high, sculpted cheekbones, and a square jaw so chiseled he could have been a statue, and *whoa. Can anyone say ab-o-licious?* More sweat trickled down the light smattering of dark hair covering his thick pectorals, continuing to a seriously undulated set of abs.

He arched a brow. "Something wrong?"

"No, I, uh. Hardly recognized you without the beard." *Good recovery.*

Jimmy massaged his chin. "I was getting a little hot."

I can see that, she nearly quipped.

"I think I've got this fixed." He picked up a silver cylindrical object. "You needed a new capacitor. I replaced it, so it should work fine now."

She stepped closer to look at the device. "What does it do?"

"The AC's got two capacitors. One to start it, and one to keep it running. The run capacitor was about to fry out. That's why the AC was making all that noise."

He picked up the cover and began screwing it back around the unit. With every twist of his wrist, the muscles in his forearm, biceps, and shoulder flexed and danced, and she couldn't tear her gaze away.

"Um." She cleared her throat. "What do I owe you?"

Much as he'd done when she'd offered to pay for the dog crate, he shrugged, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "Forget it. The part cost twenty bucks." He continued screwing the top back on, then grabbed a towel and wiped it over his chest, abs, and arms.

"No, I'll pay you back. But thanks." Admittedly, what he'd done was thoughtful. *Again.* But being beholden to him, a man she barely knew, sent a sliver of apprehension up her spine. Maybe he'd only fixed the AC because he thought it would help him get in good with Tony and her aunt.

He watched her a moment longer. "Suit yourself."

Gnocchi yipped, his tail thumping on the grass.

"Hi there, little Gnocchi." Bella crouched next to the puppy, who rolled

over so she could pat his belly.

“You like the name?” Jimmy asked, giving his pecs another swipe with the towel.

“It fits him.” She continued rubbing the pup’s belly, wondering what he would look like all cleaned up and groomed.

“I pulled the ticks off.” Jimmy crouched beside her. For a man who’d been sweating in the hot sun, he managed to smell good anyway. Spicy and clean. “But he still needs a bath. I can give him one.” He hitched his head to the hose reel attached to the siding.

Warning flags whipped inside her head. In her experience, when people offered so many favors, they had a hidden agenda. First, it was the dog crate and supplies, then the AC, and now bathing Gnocchi.

“Well?” he prodded.

She glanced at her watch. There was barely enough time in her day to breathe as it was, let alone bathe a dog. Luckily, she always had a spare set of clothes in the Bistro’s office. Besides, Gnocchi was *her* dog and her responsibility. And he did need a bath. “I’ll get the shampoo.”

Minutes later, Jimmy wet Gnocchi down with the hose while Bella massaged in the shampoo he’d bought at the pet store. The pup twisted, trying to run away.

“Easy, Gnocchi,” Jimmy crooned, holding the puppy in place while Bella continued rubbing in shampoo. “Easy, boy. There you go.”

Gnocchi settled down, allowing her to scrub his legs.

“You’re really good with dogs.” Her hand brushed against Jimmy’s large, callused fingers. The brief contact sent a shiver through her body that she tried to ignore but couldn’t.

Jimmy smiled. “It’s a gift.”

She began working on the puppy’s head, being careful not to get shampoo in his eyes and ears. “Do you think he and Jax will get along?” Living in the same house, the two dogs were bound to cross paths.

Jimmy nodded. “Jax likes other dogs, especially puppies. He’s a real father figure to them, likes to show them the ropes.”

“What kind of ropes?” As Jimmy adjusted the nozzle, Bella used her hands to squeegee the sudsy water off Gnocchi’s back. “Barking at mail carriers?”

“That and other important things, like lifting their legs on fire hydrants.”

She laughed. “I suppose that would be important to a dog.” She also saw Jimmy had a good sense of humor. “I think he’s done.”

On cue, Gnocchi leaped to his feet and shook. Bella flung her hands in front of her face but not in time. A gob of suds landed on her forehead.

“I’ve got that.” Jimmy grinned as he swiped off the suds. His touch was gentle, lingering a moment longer than necessary. His gaze dipped to her mouth, and his Adam’s apple bobbed, drawing her attention to the strong muscles of his neck.

Gnocchi wriggled between their knees, demanding attention.

Jimmy cleared his throat and stood abruptly. “I’d better run home to shower and change before my shift.”

Bella picked up the puppy, cradling his damp body to her chest. Jimmy strode to where he’d draped a black T-shirt on a fence rail. Standing there in the late afternoon sun, his body was bronzed and glistening, like a Roman deity. He yanked on the T-shirt. Rather than using the gate leading to the back alley where they all parked their cars, he vaulted the fence, then got into his SUV and drove off.

There really was something about this guy that got to her, and that was so not good. Was it his surprisingly nice and helpful personality? His unexpected sense of humor?

Gnocchi licked her chin, wriggling closer and wetting her shirt even more. She kissed the top of the puppy’s head. “Aren’t you a handsome little boy?”

The dog’s newly revealed short-haired coat was a beautiful brown with red highlights. Based on his behavior, she assumed he was indeed a puppy, maybe eight weeks old or so. Without knowing his lineage, however, how big he’d become was anyone’s guess.

She wiped off a blob of residual shampoo from Gnocchi’s adorable, button-size nose. He resembled a ruddy Labrador puppy. Smiling brown eyes looked up at her, and her heart melted. Again, she nuzzled his head. “You smell so good.” Like Jimmy Santoro.

Bella groaned as she carried Gnocchi inside to find a dry towel.

Lusting after one of Tony’s boys would only cause trouble in ways she didn’t want to think about. Not much surprised her anymore, but Jimmy had.

Sierra met her outside the closet that had become Gnocchi’s daytime residence. “So, what do you think?” Sierra asked.

“The AC’s fixed.” She found a dry towel in the closet and began rubbing Gnocchi’s head.

“Not about the air conditioner.” Sierra leaned in to whisper, “About Jimmy. He shaved off his beard. What do you think?” She grinned then

bobbed her eyebrows.

“He was probably hot,” Bella countered.

“Not *probably*.” She snorted then grabbed a stack of napkins from a shelf.
“He’s *definitely* hot.”

No argument there. No matter how hot the man was, and even if his favors weren’t tied to some hidden agenda, he was everything she shouldn’t be thinking about.

He was, and always would be, a mobster.

Chapter Eight

Jax's tail whipped back and forth happily as they meandered up and down Nyack's hilly side streets. They'd been walking for half an hour. Jax needed the exercise. Jamie needed to clear his head, and having alone time with his dog was usually the best cure.

Fixing the Bistro's air conditioner had been smart. And stupid. Helping Bella bathe Gnocchi... More so. On both counts.

When he'd touched her face, just to wipe away a gob of shampoo, the brief contact had sent a need for something he couldn't explain ripping through him. Whatever it was, he'd shut it down and hauled ass home.

Jamie shook his head to clear his mind of the all too vivid image of what he'd been half a second from doing.

Kissing Bella.

Every time he touched her, his brain matter went to shit.

Cold. Shower.

With Jax taking point, they jogged the rest of the way up the hill. Minutes later, he stood beneath the freezing cold shower spray, still unable to stop thinking about Bella. Eventually, she'd come to trust him. Everyone he worked undercover did. He was that good. And that bad.

Over the pounding spray, his cell phone blared from the vanity. He cranked off the water and opened the shower door. A number he didn't recognize lit the screen.

He grabbed the phone. "Santoro."

"Fist, it's Nicky. Tony wants you to meet us at Patch's. It's a bar in New City. Get your ass over there."

Jamie looked at his phone. It was three thirty. He didn't know exactly where Patch's was, but New City was at least fifteen minutes away. His shift at the Bistro started at five. Bella would kill him if he was late again.

Declining Tony's order wasn't an option. "Be there in twenty."

...

Jamie parked outside Patch's but didn't go in right away. He said he'd be there in twenty. He'd made it in fifteen.

While he watched the locals stream in the front door, he tapped his fingers on the wheel. Jax rested his head on Jamie's shoulder and sighed. Even Jax knew something about this meeting was odd. With all the bars and restaurants in Nyack, including the Bistro, why meet in New City?

He'd checked his six the entire drive over here. No one had followed him. If they had, they were the best surveillance team he'd ever encountered. Not likely.

Could be paranoia, but whatever this meeting was about, he wanted his partner as close as possible. With help from a trusted mechanic, Jamie had retrofitted the Tahoe so he could lock it up with the engine and the AC running. While he was inside, Jax would be cool and comfortable.

Jamie opened the door, and Jax rested his paw on his shoulder, as if telling him not to go in.

"Yeah, I know." He scratched the soft fur on his dog's neck. "I'll watch my ass in there, you watch it out here."

Jax uttered a soft *woof* but didn't look any happier.

Jamie locked up the Tahoe and went inside. Judging by the clientele, most of whom were over sixty, Patch's was a local bar. The building was old, the inside dark and dingy, and smelling of spilled beer that had never been cleaned up. Music blared from an old jukebox in the corner. Being a Saturday afternoon, the place was busy. Most of the tables were filled, with only a few empty seats at the bar.

Nicky, Paulie, and Sammy sat at the far end. No Tony. No Marco. Paulie saw him first, waving him over and nudging Nicky's shoulder. Jamie headed for the men, methodically scanning for anything or anyone out of place. Like someone he might have arrested. No familiar faces he could see, not that he remembered everyone he'd locked up. Only a few women, including a waitress, gave him any lengthy looks.

"Yo, Fist!" Sammy clapped him on the back. As usual, the man wore sneakers.

Nicky texted on his phone, then set the phone on the bar before Jamie could see who he'd sent the message to. Nicky's manicure made his fingers

gleam like they were tipped with diamonds.

“Grab a seat.” Nicky signaled to the bartender, a grizzled man who reminded Jamie of Rip Van Winkle, wise face, long beard, and all. “What’ll ya have?”

“Water,” Jamie said to Rip.

“Nah.” Nicky grimaced. “They don’t serve water here. Get him a whiskey.”

Whiskey was the last thing he needed. “Where’s Tony?” he asked, glancing at the door.

“He’ll be here,” Paulie said, then began popping sunflower seeds as if they were candy.

Nicky downed his drink and signaled for another. “He’s runnin’ late. Don’t get your panties all in a bunch.”

Rip-the-bartender returned with Jamie’s drink, then topped off Nicky’s. Ironically, it was Pappy Van Winkle Bourbon Reserve.

“Cin cin.” Sammy held up his glass.

Paulie did the same. “Salute.”

Warning flags prickled across Jamie’s scalp. He still couldn’t shake the feeling something was royally off about this meeting. He took a small sip, relishing the burn as it trickled down his throat.

Fifteen minutes and another bourbon later, those warning flags whipped harder, smacking Jamie in the back of the head and telling him it was time to find out WTF was going on.

They were stalling. Trying to keep him here. But for what? For that matter, if this meeting was so important, why wasn’t Marco here?

“Where’s Marco?” he asked.

Sammy and Paulie shrugged.

“I’ll find out.” Nicky grabbed his phone, then walked to the other end of the bar.

Jamie’s radar pinged louder. But if they wanted to whack him in the back of the head, they wouldn’t do it in the middle of a crowded bar. They’d take him to an isolated location where it would take weeks for anyone to find his body.

“I’ll call Tony myself.” Jamie tugged out his phone.

Sammy grabbed Jamie’s arm. “Relax, kid. Put the phone away. He’ll be here.”

“When?” he bit out.

“Soon,” Paulie said. “Have another drink.”

Jamie let Paulie order him another bourbon he had no intention of drinking. What the hell was going on here?

Didn’t matter. He was outta here.

“Gotta go,” he said as Nicky returned and sat on his stool. “I’m late for my shift at the Bistro.” He tossed two twenties on the bar and headed for the door.

“Aw, c’mon, Fist,” Nicky called after him. “Blow off Bella and hang with us. She won’t give you any, trust me. Not even Marco got into her pants, and he’s been tryin’ for years.”

Confirming Jamie’s suspicion and again begging the question: where was Marco Ianetti?

He pushed open the door so hard it smacked against the outside wall. On a hunch, he looked over his shoulder. His hunch was founded.

Nicky was on the phone again.

Jamie raced to his SUV. The engine was still running, the doors still locked. Jax’s head popped up. His dog was okay. That was his first concern.

But that bad feeling in the pit of his stomach was now a fifty-pound ball of lead.

This was a setup. At this point, he was reasonably certain it wasn’t about whacking him. They were trying to keep him from something. Or *somewhere*.

He got into the Tahoe and gunned it back to Nyack. The entire drive, he alternated between watching the road ahead and the rearview mirror.

Were they trying to keep him from the Bistro? Not for any reason he could come up with. That only left one other place.

Ten minutes later, Jamie pulled into Bella’s driveway.

The door to his apartment was open. Barely, but definitely open, and he’d damned well locked it when he and Jax had left.

Someone had been in there. Maybe still was.

He shut off the engine. “C’mon, Jax.”

Not bothering with a leash, he let Jax out the side door, then opened up the back of the Tahoe. Picking up on Jamie’s body language, Jax lowered his head. A deep growl rumbled in the back of his throat.

Keeping one eye on the apartment door, Jamie unlocked the small gun safe hidden in the cargo space. He pulled out the military revolver he’d stashed there—an untraceable antique from Korea his father had given him as a gift

when he'd graduated from the police academy. The gun might be old, but it still functioned. He rammed in a fully loaded magazine and charged the weapon.

With Jax backing him up, he sidestepped past the apartment's first window. The shade was down, just like he'd left it. At the door, he pointed to the ground.

Jax dropped to his belly, his body quivering, the hair on his spine standing upright like a mohawk.

Jamie eased the door open and aimed in. Leading with the muzzle of the revolver, he searched the main room. Empty.

He motioned for Jax to follow. His dog bolted to his feet and took up position at Jamie's side.

Next they entered the bedroom. Empty, too. Jamie whipped open the closet door. Also empty. The kitchen came next with the same results. Nothing out of place.

Standing on the bathroom threshold, blood pounded in Jamie's ears. The top drawer of the vanity had been pulled all the way out.

Like the open front door, the open drawer was a message. Whoever had broken in wanted Jamie to know. But what was the message, and who was it from?

Taking a steadying breath, he tucked the gun in his waistband.

Tony and Marco were the only absentees at the bar. Could Tony have done this? Possibly, but he would have had someone else do it. As a test. To see if anything in the apartment dimed Jamie out as a snitch or an undercover. They wouldn't have left the drawer or the front door open, though. That was sloppy.

Jamie's gut told him Tony hadn't ordered the break-in. Everyone in Tony's crew knew he worked at the Bistro. Assuming this was the work of someone else in his crew, they could easily have waited until he'd gone to work for his shift. Why bother dragging him to Patch's to get him out of the apartment?

The answers to his questions hit him like a kick to the balls. Someone was fucking with him and wanted him to know it.

This had Marco Ianetti's name written all over it.

Chapter Nine

The dinner rush was on. Not only was every table full, but there wasn't an empty seat at the bar, either. The place was so noisy, Bella could barely hear "Funiculì, Funiculà" over the clinking silverware and crowd of people talking and laughing.

Jimmy had returned for his shift, wearing a black polo shirt and black slacks. Black was definitely the man's color. From the moment he'd walked in, not a single set of female eyes hadn't ogled him. Including her. What she noticed most was the tension on his face, and the way his gaze lifted every time the front door opened.

Since Jimmy had the bar covered, Bella pitched in, helping to serve and wait on tables. She joined Rebecca and Lori at the end of the bar to fill water glasses.

Using a napkin, Rebecca wiped perspiration from her brow. "It's a madhouse in here."

Lori dropped lemon wedges into the glasses. "I heard the River Pub's power went out for some reason, so they had to shut down. I think everyone left and came here."

"Oh my God." Bella looked at the line outside the front door and Sierra doing her best to start a waitlist while still juggling orders. They weren't staffed for this kind of crowd, so she hustled to the door to manage the people trying to get in.

"I don't know how we're going to handle this," Sierra said. "On top of which, I've already got several orders for cappuccinos, and Jimmy doesn't know how to work Big Mama."

"I'll have to go back there and—" Hissing and whistling sounds drifted through the crowd, followed by gurgling and sputtering. Bella jerked her head to the bar.

“Big Mama!” she and Sierra said at the same time.

“Oh no. If he hurts her, I’ll make him sorry he ever walked in here.” But she didn’t have time to deal with Jimmy now, not with the thickening crowd waiting to get in.

Bella headed back into the fray to help the waitresses. As she stepped aside for Lori, who carried a tray laden with cups of cappuccino, her jaw dropped. Not only did the cappuccinos look good, they looked *amazing*.

No hearts. No flowers. No leaves. Bella easily recognized a lion, a dragon, and was that...a unicorn?

More gurgling came from behind the bar. Bella arrived just in time to see Jimmy put the finishing touches on a latte foam angel. The rich aroma of freshly ground espresso beans filled her nose. She still couldn’t believe what her eyes were telling her. The man had a skill she never would have suspected. “You didn’t tell me you could do that.”

“You didn’t ask.” Carefully, he set the cup on Rebecca’s tray.

“Thanks, Jimmy. It’s beautiful.” Rebecca turned slowly, then whisked the work-of-art coffee away.

Bella stared after Rebecca. The cappuccino *was* beautiful. No, it was more than beautiful. It was stunning. “It never occurred to me to ask if you were a professional barista. Don’t you think that would have been useful information for me to have when I told you not to touch Big Mama?”

He twisted off the portafilters, then began scooping in and tamping down espresso powder, the quick, efficient movements calling attention to all those rippling muscles. “Would you have believed me if I’d said that?”

“Well...” She watched him reverently stroke a big callused hand over Big Mama. “Probably not,” she admitted.

“Why?” If dark brown eyes could glitter with challenge, his did.

“Because your hands are so big, they look like they were made more for crushing rocks, not creating beautiful artwork.” *Woops*. Sometimes her blunt honesty could use a little curbing.

“Don’t you think that’s prejudicial? Can’t a man with big hands have hidden skills?” Full, sensual lips curved slightly. Dark eyes now glittered with something other than mirth—a warmth she felt straight to her toes.

“I—” *Are we still talking about latte art?* She shook her head to clear it. “I need to get back to work.”

She spun and nearly tripped on a broken corner of the rubber matting floor tile she’d been meaning to replace. Just when she was about to fly headfirst

into the bar, long arms came around her waist, lifting her into the air.

A few people in the dining room had noticed her near face-plant. Heat shot to her neck. Turning into a total klutz whenever Jimmy was around was becoming an annoying habit. “Let me go,” she shot over her shoulder, and her face nearly collided with his. Warm breath washed over her face, and dammit...her nipples tightened.

He did as she ordered, and as she made a hasty exit to the dining room, Bella made the ultimate mistake of looking back at the bar. Frown lines had gathered on Jimmy’s broad forehead, and his lips pressed together tightly.

What’s his problem?

She didn’t know the man well enough to understand anything going on inside that handsome head. What she did know was that he really did have hidden talents.

An AC repairman. A barista. A man with big, warm hands with the power to send her pulse skyrocketing into the stratosphere, a physiological response to a man she didn’t want to have *any* responses to. Other than being her temporary bartender, that was where their relationship had to stay. As soon as her bartender came back, she’d fire Jimmy’s perfectly toned ass. For now, she had her hands full enough as it was with an overflowing restaurant.

The front door opened. Tony, Paola, and Marco walked in, bypassing the long line outside and garnering a steady flow of whispers as people mouthed Paola’s name. Paola tipped her chin as she always did when she wanted to speak privately with Bella.

Her heart sank. Private meetings with Paola were never a good sign. In fact, they were usually a really, really *bad* sign.

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Bella’s lips pressed firmly together, and one of her hands was clenched into a tight fist. Jamie flipped up the hinged end of the bar, intending to follow and try to discreetly listen in.

“Jimmy!” With no tables free in the dining room, and every seat at the bar occupied, Tony and Marco stood at the other end of the bar. Tony held up two fingers. “Get that Pierazzuoli Chianti.”

So much for eavesdropping. He poured the wine, then set the glasses in front of Tony and Marco.

The redheaded guy Jamie had noticed at the bar the day before was back and signaled for another beer. Jamie took the empty, poured a refill into a

clean glass, then brought it over.

Tony picked up his wine but didn't drink. "Why don't you pour yourself a glass?"

After all the bourbon he'd been forced to drink, Jamie wanted to keep a clear head but recognized this was an order, not a question. Tony was now his boss, his capo. A moment later, he had a glass in hand.

"Salute." Tony took a long sip. "Here's to you shaving. You look pretty enough to be on TV."

Marco made a derisive, scoffing sound. "Or in a porn movie." Over the rim of his glass, his gaze held unconcealed bitterness.

Smashing his fist into the man's jaw for breaking into his apartment would have been sweet. Could it be this was over Bella? Or possibly he thought Jamie was a threat to his position as Tony's lieutenant. Not that Jamie cared, except it might hinder the investigation. If the man became a problem, he'd deal with it. Any way necessary.

Not wanting to raise any suspicion, he took a small sip of wine. It was good. No wonder Tony sucked it down like water.

"What's with Bella and Paola?" he asked in what he hoped was a casual tone. "Bella looked upset."

Tony made a dismissive gesture. "Bistro business. Paola wants things her way. Bella doesn't like it. They never agree on anything anymore."

Anymore? So at one time, apparently, they had. The only question now was who was cooking the books. Paola, Bella, or both. According to Jenkins, someone was. He took a chance and pressed. "What don't they agree on?"

"None of your damned business, that's what." Marco downed the rest of his wine in one gulp, then set it on the bar and flicked his finger at it.

Again resisting the urge to slam his fist into the man's face, Jamie refilled the glass. "Just curious."

"Don't be," Marco shot back. "And don't butt into business that's not yours."

"Ease up," Tony growled. "I gotta take a piss. Don't kill each other while I'm gone."

Keeping one eye on Marco, Jamie watched Tony head to the men's room.

Marco cocked his head. "Where exactly did you say you were from?"

He met Marco's cold, hard stare with one of his own. "I didn't."

Marco leaned on the bar and began stroking his chin. "And what were you in Sing Sing for?"

“Carrying a loaded pocket heater.” *Good luck finding a hole in that story, douchebag.* Even his arrest had been real, going down in front of several witnesses.

Marco made a *hmphing* sound. “You might have run into a friend of mine. Danny Visconti. He was in Sing Sing the same time as you.”

And you must think I’m stupid to fall for that crap. He shook his head. “Never met him. Not that I know of, anyway. Different cell block, maybe.”

“Maybe.” Marco narrowed his eyes. “I checked you out.”

“Then what’s your problem?” Jamie didn’t doubt his cover would pass scrutiny. Marco had been wasting his time searching Jamie’s apartment.

“The problem is, I don’t like you, and I don’t trust you.”

Jamie leaned over the bar, getting in Marco’s face. “Then it’s a good thing I don’t give a shit *what* you think.” He remained that way, waiting for Marco to balk first and knowing the other man would. Sure enough, Marco sat back, his expression darkening.

Seeing Tony emerge from the men’s room, Jamie topped off his own glass. No background was perfect, but his cover was as good as it got.

“One more thing.” Jamie leaned in again, fast and close enough to make Marco jerk back. “Break into my place again, and I’ll bust every tooth in your big fucking mouth.”

Tony came back, then whispered, “Jimmy, did you come up with something good to bring to the table tomorrow?”

Meaning, not flowers or a bottle of wine. “Working on it.”

“Work fast.” Tony held out his empty glass, again whispering, “We’ve got a big job coming up, and Paola needs to know she can count on you. Most of all, she has to *trust* you. She won’t let you in until you earn your keep.”

Jamie’s pulse thrummed faster. *In* could be the “big splash” the FBI suspected was about to go down. “I’ll make it happen.” Come hell or high water, he *would* make it happen. “I know a guy,” he began. Detective Steve Palos, to be precise. “Who knows a guy.” Detective Artie Masamoto, Steve’s partner. “I’ll have more on it tomorrow.”

“Good. I know you won’t let me down.” Tony grinned, but there was warning behind the man’s friendly facade, reminding Jamie of just how deadly he really was.

Marco Ianetti might have “asshole” stamped on his forehead, but Tony’s true nature was deceptively hidden. Not far beneath the surface of his jovial demeanor was the soul of a cold-blooded killer suspected of murdering at

least four people.

Including that FBI informant.

Chapter Ten

Hours later, Jamie wiped down Big Mama, then hooked clean glasses on the overhead rack. The Bistro was finally closed for the night. He'd lost count of how many cappuccinos he'd whipped out. Once customers got a look at his latte art, the orders flowed in like a tidal wave of caffeine. All those hours making cappuccinos at his friend's café-bar had paid off in spades. It had given him a leg up with Bella.

In the dining room, Lori and Rebecca set the last of the tables in preparation for tomorrow. Sierra was busy helping Lou and his staff wipe down the kitchen. Bella was nowhere in sight.

After meeting with Paola behind closed doors, she'd helped her staff with practiced efficiency but zero joy on her face. Whatever she'd discussed with her aunt had left her more than a little upset.

He grabbed a clean rag to wipe down the bar.

Caring about Bella Bianco's feelings wasn't something he should spend time on. He also needed to stop doing things for her. Fixing broken equipment and bathing puppies weren't requirements of his assignment, although that's how he'd justified them.

Jamie wiped the bar harder, until it gleamed. Keeping his hands off Bella was a directive he had to follow.

He tossed the rag in a bin beneath the sink, then collected his tip money from a jar, portioning out some to share with the waitresses. Speaking of money, if his plan to earn big worked, it would catapult him higher in Tony and Paola's estimation. Not Marco's.

Ironically, he and Marco Ianetti weren't so different after all. They were *both* assholes. In many ways, however, Jamie's condition was more deep-seated, like a stain he could never erase. Memories of all the stupid, bad things he'd done after his father had been arrested settled over him like a

shroud.

In the weeks after they'd hauled his father away in the back seat of a police car, Jamie became defiant, aggressive. His temper knew no bounds. To hide his emotional pain and loss, he'd had a complete meltdown. He'd stolen things. Gotten drunk and bashed in so many windshields he'd lost count. He even set a few of those cars on fire. When another boy taunted him, he beat the kid senseless, busting his nose and bashing in most of his teeth. He'd been in the hospital for weeks. The local cops quickly labeled Jamie as the town's "bad boy." Only his age at the time kept him in juvie court. If it weren't for a kindly lieutenant who set him straight, he might be in the cell right next to his father.

Seventeen years later, Jamie was still trying to make up for all he'd done. Trying to be something he never could be. A good person. Misleading Bella—lying to her—wasn't helping.

He went out the back door to check on the AC unit one more time before heading home to his apartment and Jax. Though it was close to midnight, the July air was still warm and humid, and his shirt stuck to his chest and back.

The AC's fan spun smoothly, whirring, not clunking, the way it had before he'd replaced the capacitor.

Movement in the alley caught his attention. *Bella*. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he recognized her black-and-red Mini Cooper parked behind his Tahoe.

While holding on to Gnocchi's leash, she balanced several aluminum trays, trying unsuccessfully to open the hatch door. One of the trays tilted precariously. He ran over, catching the tray just before it slipped from the top of the stack. "Can I help?"

Bella uttered a high-pitched shriek and nearly dropped the other trays. Her eyes rounded until she recognized him. "Don't *do* that."

Gnocchi stood on his hind legs, trying to crawl up Jamie's leg.

"Sorry. My bad." Before the rest of the trays hit the asphalt, he took them from her arms. Tantalizing smells of marinara and meat came to his nose. *Lou's lasagna*. Had to be. "Stealing food from your own restaurant?"

"It's for the Hudson Food Pantry. Once a month, I contribute to their Sunday dinner. I won't have time to do this tomorrow, so I want to make sure they get it tonight." She lifted the hatch door, then groaned. The inside of the Mini Cooper was crammed with large cardboard boxes and three smaller white boxes with images of puppies and tiny video cameras on the outside.

“Shoot. I totally forgot about all this. They’re new table linens.”

“Are these puppy cams to keep an eye on Gnocchi?” he asked.

“Actually, those are for the Bistro. After what happened the other day when that customer harassed Sierra, I’ve been thinking of putting all of them in the dining room.”

“Not a bad idea.”

“Yeah, if I only had the time.” She began reorganizing the boxes, which didn’t do much to make more space. “I have to download an app on my phone, then sync up the cameras. I’m not particularly tech-savvy.” She sighed, then shook her head. “There’s just no room. I’ll have to unload these boxes first.”

“We could take my Tahoe. Besides, it’s late, and food banks tend not to be located in the best of neighborhoods. I could help.” The idea that she’d be doing this alone and in the dark didn’t sit well with him. “I can also help you out with the cameras.” More do-gooder stuff. He was on a roll and couldn’t stop himself. Not around her, anyway.

Again, her eyes rounded, although this time in obvious surprise. “Sure. Thanks.”

Balancing the trays in one arm, he dug his keys from his pocket and headed for the Tahoe. “Mind if we pick up Jax along the way?” He opened the back of the SUV and set the trays inside. “I don’t think my landlord would appreciate it if he whizzes all over the floor.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t.” For only the second time in the two days or so he’d known her, Bella laughed. She even laughed pretty, the sound like a twinkling bell, and damned if it didn’t make the hair on his scalp tingle.

“But we’ll have to take Gnocchi, too. This will only be his second night at the house, and I’m not ready to leave him alone. He’d probably scream his little head off, then the neighbors will sic doggie welfare services on me.”

“Not a problem. It’s time for him to meet Jax and start learning the ropes.” He shut the rear door, then opened the passenger door and waited for Bella to pick up the puppy and climb in. As he rounded the hood, something on the other side of the nearest intersection caught his eye. A shadowed figure quickly ducked away around a corner of another building, but not before he’d caught a glimpse of red hair beneath that hoodie.

Over a decade of cop instincts kicked into high gear, and he tightened his fingers around the keys. There’d been something furtive there. Male, judging by the breadth of shoulders. Five-ten, one-seventy, thin but not skinny. And

the guy had been watching. Watching him...or Bella?

Given the fact he was an undercover cop sitting smack dab in the middle of mob central, he'd go with *him*. But he was also experienced enough to know anything was possible.

Minutes later, they'd picked up Jax, let him do his business, then begun the drive to the food pantry. As predicted, Jax had instantly taken over as Gnocchi's father figure. Both dogs lay on the bench seat behind them, Gnocchi's head nestled between Jax's front paws.

"You trust your staff to close up for you?" He took the onramp for the New York State Thruway and headed north, as Bella had instructed him.

"I trust Sierra and Lou. They're the closest thing to family I have."

In the dashboard glow, he caught her wistful expression. According to FBI records, her closest remaining blood relatives since her parents had been killed while attending a wedding—a *mob* wedding—were Tony and Paola. Yet apparently she was tighter with Sierra and Lou.

"How long have you owned the Bistro?" he asked.

"Eight years." She looked over her shoulder. "You were right about Jax. Gnocchi adores him."

"Told ya." Now to get back to his subtle probing. "You're partners with Paola, right?"

"Yeahhh." There was no missing the bitterness there. "When the property came up for sale, I wanted it but didn't have enough money to buy it. Paola did."

"You don't seem happy about that."

She turned to face him. "Why do you care?"

"Just trying to make conversation." And log valuable intel for his first report back to Jenkins.

"Sorry." She sighed. "Now that I finally have the money, I'm trying to buy her out, but she won't sell. Take the next exit." Bella pointed to the sign for the Palisades Parkway.

Jamie flipped on the turn signal. "Why won't she sell?" He already knew the answer to his question but wondered how Bella would answer it.

"The Bistro is...useful to her."

Yeah, for laundering money. "I'm guessing she enjoys Lou's cooking too much to give it up."

Bella grunted. "That, and a few other things."

Trying to appear only half interested, he adjusted the AC's temperature

knob. “Such as?”

“Such as taking over the Bistro for her special dinners any time she chooses.”

“Ah.” Jamie nodded. “That means no *paying* customers.”

“Exactly.” In the dim light, Bella made a frustrated motion with her arm. “She told me—not *asked*, which would be common courtesy—that next Monday, the only day of the week we’re closed, she wants a traditional Italian feast, at least eight courses. Now I have to tell all my staff their day off is canceled.”

Traditional Italian feasts were generally reserved for celebrations. “Someone getting married?” Still being careful not to show too much interest, Jamie adjusted the air vents.

One of the signs at the end of the exit ramp indicated the town of Nanuet was to the right and the Hudson Food Pantry to the left. At the stop sign, he turned left.

“There it is.” She pointed to a one-story building set back about a hundred feet from the road. Half the lights were still on. “Paola didn’t say much, and I’ve learned not to bother asking.” Again, it was impossible not to miss the note of frustration in her tone. “The only thing she said was that important people were coming, and she wanted everything upscale. Naturally, that means the most expensive food and wine we serve and even some we don’t normally offer.”

“Important people” could be anyone. Including high-ranking mobsters, possibly from the Palumbo crime syndicate. Tony hadn’t mentioned anything about that. Then again, as far as the Mancusos were concerned, Jamie was the newest and, therefore, the lowest guy on the roster and not completely in the inner circle. Jamie intended to change that.

“Can’t you just tell her no?” He pulled into a spot near the front door and shut off the engine.

Bella laughed again, tightly this time. “I wish, but since I only own forty-nine percent of the business, I have no say in the matter.”

Begging the question as to exactly what it was Bella didn’t approve of—booking an event on a night when the Bistro was closed or using the restaurant for illegal activity. Bella *had* to be a part of Paola’s operation. Didn’t she?

Jamie wasn’t so sure.

The FBI hadn’t known Paola owned the controlling share of the Bistro. His

gut told him they could also be missing something critical about Bella's role in all of this.

"Look," Bella said, shaking her head. "I don't know why I'm even telling you all this. I guess I just needed to vent. Forget I said anything. Okay?"

"Okay," he lied. Nothing she said to him was off the record. "I can help out at this event, if you want. Bartending, clearing tables...you name it." Whatever this celebration was, he needed to be there in whatever capacity he could wangle. "After all, I'm staying at your place rent-free."

For a second or two, Bella looked at him skeptically. "Thanks. I'll take you up on that."

As they unbuckled their seat belts, Jax pranced back and forth on the passenger seat, expecting to go to work. Gnocchi yipped excitedly.

Bella reached behind her to pick up the puppy, then hooked on his leash. "Doug, the manager of this place, said there are a couple of women and their children staying here until they find better accommodations. They may not be up this late, but if they are, they'll love Gnocchi. Is Jax good with small children?"

"The best." Sometimes Jamie wondered if his dog was a reincarnated nanny.

Moments later, he carried the trays of food inside. Jax trotted obediently at his side, happy at not being left behind. Gnocchi tugged at his leash, barking the entire way to the door.

"Bella!" A burly giant of a man rose from a desk. "I didn't think you'd make it tonight."

"Hi, Doug. Sorry we're late. This is Jimmy, and this"—she nodded to Jax and Gnocchi, both of whose tails whipped back and forth—"is Jax and Gnocchi. Jax is Jimmy's dog. Gnocchi's mine."

"Nice to meet you, Jimmy." Doug let Jax and Gnocchi sniff his hand. Instead, Jax lifted his paw and courteously placed it in Doug's hand. "Nice to meet you, too, Jax. Bella, I didn't know you had a dog. Where did this little guy come from?"

Gnocchi wiggled his body, excited at meeting someone new.

"We're not sure *where* he came from. Lou found him stealing food from the kitchen, and I decided to keep him."

Doug frowned. "I'm surprised Lou didn't throw him in a pot of marinara sauce."

Jamie snorted. "He nearly did."

“You can bring the trays right into the kitchen.” Doug led the way down the hall.

After they’d set the trays in the refrigerator, Jamie turned at the sounds of shuffling feet. A young woman and two small children stood in the doorway. One of the kids squealed, running to Jax and Gnocchi.

“Jeremy, no!” the woman cried, racing after the child, her eyes wide with fear.

“Jax, down,” Jamie commanded, and Jax lowered to the floor. “He won’t hurt your son,” he reassured the woman.

The boy knelt to stroke Jax’s ears. The boy’s sister, who looked to be a year or two younger, hung back, clutching her mother’s hand.

“This is Gnocchi.” Bella led the puppy over to the little girl, rightly surmising her mother would be less intimidated by a five-pound puppy than a ninety-pound German shepherd.

Gnocchi whined until the girl squatted and pet him.

“Did you know he can do tricks?” Jamie asked, and the boy shook his head. “Jax, roll over.” He made a spinning gesture with his index finger, and Jax made a complete revolution on the floor, making the boy laugh. “Do you want to tell him to do something fun?” The boy nodded eagerly. “Tap the side of your face like this.” Jamie tapped his cheek. “And say, ‘Jax, do you love me?’”

The boy did as Jamie instructed, and Jax delicately pressed his nose to the boy’s cheek. The child’s high-pitched laughter could wake the dead.

“I want to make him do a trick,” the little girl said, stepping closer now.

“Hold up your hand like this.” Jamie held out his hand, palm facing out. “And say ‘high five.’”

When the girl raised her hand, Jax did the same with his paw, gently tapping it against her outstretched palm. The girl giggled, then jumped up and down. “What else can he do?”

A gentle smile curved Bella’s lips, softening her expression. It was the kind of smile that could stop a man in his tracks and make him do whatever she asked.

Reluctantly, he dragged his gaze away. “Sorry, guys. It’s late, and we need to go to bed.” Bella raised her brows. *Okay, bad choice of words.* “I mean, it’s late, and we need to go.”

Bella rolled her lips inward, trying not to laugh. “See you next month, Doug.”

“Thanks, Bella.”

Outside in the parking lot, he opened the rear door for Jax and Gnocchi, then the passenger door for Bella, but she didn't get in right away.

“You are so not what I thought you'd be,” she said, then heaved herself onto the seat.

Jamie's hand froze on the passenger door handle. A big fat lump of guilt threatened to choke the air from his lungs.

You don't know the half of it.

Deception while undercover was part of the job. Normally, it didn't bother him. So why was it bothering him now?

As he got in and turned the key, he didn't have the answer.

Chapter Eleven

Early morning sunlight reflected off the ripples on the surface of Rockland Lake, shimmering like diamond tennis bracelets. Bella stifled another yawn. The Mini Cooper's dashboard clock said it was only six thirty, but she'd wanted to get in a run before the heat and humidity kicked in.

She turned off the engine but remained in the car, staring through the windshield at the lake. Given how late she'd gotten into bed, sleeping in had been the initial plan, but Gnocchi's whining had put an abrupt end to that dream. As they'd walked around her tiny yard, she tried not to look at the apartment windows. The blinds were down, and Jimmy's Tahoe sat in the driveway.

Last night, she'd told him the truth of what was on her mind. He wasn't at all what she'd expected, not even close. In addition to all the things he'd done for Gnocchi and at the Bistro, the kicker was escorting her to the food pantry late at night when he could have been out carousing with Tony and the rest of the guys.

Bella grabbed the door handle.

Oh, hell. She was attracted to Jimmy and didn't want to be. What was wrong with her? Not even Marco, who'd made it plain for years that he was interested, did anything to amp up her heart rate. Watching Jimmy and Jax entertain those poor children had made her heart flutter, and she'd *never* been the fluttering kind.

With a forceful push of the door, she got out of the Mini Cooper, locked it, then shoved the key in her shorts pocket. There was only one other car in the lot a few spaces from hers. The driver pressed a phone to his ear.

After a quick stretch, she jogged to the trail that ran around the edge of the lake. Less than a minute later, perspiration dripped down her temples and was already soaking her tank top. Unlike Jimmy, however, she doubted she'd ever

look half as good as him when *he* perspired.

Last night, after he'd dropped her off at her car, he'd waited until she'd gotten in and driven away. But when she'd turned toward home, he'd gone in the opposite direction. Maybe he went out trolling one of the late-night bars. A guy like him could probably pick up any woman he wanted just by looking at them. It wouldn't have surprised her if he hadn't come home until the sun had risen high over the river.

That didn't necessarily mean he'd come home alone, and she wasn't talking about Jax.

At the first bend in the trail, she picked up her pace and noticed another runner behind her. A man wearing a blue T-shirt and shorts that looked oddly like cargo shorts, not the kind of shorts most people ran in, but whatever. Each to their own.

Unobscured by trees, the sun blazed down hotter on this section of the trail, heating the air faster and making every breath she sucked in seem hotter and more humid. The quarter-mile marker seemed to mock her, reminding her that she still had two and three-quarter miles to go. Who knew ditching twenty pounds would take so much work?

The question reminded her of the conversation she'd had with Jimmy that first day at the Bistro. He hadn't seemed to notice she was a bit overweight. More likely he didn't care since he had no interest in her. But *she* cared. It wasn't about doing it to look more attractive to men. Losing the weight was something she needed to do for herself. It was a self-confidence issue. And if it had the added benefit of getting Paola off her back, it would be worth it. Her aunt's criticism had been eating away at her for years, but lately, for some reason, she'd been on her case more than usual.

At least she hadn't spilled that much of her guts to Jimmy. Although, he did have a way of making her feel comfortable. Maybe *too* comfortable.

One of her shoelaces made a soft clicking sound, and she looked down to see it had come undone. She stopped and bent to retie it. The man running behind her also stopped.

After retying the lace, she started running again and replaying more of her conversation with Jimmy from last night. When she'd voiced her discontent about her aunt, she'd barely touched the surface. Divulging too much about her family could be dangerous. Whatever else Jimmy wanted to know he'd have to figure out on his own.

As much as she wished otherwise, Paola and Tony were her closest living

blood relatives. One would think that meant something. To her it did. Not to Paola, and probably not to Tony, either.

Again, her shoelace flapped loose, and again, she stopped to retie it. This time, she'd double-knot it. Sweat dripped down her forehead, and she swiped it away.

The man behind her had also stopped. As she knotted the laces, her hands shook. No one would ever consider her a quick runner. Judging by his size and level of fitness, he should have passed her long ago. Why hadn't he?

Nothing good came to mind.

Her pulse rate kicked up. She shot to her feet, running faster this time, pounding along the trail. Sucking in shallow breaths, she glanced over her shoulder.

The guy had also picked up his pace.

The trail ahead was empty. Aside from the parking lot where she'd started from, low scrub and trees rimmed the rest of the lake. Only one other car—an SUV—had pulled in, but she couldn't tell if the driver was still inside.

Not accustomed to the brutal pace, her thighs and calves screamed in protest, and her heart jackhammered. She'd only just begun this running regimen, so outrunning this guy...doubtful.

Something about his odd behavior told her to kick it in faster.

Footsteps pounded closer. Bella dug deeper, tapping into fear-fueled adrenaline. She pumped her arms harder, hoping and praying she could actually get her legs moving faster.

With every breath, her lungs burned. She could no longer hear the guy's pounding feet. But she knew he was back there. Following her.

A hand grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around. "Hey, I just want to talk to you."

Sure you do.

Taking a deep breath, she shoved at him, intending to push him into the lake, but he was rock-solid. She practically bounced off him, losing balance and falling backward into the scrub. Gasping for air, she managed to get on all fours and push to her feet. She scrambled deeper into the trees, then stumbled over a large rock. She cried out, flinging her hands in front of her to break the fall.

The ground might have been soft, but naturally, she landed on another rock. Pain jolted her right shoulder, and she hissed in a breath.

Get up! Get up!

Using her left arm, she pushed upright and turned in time to see a shadow looming over her. She kicked out, catching the guy in his family jewels.

Muttered curses split the silence. He bent over, cupping his hands to that special place she hoped now had a permanent imprint of her sneaker. “I just...” He sucked in a pained breath, stepping closer. “...want to talk to you.”

Bella gulped. He was big. And he looked vaguely familiar. Not that he was a friend.

Knowing it would be the equivalent of a gnat buzzing a gorilla’s head, she fisted her hand, readying to slam it beneath his chin. If she even *could* reach his chin. But she had to try, had to do something, because she was alone, and he easily had a hundred pounds on her.

Once he took her to the ground again, it was game over.

He advanced on her, reaching out to grab her by the shoulders.

Taking a deep breath, Bella fisted her hand tighter...and prepared for the worst.

• • •

“Thanks, Steve.” Jamie stuffed his phone in the pocket of his running shorts. While he’d been pitching his idea to two Port Authority detectives who had his back and would be discreet, he’d also been keeping an eye on Bella.

He’d watched her leave the house in running clothes, and since she’d told him about the lake, he’d taken advantage of the opportunity to just “happen” to be there at the same time she was. Good thing that, because something about the guy running behind her was off.

Not only wasn’t he dressed in running gear, but when Bella had stopped to tie her sneaker, he’d also stopped and seemed to be pretending to look at his phone. If that guy was actually here to run, Jamie would eat bean sprouts for dinner. In other words, bean sprouts weren’t on the menu.

Sure enough, when Bella veered off into the woods, the guy followed, trying to grab her shoulder.

“Jax, let’s go!” He tugged on the leash, and they bolted after her. His dog had been itching to go to work as it was and strained to be set free.

Jamie pounded on the asphalt trail, pushing himself faster. Jax easily kept stride with him. By the time they reached Bella, the guy was leaning over her with his arms outstretched. Without stopping, Jamie unclipped Jax’s leash. “Attack!”

His dog galloped into the woods and leaped, slamming into the guy and taking him to the ground. Jax clamped his jaws on a forearm.

“Ahhh!” The guy struggled, which only made his predicament worse. Jax adjusted his grip and clamped down again. “Get him off! Get him off!”

Bella scrambled backward, her eyes wide, chest heaving.

“Jax, easy!” Jax relaxed his jaw but still kept it clamped firmly around the guy’s arm. Jamie had to be careful about what commands he gave in front of Bella. Some K-9 terminology was used exclusively for law enforcement, while others were universal commands for all protection-trained dogs.

“Let me up,” the guy said. “I’m a—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Jamie flipped the guy onto his belly, pressed his knee into his back, and wrenched one of his arms there, too. “Move, and I’ll feed your fingers to my dog. Understand?” When he nodded, Jamie tugged a black wallet from the guy’s rear pocket. He flipped it open, then gritted his teeth to hold back a surge of fury.

You’ve gotta be kidding.

A gold FBI badge stared back at him. *Special Agent Daniel Hoover*. He snapped the wallet shut and wedged it out of sight beneath Hoover’s belly. He leaned down, whispering, “Say one more word, and I’ll let him chew on your gonads. Got it?” Again, Hoover nodded.

“Bella, are you okay?” he asked over his shoulder, quickly patting Hoover down for weapons, of which there were none. Not even a knife. *What an idiot.*

“Y-yes. Aside from being thoroughly pissed off.” She stood and brushed leaves and pine needles from the front of her shirt, the strap of which had slipped off her shoulder, revealing the luscious curve of her breast.

“Get out of here,” he ordered her.

“I know him.” She stepped closer, and her brow furrowed. “He was at the Bistro a couple of days ago.”

Jamie, too, looked harder at Hoover, then clenched his jaw so hard it hurt. She was right. This guy had been at the Bistro yesterday, too. Jamie had served him a beer just as Tony and Marco had shown up.

“Bella,” he repeated. “*Please*, just go back to your car. I’ll take care of this.”

“Do you want me to at least call the police?” She pointed to where her Mini Cooper was parked by his Tahoe. “My phone is in my car. I can—”

“No,” he growled. “Go back to your car and go home. *Now.*” He took a

calming breath. Bella looked okay, and from what he'd witnessed, Hoover hadn't had time to do anything. And what the heck had this jerkoff been thinking? Jamie's mind seesawed between pummeling him and taking Bella in his arms and holding her. "It's better you stay out of it. I've got this."

She threw up her hands. "Okay, okay."

He watched until she'd gotten back on the paved trail and was running back to her car. When she was out of earshot and out of sight, he searched Hoover's pockets until he found what he was looking for. Handcuffs.

Jamie whipped them out and snapped one on Hoover's right wrist. "Get up."

By simultaneously pulling up on Hoover's arm and digging the edge of the handcuff into the guy's wrist, Jamie had total control over his prisoner and got him to his feet. As stupid as this guy was, he'd gone to Quantico and should know the drill. If he resisted, one yank upward on the cuff would cause excruciating pain. Judging by the way Hoover was tiptoeing slightly, Jamie would bet it hurt like a mother already.

"Move," he ordered, shoving Hoover none too gently and deeper into the woods.

Jax followed, occasionally uttering a low growl in Hoover's direction.

"You saw my badge," the agent shot over his shoulder. "You know who I am."

"Yeah." Jamie snorted. "A total prick that preys on defenseless women." He searched until he found a tree trunk just the right diameter. "Move," he ordered again, pushing Hoover in front of him.

"That *wasn't* what I was doing," Hoover insisted. "If anything happens to me, you'll get the death penalty."

"I seriously doubt that." But the guy's words told Jamie what he needed to know.

Hoover didn't know he was undercover. Jenkins must have assigned him to surveil Bella but had wisely kept Jamie's ID intact.

He released the agent's wrist and whirled him around until both his hands were behind a tree, then snapped the loose cuff around Hoover's other wrist.

"You sonofabitch. I'll have you charged with assaulting a federal officer."

Jamie chuckled. "Don't overestimate your self-worth." Being careful to remain behind Hoover so he couldn't bite or spit at him, Jamie searched the guy's remaining pockets, tugging out a set of keys, then tossing them about ten feet away in the brush.

Last, he ran his fingers along the inside of Hoover's belt, searching for a spare handcuff key that might be taped there. It wasn't a precaution most feds took, but Jamie didn't want Hoover getting loose until he was long gone.

"You might as well have a seat." He nodded to the ground. "I have a feeling you'll be here a while."

While Hoover cursed, Jamie grinned. Hoover was standing in a particularly lush patch of poison ivy. "One more thing." He reared back, then slammed his fist into Hoover's jaw. Not a bone-cracking slam, but enough to bruise the guy and leave a mark big enough that he'd have trouble explaining it away. "Don't ever come near Bella Bianco again."

As he and Jax stalked from the woods, Jamie clenched his hands. He hadn't known that kind of rage in a very long time. When he'd realized someone was after Bella, he'd wanted to pound the guy headfirst into the ground. He didn't know what Hoover had in mind by chasing after Bella the way he had, but any man who frightened a woman like that deserved to be put six feet under. Anyone who did that to Bella...

Didn't deserve to breathe.

"C'mon, Jax." He picked up his dog's leash and began jogging back to the parking lot. With every step, more rage rolled through him, even stronger, as he considered what could have happened. Whatever Hoover's assignment was, Jamie had a feeling *he* was to blame.

This had to be the work of Special Agent Jenkins, but was it because Jamie had pushed back too hard by refusing to wear a wire? Was this why Hoover had been assigned to make contact with Bella? If so, it was Jamie's fault that Bella had nearly been hurt.

When he and Jax ran back to the parking lot, her Mini Cooper was gone. A few other cars had pulled in near his. Sooner or later, another runner or dog walker might spot Hoover cuffed to a tree, or the agent might start calling for help.

Not wanting to be anywhere around when that happened, Jamie loaded Jax into the back seat, then got in and backed out. Another vehicle sat a hundred yards away at the far edge of the parking lot—a black Explorer with tinted windows that screamed cop. He couldn't see if there was anyone inside. Probably just one of the locals writing up reports or having his morning coffee. Another reason to beat feet.

Just before driving through the park gates, he cued up the number he'd memorized, exhaling slowly through his nose to quell his irritation.

The phone rang three times before a sleepy voice answered. “Jenkins.”

Jamie chuckled. It was barely seven o’clock on a Sunday morning. *Serves you right, dickwad.* “What are you doing sending another agent into Bianco’s Bistro?”

“I told you to check in every day,” Jenkins said. “You refused. I told you to wear a wire. You refused that, too. What did you expect? HQ doesn’t like that kind of pushback. They were afraid you’d miss getting critical information, and I have to agree. I need *someone* to report in on what’s happening, and you made it clear you weren’t about to cooperate.”

Jamie pulled over on Route 9W, just outside the park. He tilted his head back, trying not to go ballistic. What he wanted was to tell Jenkins that if he pulled this nonsense again, he’d take himself off the case. But he couldn’t do that. His dad’s health was at stake. In fact, a check-in with his mother was long overdue. Succinctly, he filled Jenkins in on what he’d learned so far.

“You’re kidding?” Jenkins’s voice was filled with awe. “That’s amazing! That’s more information than we could have hoped for so soon.”

“Yeah,” Jamie quipped. “So cut me a little slack, and let me do my job. Alone.”

“Fine. But let’s compromise. How about checking in at least once a week so I know you’re still alive?”

Jamie hesitated. “Okay, but I want Hoover off this case. Permanently.”

Dead silence came through the phone. “How did you find out his name?”

“It was printed on his creds.”

“He *showed* you his creds?”

“No.” Jamie shook his head in disbelief. “I saw it when I pulled out his wallet. He was face down in the dirt at the time after scaring Bella Bianco to death. Whatever he’d been planning, he screwed it up. Royally.”

“*What?*” The sound of an engine starting came through the phone. “He was only supposed to try and get to know her.”

“From what I saw, total mission failure there. He’ll be lucky if she doesn’t call the police and press charges. And by the way, you’ll find Special Agent Dickwad handcuffed to a tree in Rockland Lake State Park.”

A beat of silence. “I’m *in* Rockland Lake State Park.”

“Black Explorer,” he said rather than asked. “Real covert.” *Moron.* And precisely why he insisted on working alone.

“I’m here to back up Hoover,” Jenkins said.

“Doing a stellar job of it, I see.”

“Since you’re here,” Jenkins added quickly, “I’ve got something for you. Swing back into the park.”

“Not a chance.” He had no intention of parking right next to an SUV that might as well have a police emblem glued to the side panels.

“I insist,” Jenkins bit out. “More importantly, the U.S. Attorney’s Office concurs with my idea. I’ll walk over to the lake. You can pick me up there, and that’s not negotiable. This comes directly from *the* U.S. Attorney himself.”

“Motherfu—” Jamie hung up and threw his phone on the dashboard. Jenkins knew he didn’t answer to the FBI, but in a federal investigation, everyone answered to the U.S. Attorney. Against every instinct in his body, he swung a one-eighty and headed back into the park.

Jenkins waited for him at a bench by the lake. A white plastic bag dangled from his hand. The second Jamie braked to a stop the agent hopped in. “Here.” Jenkins held out the bag. “It’s a wire and a receiver.”

Jax leaned between the seats to sniff the bag, then glared at Jenkins.

Not taking the bag, Jamie shook his head. Apparently, Jenkins had a memory shorter than a gnat’s. “I already told you—”

“It’s not for you. It’s for Bella Bianco.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Jamie laughed, because clearly Jenkins hadn’t thought this through. “What makes you think she’ll wear a wire for the FBI?”

Jenkins dug into the bag and pulled out two items. The first was a receiver about the size of his fist, the other was a red velvet jewelry box. “Just look at it, and I’ll explain.” He held out the jewelry box.

Reluctantly, Jamie flipped open the lid. Nestled on more red velvet was a gold pendant. The center of the pendant held a large purple gemstone surrounded by different-colored metal flowers. “What do you expect me to do with this?” He snapped the lid shut. If he wasn’t so annoyed at having a wire forced on him, he might think the necklace was pretty.

“Get close to her, and when the time is right, give it to her. Women *love* jewelry. The only catch is that the transmitter is small, so it’s low-powered, and the receiver has to be within fifty yards.” Jenkins dropped the receiver into the cupholder. “Before you ask, we do have a court order for this bug. We’ll probably miss some conversation, but if you know she’s going to be around her aunt, you can try to be nearby with the receiver.”

“Fine.” Knowing he’d never use it, he tossed the velvet box on the dashboard next to his phone. Giving the appearance he was being agreeable

was the easier course of action. He might catch flack for it later. He'd deal with it then.

"Stay in touch." Jenkins got out, then headed down the path in the direction of where Jamie had left Special Agent Hoover.

In his rearview mirror, Jamie saw more cars pulling into the park. Slowly, he backed out, then drove through the gate and onto Route 9W.

This case was on the verge of going down the toilet fast. If it weren't for his father, he *would* take himself off the case.

Before the arrest, he and his dad had been close. They'd done everything together. Fishing in Long Island Sound had been their favorite thing. Disillusionment had long ago set in, and for the last seventeen years, he'd barely visited his dad in jail. Until the cancer diagnosis. Now they might never go fishing together again.

Under normal circumstances, his dad would have been paroled years ago, but an innocent woman had died as a result of what his dad and his friends had done, making the chances of that happening slim to none. The law was black and white. Didn't matter that it hadn't been his dad's fault. The best Jamie's family could hope for now was getting his dad transferred from Otisville into the Federal Medical Center in Butner, North Carolina, a Level 4 Medical Care Prison. But would they have access to oncologists specializing in his dad's rare form of cancer? Maybe. The only thing he knew for sure was that being in Butner was better than being stuck in Otisville. If only the waitlist to get into Butner wasn't as long as Jamie's leg. His dad had been on that list for months now.

Repairing their relationship would take time, time his dad might not have inside a prison. *Any* prison.

Jamie slammed his fist on the steering wheel. He'd do anything to get his father the expert medical care he needed, and no one would take that opportunity from him. *No one*.

Chapter Twelve

Bella wrung her hands and made what had to be the fiftieth circuit of her kitchen and living room. If she paced any longer, there'd be an indentation in the oak floor.

Gnocchi's nails clicked as he followed her, looking up from time to time as if to ask: Mommy, what's wrong? The pup must think she was coming unhinged.

She picked up Gnocchi, then sat with him on the red velvet love seat. Sensing she needed his comfort, he curled up on her bare thighs, snuggling his cute little head against her belly.

Nearly an hour had passed since she'd raced home from the park and locked herself in her house, and still her fingers trembled. The only time in her life she'd been more frightened was when police had shown up at her house to say her parents were dead. Since that awful day, she'd never felt the same sense of love, safety, or security that family—a *real* family—inherently provided. It was a hole in her life she feared would never be filled, and right about now, she could use some of that missing safety and security.

That man in the park could have done anything to her, and there would have been no one around to stop him. If Jimmy and Jax hadn't shown up when they did, she might have become another face on a milk carton.

She cuddled Gnocchi closer, grateful for the puppy's warmth as she shivered, reliving the moment when she'd expected to be strangled or raped. *Or both.* The very same man had been sitting at the bar in her own restaurant. He could have been stalking her for days. For that matter, why had Jimmy been there? Was *he* stalking her?

No, stupid. She'd recommended the lake trail to him. But what were the chances he'd be there at the exact time she was? Coincidence, most likely. Or did Paola or Tony order him to follow her and watch her?

The sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach intensified. Whether Jimmy's being there had been coincidental or intentional, he'd saved her life.

Unable to sit still, she set Gnocchi on the floor, then went into the kitchen and filled her coffeemaker with water. Gnocchi settled in a corner of the living room where she'd bunched up an old blanket for a bed. A car outside slowed, and she looked out the window, expecting to see Jimmy's Tahoe pulling into the driveway, but it wasn't him.

What had he meant when he'd said he would "take care of this"?

Assuming he subscribed to the same violent tendencies Tony did, her attacker could very well be floating face down in the lake or his body left in the woods for animals to pick at until there was nothing left but bare bones.

The images her mind conjured up made her hands shake even more. Water spilled from the carafe as she poured it into the coffeemaker. She set the carafe on the counter, then gripped the edge of the cold, hard granite. As if her life wasn't complicated enough.

Knocking came from the front door. Bella gasped, then spun. Gnocchi's high-pitched barks sliced through the air while he pranced back and forth in front of the door.

Through the living room window, she glimpsed Jimmy's Tahoe. Being so distracted with her own thoughts, she hadn't heard him pull in.

Taking a steadying breath, she looked through the brass peephole, confirming it was indeed Jimmy who'd knocked. Standing at his side, Jax panted, his tail swishing back and forth in a slow wagging motion. She twisted open the deadbolt and unlocked the screen door for him and Jax to come inside. Another frightening urge made the breath catch in her throat—the urge to throw herself into his arms.

Don't be stupid. All she wanted and really needed was comfort. That had to be why such a ridiculous, impetuous thought had come to her. Didn't it?

Jimmy stepped into her home, his first time being there. His presence was as big as his body and seemed to take up the bulk of her entryway. Jax trotted in, touching noses with Gnocchi, whose short tail whipped back and forth with excitement at seeing his father figure again. With Gnocchi on his heels, Jax proceeded to inspect every inch of her living room and kitchen.

Meanwhile, Jimmy watched her from dark, concerned eyes. She didn't know how long they stared at each other. It could have been seconds, or it could have been minutes. She couldn't tear her gaze from his.

"I'm sorry," he finally said in a gravelly voice.

“Sorry?” She shook her head, not understanding. “For what? You and Jax saved me from—” She didn’t want to give voice to the ugly possibilities.

His throat worked as he swallowed hard. “I’m just...sorry this happened to you.”

“Me, too,” she whispered, and a sudden chill swept through her body.

Jax sat before her then leaned back, balancing on his haunches as he lifted both paws in the air. The dog looked exactly the way a person would if they were holding out their arms to hug someone.

She knelt and wrapped her arms around Jax’s back, leaning in and burying her face in his thick ruff. Jax rested his head on her shoulder, snuggling closer. Not to be outdone, Gnocchi did his best to mimic Jax, nuzzling his head against her leg.

Despite the canine comfort, the chill she’d experienced worsened, settling dead center in her chest and leaving her shivering uncontrollably. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she understood what her body was saying. She was going into shock.

Tears streamed down her face, and she couldn’t catch her breath. Through the haze, she heard Jax and Gnocchi whimper. Strong arms pulled her to her feet then lifted her in the air. A moment later, a warm blanket settled around her shoulders. No, not a blanket. *Jimmy’s arms.*

He’d sat on the sofa, gently rocking her back and forth. His arms made her feel like she was cocooned in a strong, warm safety blanket, one that smelled really good, all spicy and fresh.

“You’re okay,” he whispered against the top of her head. “He won’t ever hurt you again.”

“Wh-what did you do to him?” she asked through chattering teeth.

“Shh.” His lips pressed against her temple. “Don’t worry about him. He’s gone.”

Gone? As in dead? she wanted to ask but knew better than to press for details.

Slowly, the rest of her faculties returned. Warmth from Jimmy’s arms continued to work its magic, easing the chill from her body. She nestled tighter against him, tucking her head beneath his chin as he continued rocking her gently. Something—or *somebody*—licked her knee. *Jax.* Unable to reach high enough, Gnocchi settled for licking her ankle.

Reluctantly, she eased away a couple of inches. Sympathy, concern, and something else she couldn’t identify radiated from Jimmy’s eyes.

His gaze dipped to her mouth. Involuntarily, she licked her lips, then parted them because she could no longer draw in enough oxygen through her nose. All the oxygen seemed to have been sucked from the room.

In painstakingly slow increments, Jimmy lowered his head. Their mouths were so close all it would take was a scant lift of her chin, and their lips would touch.

Heat rolled off him in delicious, spice-scented waves she breathed in, expanding her chest until her breasts pressed against his pecs. Kissing Jimmy Santoro would be a supremely bad idea. So why wasn't she stopping him?

Because I don't want to.

Hard, firm lips grazed hers. The contact was slight, like being tickled by a feather. But the blast of heat that shot through her was undeniable. Like someone had turned on a furnace and angled it directly at her face.

With a deep groan, Jimmy kissed her more deeply, breathing into her mouth. She answered with a throaty moan of her own, sliding her hand to the back of his neck, pulling him closer.

The kiss was delicious, licking at her like flames, igniting a fire in her soul and in her core. Jimmy shifted, easing her backward so her neck rested in the crook of his arm. His hand slid up the side of her rib cage, his long fingers skimming her breast. Instantly, her nipples pebbled. If his mouth hadn't been fused to hers, his tongue sweeping in deep, fluid strokes, she would have wanted those masculine lips wrapped around her painfully tight nipples.

He slipped his hand around her shoulder, and she winced at the sharp pain. He broke off the kiss, pulling back and narrowing his eyes. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Her upper back, just below her right shoulder blade, stung when he'd touched her there.

Without preamble, he tugged her tank strap aside. "You're hurt."

"Really?" She tried looking over her shoulder to see the source of the pain. "I didn't feel a thing until now." Probably because she and Jimmy had been lip-locked like two kissing gouramis. She turned back to see a dangerous glint in his eyes and a muscle ticking in his cheek.

"Adrenaline can do that," he said tightly. "Do you have any antiseptic?"

"Antiseptic?" *You dork.* Parroting was something she never did. Her brain must have been clouded over by a kiss-induced haze. "In my bathroom." But she'd much rather he soothe her scraped shoulder with his warm lips.

He stood, taking her with him, then set her down and grabbed a thin throw

blanket that had been hanging on the back of the sofa and draped it around her shoulders. With quick, angry strides, he went down the short hallway, looking left then right at each open door before turning into the master bedroom.

Now that she was no longer intimately pressed against his buff body, the adrenaline and kiss-induced tension bled away like air from a sliced tire.

Kissing Jimmy might have felt good in the moment, but abandoning her ironclad rule not to date a mobster was just plain dumb. Foolish. She rolled her eyes.

What have I done?

She'd been upset, afraid, and craving a comfortable safety net. That's all this was. All it could ever be.

Jimmy Santoro might have a do-gooder streak in him, but he was still part of the Mancuso Crime Family. One of Tony's boys and soon to become one of Paola's minions.

He was a man she could never allow into her inner circle.

• • •

Jamie bit back a growl. The anger he'd barely managed to tamp down at the lake threatened to resurface with deadly thoughts of violence—something he was good at and a skill he'd been perfecting since the day his father had been taken from him.

Special Agent Hoover better pray he never crossed paths with Jamie again. Seeing those scrapes and the blood on Bella's smooth skin made him want to tear the guy's head off and shove it up his ass. And if it hadn't been for Hoover, he wouldn't have been holding her in his arms, cradling her warm body against his, and kissing her like she was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted and could never get enough of.

She was a taste he could never allow himself to savor again.

He took three steps into Bella's bedroom and stopped. The living room and kitchen of the house had been decorated similarly to the Bistro, in rich yellow and terra cotta and deep-red upholstered furniture. Her bedroom was entirely different.

A black antique wrought-iron bed with intricate scrollwork on the headboard took up a large part of the room. The bed was neatly made, covered in a white quilted duvet with matching pillows. Sheer white draperies billowed at the open window. The area rug had a crisscrossing

beige-and-white pattern.

The effect was subtle and serene, a tranquil oasis that called to his very soul, surrounding him with a calm that defused a big chunk of the fury burning inside him. His next thought was a stupid one, but he never ignored his instincts.

Every moment he spent with Bella Bianco gave him fresh insight that wasn't in the FBI's file on her. After reading that file, he'd expected one thing. In reality, she was another. A soft, vulnerable woman with no real family that mattered. None of it meshed with the FBI's firm belief she was a criminal.

He took in the rest of the room, the walls of which were painted a creamy color that reminded him of a foam-topped cappuccino as the milk began melding with the coffee. A golden oak bureau sat against one wall, and a white wood vanity topped with a tripod mirror sat against the other.

Jamie drew in a deep breath, inhaling Bella's scent. As he headed for the bathroom, he paused by the vanity. Sitting on a glass tray were several pieces of jewelry and a tiny purple glass bottle. Strictly for investigative purposes, he picked up the bottle and held it to his nose. *Yep*. This was the source of the flowers he smelled anytime he was around Bella.

"Did you find it?" she called out from the living room. "Top drawer in the bathroom."

Gently, he set the bottle back on the tray and moved into the bathroom. He flipped on the lights, opened the top drawer beneath the sink, and quickly found the tube of antiseptic ointment, along with a box of gauze pads and a roll of white medical tape. Before returning to the living room, he wet a washcloth in the sink and wrung it out.

Back in the bedroom, he couldn't help staring at the neatly made bed with its pristine white cover and wondering about the men in Bella's life who'd been lucky enough to rumple those bedsheets.

The image of Marco Ianetti and Bella in bed together wedged a solid lump of steel in his gut. One kiss didn't give him any rights to her. Who she took to her bed was none of his freaking business. When this case was over, he'd be history.

Heading back through the hallway, he shook his head to clear it. He had a job to do. That was the only reason he was here in the first place. Definitely not to ponder Bella's love life.

She looked up as he came back into the living room. The blanket was still

around her shoulders. She seemed to have stopped shaking, but her eyes were still tinged with fear that cut straight into his heart.

Fear *he'd* indirectly put there.

Jax sat by her legs, his head in her lap. Gnocchi had either managed to hop onto the sofa, or she'd picked him up. One of Bella's hands rested on the puppy's belly. The fingers of her other hand sifted through Jax's fur.

"Will you let me clean your injury?" It was the least he could do. For a moment, she hesitated, then nodded. "Move over, buddy." He nudged Jax out of the way and wedged himself behind Bella. Their bodies were close. *Too* close. With every breath he took, her scent flooded his lungs. Her spiky blond hair was softer than he'd expected, tickling his chin.

As he tugged the blanket from her shoulder, she shivered. "Cold?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Can I move the straps out of the way?" When she nodded, he slipped two fingers beneath her bra and tank straps, then slid them off her shoulder to her upper arm. Again, she shivered. Goose bumps prickled her back and—

Oh no.

Her nipples strained pertly against her snug shirt, forcing him to adjust his position on the sofa. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and said a silent prayer. He felt like fifty shades of perverted, rendering first aid to an injured woman and getting as hard as the barrel of a Colt M4.

"This might sting." Gently, he began wiping away the dried blood, starting at the edges of the scrapes and working inward to where her once smooth skin was now raw and abraded. She stiffened, her arm brushing against his. Now it was his turn for goose bumps. A barrage of them paraded across his forearm.

Getting close to her had been part of the plan, but this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind. He should be asking more subtly probing questions about the Bistro's intake and how much of that money was actually proceeds from the restaurant or money the Mancusos were laundering through the place. But there was a dangerous war taking place inside his head.

The undercover in him should take total advantage of the situation, of Bella's vulnerability. The man in him couldn't do it. Not now, not while he wanted to hold her, comfort her. And kiss her again.

"I should thank you and Jax," she said, breaking the silence. "I've never thought of myself as being helpless, but—"

"You're not helpless." He tossed the bloodstained washcloth on the coffee

table, then inspected the severity of the cuts, which were long but not deep. “Not all strength comes from muscle. The way you put that customer in his place at the Bistro the day I met you was impressive.”

She huffed. “With Tony and his boys there, it was easy. If he’d caused any real trouble, he probably would have wound up in the hospital.”

He didn’t doubt that, which was another reason he’d stepped in that day. If Tony had broken the guy’s kneecaps, he might have ended up in jail again, putting a serious kink in Jamie’s investigation.

Bella twisted her neck to look at him. “Why are you working for Tony?”

The cap he’d just unscrewed from the tube of ointment fell to the sofa. Considering her Italian lineage, she really did have the clearest, most beautiful blue eyes he’d ever seen. He squirted a dab on his finger. “Why do you ask?” And how to answer that question?

“You could be doing something else. You’re capable, handy, helpful, and you make the most amazing cappuccinos.” The smile she gave him did something dangerous, tugging on his heart. “A man who takes the time to make children stuck living at a soup kitchen smile could be doing something more constructive with his life than working for a mob capo.”

Not that he doubted it, but she’d just confirmed in no uncertain terms she knew precisely what her cousin was. If she’d been wearing that necklace, her own statement could be used against her. Jenkins would have had an evidentiary orgasm. But again, Jamie had no intention of ever giving it to her.

He began dabbing the ointment on her wounds. “It’s not that easy for an ex-con to get work.” And it wasn’t. He’d seen that firsthand, and it was a major cause of recidivism.

“You could work full time for me. If you wanted to, that is,” she added quickly.

“What about when your bartender gets back? Then you won’t need me.”

“I’d find you some other work.”

“I wouldn’t make a good bus boy, and waiting tables isn’t my thing. Besides, Sierra, Lori, and Rebecca have that covered.”

She turned away. “I’m just trying to help.”

Jamie recapped the tube, then tore open a gauze wrapper. “I know. Thanks.”

Oddly enough, it meant something that she thought enough of him to say that. It made him feel good.

And that was bad.

It meant he'd let his guard down enough for her to see him as something other than a mobster. He'd stupidly led himself down this warm and fuzzy path with her, and he needed to get off it posthaste. A mobster was precisely what he needed the world to believe he was. For the moment, anyway.

Working quickly, he taped the gauze bandage over her wounds, then eased from behind her and stood. "Can you cover me at the bar tonight?"

Her brows drew together in a frown. "Why?"

"I have a meeting with Tony and Paola." He knew that wouldn't be what she wanted to hear. From her deepening frown, he was right, and that was okay, because what he needed most right now was a little space from her.

"I see." Her voice held an icy note, one he'd intentionally put there, but it couldn't be helped. He couldn't risk her thinking he was a good guy, which he wasn't. If he let himself fall into that trap, it could be his downfall and the end of the case. "It should be slow tonight. I guess I can cover things."

"Thanks." He hitched his head to the door, but Jax didn't budge. "Jax, let's go." Jax whined then shook his head. "Jax!" Jamie didn't know what was up with his dog. He never disobeyed. *Never.*

With obvious reluctance Jax stood, then stretched his neck to kiss Bella's cheek.

She giggled. "Thank you, Jax." When she looked back at Jamie, her smile faded.

That was his cue to leave. In more ways than one. "If you leave those puppy cams at the Bistro tonight, I'll get them up and running for you when I come in on Tuesday. Then I'll show you how to work them." He opened the door, waiting for Jax, who plodded outside.

"Thank you." Bella turned away and tugged the blanket around her, effectively re-erecting that emotional wall between them.

That part of his plan had worked perfectly.

But as he went down the steps to his apartment, he wondered why he felt so miserable.

Chapter Thirteen

The dashboard digital display read five o'clock. Meaning the dinner rush would be kicking in shortly.

Bella's knuckles whitened where she had the steering wheel in a death grip. Ideally, she would have waited until Monday when the Bistro was closed to have this conversation with Paola. After what she'd learned yesterday from Misty at the bank, she couldn't wait a minute longer.

Rain pelted the car as she pulled into the circular driveway in front of Paola's house. Calling her aunt's place a house was like saying the Titanic was just a boat.

The five-thousand-square-foot, three-story, gray stone monster reminded Bella of a mausoleum. Not even the beautifully manicured lawn and perennial gardens, or the amazing waterfront view of the river, would ever make her feel differently. After her parents had been brutally gunned down when she was five, Bella had lived here with Paola, Tony, and Tony's older brother, Angelo. Still, it had never been her home and never would be. Whatever love she'd once thought Paola had for her had been tainted with too many lies and deception.

Including the circumstances of her parents' deaths. Paola had lied about that, too. Years later, Bella learned her parents had been innocent casualties of a mob war—the same one Paola and Tony now waged—making her despise her family's activities even more.

After all that had come between them, sometimes she wondered if her aunt had ever truly loved her at all.

She took a deep, fortifying breath, then pushed open the car door and leaped out, slamming the door shut behind her as she raced for the front steps. Lightning flashed, followed a second later by a resounding clap of thunder that reverberated inside her chest.

This wasn't a conversation she was looking forward to having again, but it was time to grow a set of lady balls and make one last pitch to extricate Bianco's Bistro from Paola's clutches. She had no illusions that today's conversation would take a different track than the previous ones. She had to try. One last time.

Big droplets soaked her silk blouse as she raced up the stairs. She grabbed the heavy knocker and rapped three times on the massive ash door. The key to Paola's house still hung on her key chain, but it didn't seem right going inside unannounced. Not anymore. This wasn't her house, and it wasn't her home.

The door swung open. Bettina, Paola's housekeeper, stood aside. "Good evening, Miss Bella." Bettina had been in the U.S. for over twenty years, most of it spent in the employ of Bella's aunt, and she still retained a thick Italian accent. More importantly, she was totally loyal to Paola.

"Hi, Bettina." Bella went in and automatically kicked off her wet shoes. One of Paola's pet peeves.

No other words were spoken between her and Bettina. Formalities were the only conversation she'd shared with the older woman, ever since Bettina had ratted her out to Paola for sneaking in late after a party. She'd been sixteen at the time and had liked a boy enough to break Paola's ironclad curfew. Bella had never forgiven Bettina and since then had never confided a single personal word to the woman.

She looked into the living room, not seeing her aunt. "Where is she?"

Bettina closed the front door. "In the sunroom."

"Thanks." Bella padded across the gleaming white marble foyer, squinting up at the massive multi-tiered chandelier. She'd always hated the thing.

With its brass curlicues and thousands of hand-cut crystals, she'd always assumed it would fall on her head one day. As a child, she'd once tried counting all the crystals and lost track before she'd even gotten to a hundred. Rumor had it this chandelier had once hung in the Valenzano Castle in Subbiano, Italy. Exactly how Paola had gotten her hands on it, she didn't want to know.

By the time she'd made it through the living room, with its ornate, gilded furniture in richly upholstered hues of blues, reds, and greens, she could hear her pulse hammering in her ears. When she reached the dining room, set for four people, Bella could swear her heart would beat right out of her chest.

Today, the sunroom was anything but sunny, and it wasn't just because the

sky outside was as gray as the very stone the house was made of, or that the waves of the Hudson had whipped to a frenzy with whitecaps racing toward the shoreline and crashing over the seawall. It was her mood, which was tanking fast.

At the sight of her aunt reclining in a regal, high-backed upholstered armchair, Bella gulped. If she didn't find a way to draw strength from those lady balls she sorely wished she had more of, she'd wind up a shaking puddle of human flesh on the floor at Paola's feet. Much as had happened when she'd been a child.

Time to man up! Or woman up.

Paola flipped a page of the magazine in her hands, the grape-sized diamond ring on her left hand glittering. Her silvery gray hair was pulled back in a perfect French twist. The skirt and jacket suit she wore was one of her favorites, sky-blue silk with dark-blue crystal buttons. One corner of Paola's mouth lifted, the only sign of acknowledgment. She was big on power plays.

Bella cleared her throat. Paola looked up and smiled, not a friendly one, more of a crafty smile that spoke volumes, and what it was saying was: I know you want something, I know what it is, and you won't get it.

Crap. She hadn't voiced a single word yet, and already her courage was faltering. She took the chair on the other side of the small table next to her aunt.

Paola set the magazine down, then clasped her hands on her lap, looking every bit the powerful matriarch she was. *The powerful Godmother that she is.*

Her aunt's graying brows arched as she took in Bella's rain-soaked attire. "I see you still haven't lost any weight as I suggested."

Suggested? Bella swallowed the rising snarl in the back of her throat. When Paola had first callously proclaimed in front of the entire Bistro staff that she was overweight and needed to lose twenty pounds, it had been a command. Hardly a suggestion.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" Paola continued, unfazed Bella hadn't responded to her unpleasant comment.

"I went to the bank yesterday." She locked gazes with Paola, but her aunt gave nothing away. "You deposited over two hundred thousand dollars in the Bistro account. Where did all that money come from? Because it sure didn't come from the Bistro."

"Bella, sweetheart." Paola shook her head gently. *Not the sign of someone*

about to be forthcoming with truthful information. “I’ve told you before, that isn’t something you need to be concerned with. You know that cash won’t be there for long.”

“That’s not the point,” Bella snapped. Her patience had worn about as thin as a tissue. The time for playing these games was over. “You can’t keep comingling outside funds with the Bistro’s account. If we’re ever audited, we’ll be in big trouble.”

Paola raised her hand in a dismissive gesture. “We won’t be audited.”

“How can you be so certain?” Bella leaned across the table. “Do you have the IRS in your back pocket, too?”

Paola’s lips thinned. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not.” So many people owed her aunt favors, it wasn’t out of the question. Bella’s breathing came harder, faster, as she struggled for control.

Paola pointed a finger. “Do *not* take that tone with me, young lady.”

“Then *don’t* treat me like I’m ten years old.” Her voice had begun to shake, and she swallowed. “I want to look at your accountant’s books.”

The patronizing sigh Paola made grated on Bella’s nerves. Her aunt leaned back in her throne of a chair, again clasping her hands. “You and I had an agreement. I let you hire your own staff, and I handle the books.”

“That’s not good enough anymore.” Bella shook her head. “Where did that money come from? Did you steal it? Did Tony work another scam or rip off some other mobster?” *Uh-oh.* She’d actually said the M word in front of her aunt.

“Bella!” Paola’s eyes about popped out of her head. “We do *not* use that word. *Ever.*”

“Oh, please.” She rolled her eyes. “Do you think I’m stupid or blind? I know exactly what you and Tony are, and everyone else who works for you. You’re mobsters. *All of you.*”

“Bella, stop it!” her aunt shouted, something she rarely did. “You don’t know *anything* about me, *anything* about what I’ve gone through to hold this family together. To keep the government from taking what’s ours.”

Paola’s lips compressed so tightly the skin around her mouth whitened. “You were in Italy when your uncle—my *husband*—and my beautiful son were murdered by the police and the FBI.”

That much was true. Bella had come home for the funerals, but the media coverage had a different spin on their deaths. She’d tried to be there for her aunt and Tony, but they’d clung to each other, essentially treating her like an

outsider.

“You didn’t see how they took everything from us. *Everything.*” Paola’s eyes blazed. “You know your uncle’s operation was nearly wiped out, and there’s always someone ready and willing to move in and take over an area. I had to act fast, and I did. We’re still rebuilding, but *I* did it. *I* rebuilt Angelo’s legacy into what it is today. A thriving business.”

A business? Was that how her aunt justified her illegal operations?

Paola had been enjoying the fruits of being wife to a mob leader, living in the lap of luxury with fancy cars, clothes, jewelry, expensive vacations and a mansion to call home. The bottom line was she hadn’t wanted to lose the lifestyle to which she’d become accustomed, and she’d turned to a life of crime to maintain it.

“My God, Paola.” Slowly Bella shook her head. “What’s happened to you? You used to be loving, caring. Now you’re just...ruthless.”

For a long moment, her aunt said nothing, then she took a deep breath. And were those tears glistening in Paola’s eyes? Not once since her uncle’s and cousin’s funerals had she ever seen her aunt cry.

“I’ll tell you what happened to me,” Paola said in a trembling voice. “I buried my husband, and I buried my son. But I survived. And when my home was taken from me, I survived that, too. Do you want to know how?”

Bella didn’t know whether to nod, but she did.

“By filling the void. By working hard. It made me stronger. You may not approve of what I am, but I’ve learned to embrace it. I would never go back to what I once was.”

A spurt of sympathy and understanding lodged solidly in Bella’s throat.

Paola was a powerful Mafia figure, but she was still a woman who’d suffered great loss and was still in pain. That much was obvious. Like everyone, Paola was a product of her past. Unlike most people, however, her past had been filled with violence, the likes of which most people were lucky enough never to live through. Paola had never dealt with the trauma of losing Uncle Angelo and her cousin. She’d never allowed herself to grieve.

For the first time in over a decade, Bella was getting a rare glimpse of the loving, caring woman her aunt had once been, and Bella *had* loved that woman. Sadly, circumstances had turned her into a cold, hard, unyielding person. Part of her aunt’s explanation made her feel sorry for the woman. “I’m sorry for your loss. You know I am.”

In less time than it took for Bella’s heart to beat twice, Paola’s expression

hardened, that cold, ruthless persona she'd become accustomed to firmly back in place. "We've been through this before, and the answer is still the same. No."

"Yes," Bella said, raising her chin. If she wanted change, she had to be strong. One thing her aunt didn't respect was cowardice. "In fact, it's past time. I've turned the Bistro into a successful operation that's made enough profit that I can afford to buy you out. It's *my* restaurant. I worked hard to make it what it is, and I want it back."

The sky over the river lit up with a bolt of lightning. Two seconds later, a crack of thunder rolled through the room.

Paola uttered a snort of disbelief. "*You* turned it into a successful operation? *Your* restaurant? And you think *you* made it what it is?" She threw back her head and laughed, not a pleasant sound, rather one that had the same effect as dragging nails down a chalkboard. "You seem to have forgotten the facts. I took you in when your parents died. I put food in your mouth and clothes on your back. *I* paid for you to go to culinary school, then gave you the money to buy the Bistro."

Not wanting to back down, Bella said, "Then tack on the money you paid for my schooling. I don't care. Just give me the Bistro."

Paola rose and began to pace the sunroom, a sign Bella had finally gotten her pissed off. Well, good. If this was what it took, then so be it.

"You still don't get it," Paola said through gritted teeth. "You're *nothing* without me. Even if I didn't own controlling interest, Bianco's Bistro is *nothing* without *me*. You actually have the audacity to think you're behind its success. Well, little girl, you're not. I am. I turned that filthy little dive into what it is today, *not* you. Do you actually think you and your quaint little atmosphere and your plebeian menu bring in customers?"

Plebeian? She and Lou worked hard creating food people loved. That menu was top notch.

"*I* bring in the customers." Paola thumped her chest. "Most of your clientele comes to Bianco's because of the mystique surrounding me and the Mancuso family. You could never have gotten the Bistro up and running successfully without me."

Bella stood. This wasn't going well, but she wasn't about to back down. "You're a criminal." There. She'd said it. "Sell me your share of the Bistro before the government figures out what you're doing and takes *both* our shares."

For a woman of Paola's age, she had the agility of a cat and lashed out before Bella could blink, slapping her on the cheek with enough force to whip Bella's head around. "You ungrateful little bitch."

Bella went as rigid as a steel beam. Her cheek stung more than the worst sunburn she'd ever experienced in her life, but that wasn't what made her stand there, mute, stupefied, incapable of moving an inch.

Her parents had never hit her. *Ever*. Paola had.

The sweeping realization of the stark cold truth cut more deeply than the pain now radiating from her cheek to her scalp. The wondering was over. Now she knew for certain. Paola had never loved her, and she had to accept it, along with another biting truth.

The fight was over, and she'd lost. Completely and brutally.

A gruff snort came from the doorway. Just outside the sunroom stood Tony, Marco, and Jimmy. The snort had come from Jax, who sat beside Jimmy, his head hung low.

Great. Heat crept to her face and not from the sting of her aunt's slap. Adding to her pain and suffering was the fact there'd been an audience to her utter humiliation. Tony witnessing such a tirade was nothing new. Even Marco knew her relationship with Paola was strained. It was Jimmy's presence that upset her the most. He was her employee, her tenant. It was bad enough he'd seen Paola hit her, but there was another reason, one she couldn't put her finger on, that was so disturbing about him seeing how her aunt treated her.

Over Jax's head, their eyes met briefly, hers filled with unshed tears and his with a mixture of what looked like anger, concern, and... *Oh God. Please not sympathy*. His jaw clenched tightly, and a muscle ticked in his cheek. Why he would care, she didn't know.

A throaty rumble came from Jax, and Jimmy tightened up on the dog's leash, wrapping it around his big hand several times as if Jax were about to launch.

Numbly, she turned to leave.

Tony's lips had twisted into a disappointed frown as he glared at her. Of course, he'd side with his mother. Marco's face was a blank mask. Jimmy's dark brows had lowered. If Bella wasn't mistaken, the look he shot Paola was chock full of malevolence. Half a second later, the look was gone, replaced by one of indifference that matched Marco's.

As Bella brushed past them, Jax touched his nose to her hand, uttering a

sad whine. Her chest shuddered with sobs she couldn't, *wouldn't* let anyone see, and her eyes backed up with unshed tears. Just short of running, she raced to the front door and leaned over to grab her shoes. Without putting them on, she flung open the door and went outside into the pouring rain.

She stood by the Mini Cooper with her fingers curled around the handle but didn't open the door. Warm summer rain mixed with the tears now streaming unchecked down her face.

Paola Mancuso's moral code ran on a completely different track, and she had no qualms about mowing down anyone who got in her way. Including her. Blood ties were meaningless if there was no love there.

Remaining part of Paola's world had become too painful. Bella wanted nothing more than to sever all ties with the woman, but that would mean walking away from the Bistro, her investment, and the employees she'd welcomed into her circle. Even they were more of her family than Paola had ever been.

Her body shuddered with sobs she could no longer suppress. The truth was devastating.

Cutting ties with Paola would also mean she'd have to walk away from everything and everyone that she *did* love.

Chapter Fourteen

The FBI had it wrong.

Jamie had already begun to suspect Bella either had nothing to do with using the Bistro as a front to launder mob money or, at the very least, wasn't a willing participant. The heated argument he'd just witnessed pretty much confirmed it.

Tony had remained silent, frowning throughout the tirade between his mother and cousin, but was it because he didn't approve of Bella's attempt to extricate the Bistro from his mother's iron grip, or because he didn't approve of his mother's treatment of her? The former, most likely.

At first, Marco's expression had been undecipherable. But as he'd watched Bella's hasty escape, Jamie saw it. The look of compassion in the man's eyes. Marco definitely felt something for Bella, and she seemed either completely oblivious or completely not interested.

For whatever reason, Bella's disinterest in the other man pleased him. As for himself, the wounded, defeated look in her eyes splayed his guts wide open, leaving his mind searching for answers as to why that was.

Bella reignited the kind of feelings he'd suppressed for so long now. The more time he spent with her, the greater the risk she would reignite the humanity in him. The side of him that wished he were a better person.

Jamie bit back his emotions, shoving them into the deep dark hole where they had to remain. The urge to chase after Bella and comfort her was a burning need inside him that had to be snuffed out. At the top of his to-do list was maintaining a professional distance from these people. Which meant kissing her again was at the top of his *to-don't* list. She wasn't his problem, and her problems couldn't become his. But as Tony indicated they join Paola in the sunroom, he felt like crap for the havoc and grief his actions would ultimately cause Bella.

His chest tightened, and his fingers twitched with the need to hit something hard enough to snap his equilibrium back on rock-solid footing before he did something stupid. Worrying how his actions while undercover would affect someone didn't normally happen. Bella was the first person who made him worry about what would happen to her when this case was over.

Paola gave a quick shake of her head and smiled. *Talk about cold.* Like she hadn't just crushed every one of her niece's hopes and dreams beneath the bottom of her shoe. Taking this woman down would be a gift to humanity.

"Mama." Tony's voice dripped with commiseration as he held out his hands to his mother and kissed her on both cheeks. "You shouldn't get upset over this. Let me handle it. I'll talk to her. She just needs to be reminded we're all family, and we need to stick together. Family is everything, right?"

The Mancuso family is everything wrong. And he now had the definitive answer to one question. Tony's frown had been directed at Bella.

"Mama, you remember Jimmy?" Tony draped his arm around Paola's shoulders.

"How could I forget?" A twinkle of mirth glittered in her dark eyes as she extended her hand, a clear invitation to greet her the same as he'd done before. Like a queen.

Beside him, Jax stiffened, and in that instant Jamie understood perfectly. "Easy, boy," he whispered. The last thing he needed was for Jax's spot-on instincts to undermine the investigation.

Jax didn't like Paola. Bella, however, he'd loved at first sight, as if he'd been struck with a bad case of canine *colpo di fulmine*, the lightning bolt of love. When Paola had slapped Bella, Jax had been on the verge of tackling the woman. *So was I.* If they'd been alone, Jamie would have high-fived his dog for being an excellent judge of character.

Jamie took her hand and raised it to his lips, doing his best to avoid the ring on her index finger. The diamond was the size of a small meatball and big enough to gouge out his eye. As it had been the first time he'd kissed Paola's hand, her skin was cool and dry. *Like the woman herself.*

Marco scoffed his disapproval. Not that Jamie gave a shit what Marco thought. The man was of no consequence and would go down with the rest of the Mancusos. Apparently, Paola didn't care, either, and completely ignored Marco's snit.

"This must be Jax." When Paola leaned down to pet Jax's head, Jax actually jerked away.

Rather than laugh outright as he was inclined to, Jamie cleared his throat. "He's a little shy around people he doesn't know," he lied. For a German shepherd, Jax was as friendly as they came. With people he liked, that was.

"I understand." When she reached out to give him another pat on the head, he sensed Jax was about to retreat farther and nudged his dog, a signal not to move. He tolerated Paola's touch like a real trooper.

"Jax," Jamie said, planning on giving his dog lots of treats when they got back to the apartment. "Sit pretty for the lady."

Still sitting, Jax raised his upper body and held it there, paws extended.

Paola took one of Jax's paws, giving it a little handshake. "How marvelous. Did you train him to do that?"

"I did." That, along with how to chase down a suspect in five seconds flat. "Jax, take a bow."

Jax stood, then lowered his front paws to the floor and arched his back, as if bowing to an audience.

"Wonderful." Paola clapped her hands together. "Let him off the leash."

Jamie did as she said, or rather, commanded. He felt reasonably certain everyone jumped to do her bidding.

"Marco." Paola hitched her chin at Jamie. "Let's get the unpleasantries out of the way."

"Gladly." Marco tugged a device from his back pocket about the size of a large cell phone, but thicker. Jamie recognized it instantly. A *body wire detector*. Marco turned on the device, ran it up and down Jamie's legs, then his back. The device would pick up any radio frequencies being sent out. It could even detect a small power surge from a digital recorder's battery.

Good thing he hadn't caved to Special Agent Jenkins's demands and worn a wire. If he had, Marco and Tony would have found him a permanent resting place. At the bottom of the river.

When Marco ran the device over Jamie's ass, as expected, the device beeped, and Jamie tugged out his cell phone. Not even wireless transmissions would go undetected, and this was Paola's home, her true inner sanctum. What they'd discussed at the Bistro had been of virtually no consequence. This was where the real business went down.

"Fist, unlock your phone," Tony ordered. Jamie did, then handed over the phone, knowing full well what would happen next.

Tony tapped, scrolling through Jamie's recent call list, contact list, and text messages. Right after he'd spoken to Jenkins that morning, he'd permanently

deleted the number from his phone.

“There’s only one contact here,” Tony said, his tone suspicious. “That ain’t normal.”

“It’s a brand-new phone,” Jamie replied, knowing he’d be grilled about that and having an explanation worked out. “I got it the day before I got busted. Haven’t had much of a chance to use it yet.” In truth, it was a brand-new phone. A *burner phone*. To avoid scrutiny, he’d memorized all the numbers he’d need so there’d be nothing in his contacts list that would raise suspicion. There was only one number in there.

“Call the number,” Paola ordered. “Put it on speaker.”

Tony did as his mother directed. After three rings, a bored female voice answered. “Parole Division answering service.”

Tony covered the phone with his hand. “Who’s your PO?”

“Juan Espinoza.”

“I need to speak with Juan Espinoza,” Tony said. “It’s Jimmy Santoro.”

“Hold on. I’ll connect you.”

A few moments later, a different voice came on the phone. “Espinoza.”

Still holding the phone, Tony extended it toward Jamie. “It’s Jimmy Santoro,” Jamie said.

“How’s it going, Jimmy? You get a job yet?”

“Yeah. Bartending.”

“Good. What can I do for you?”

“I, uh, need to reschedule my appointment with you on Tuesday.”

The sound of papers being shuffled came through the phone. “Can you come in on Wednesday? Same time?”

“See you then.”

Tony ended the call and handed back the phone. “Sorry, Fist. We can’t be too careful.”

“No problem.” Jamie stuffed the phone back into his pocket. Behind him, Marco didn’t say a word, but the disappointment from the other man washed over Jamie in waves. Tony might be on Jamie’s side, but there was no doubting Marco was waiting for him to either screw up or get tripped up.

Sorry, bucko. Not today.

Juan Espinoza really was a parole officer. He was also the brother of another Port Authority cop Jamie had gone through the academy with. Juan had been more than happy to assist with Jamie’s painstakingly orchestrated cover story.

“Come.” Paola flicked her fingers, and they followed her into the dining room to the table he’d noticed on the way in that was long enough to accommodate a small country. An ornate chandelier with pink crystals hung over the table. Considering it was the size of a fifty-five-gallon drum, he hoped it didn’t fall on their heads.

It was obvious the elaborate table settings had been designed to match the chandelier. The tablecloth was white with frilly pink trim and matching napkins. Even the stacked plates were pink with embossed gold stuff around the edges. And how many forks, spoons, and knives did one person need to eat dinner? The only thing he’d ever needed to eat his mom’s lasagna was a fork. There had to be more than a dozen pieces of silverware in front of each chair, along with three different size and shape glasses and tiny little espresso cups.

Jamie didn’t know which was more impressive—the table settings or the large picture windows taking up an entire wall. Outside, the Hudson churned up white caps as the thunderstorm continued rolling through the area.

“Sit.” As expected, Paola took the chair at the head of the table. “Food and wine before business. Jimmy, you sit here.”

When she waved her diamond-laden hand at the seat immediately to her left, Marco made another grinding sound of disapproval. Guess that seat was normally reserved for him.

Too bad. The guy was seriously starting to irritate Jamie, but he understood the man’s reaction. As Tony’s lieutenant, Marco was, essentially, third in command. Jamie’s presence undercut that position, especially since it had been *he* who had saved Tony’s life in prison. Jamie would bet that ate at Marco like a vat of acid.

Since neither Tony nor Marco made a move to do so, Jamie stood behind Paola as she lowered herself gracefully onto the high-backed captain’s chair, then pushed it in for her.

Marco’s expression filled with derision. Whatever this man had against him, it was more than just a healthy distrust of the new guy. Jealousy over Bella might have something to do with it. Either way, Jamie’s gut told him to watch his back around Marco Ianetti or risk having one of Paola’s pricey silver forks jammed into his neck when he wasn’t looking.

As they sat, Jax lay down at the corner of the table between Jamie and Paola. With a groan that clearly said he was bored, Jax rested his head on the rug.

“Bettina?” Paola called out.

Italian opera began playing from speakers flush in the ceiling. Two seconds later, a woman with short gray hair, a pinched face, and wearing a black maid uniform and a white apron pushed through a swinging door toting a tray with two decanters of red wine and two small canoe-shaped bowls containing olives and nuts. She must have the hearing of a bat or been hovering by the kitchen door.

Had she heard the argument between Bella and Paola? As housekeeper, Bettina was in a position to overhear things and could very well be privy to a wealth of information the FBI would kill for. Was she the informant Jenkins had nebulously referred to?

Bettina set the tray on the table, then proceeded to fill their glasses, emptying one of the decanters.

“Thank you, Bettina,” Paola said without looking at the other woman. To Jamie, she said, “This is Il Caggio, my favorite Chianti.”

Bettina set the remaining decanter on the table, then picked up the tray and disappeared through the swinging door.

Paola picked up her glass and held it in the air. “Salute.”

As one, Jamie and the other men did the same and waited for Paola to take the first sip. When she did, Jamie tipped his glass, swallowing the bare minimum necessary to keep up appearances. Given the scam he was about to pitch to earn his place, he had to keep a clear head.

“You like it?” Tony asked, then tossed an olive into his mouth and chewed loudly. “It’s very expensive. Three hundred dollars a pop but worth every penny. Bella’s got bottles of this stuff locked up in a special wine cooler at the Bistro. Every once in a while, I pinch one. She doesn’t know that *I* know where she hides the key.” He grinned slyly.

Jamie didn’t doubt for one second the wine was of the highest quality money could buy. Or, in the case of the Mancusos, *steal*. The miniscule amount he’d swallowed *had* tasted expensive, even better than the Pierazzuoli he’d sipped on at the Bistro. “It’s excellent,” he said to Paola, who smiled back, clearly pleased.

This time, Paola didn’t call for Bettina but picked up a silver bell sitting at her left hand and rang it. Again, as if she’d had her ear glued to that swinging door, Bettina immediately brought in a platter of baked clams. Smells of garlic and herbs rolled across the table, making Jamie’s mouth water.

Two hours later, and after several more courses, including gnocchi, osso

bucco, salad, fruit, and cheese, his gut was pushing at his belt. Halfway into the espresso and tiramisu, he thought he'd explode.

Not only had he eaten his fill two courses ago, he was itching to lay out his plan. Aka *scam*. But that wasn't the way things were done. Paola was following strict Italian guidelines. A traditional feast before business.

Paola shook the silver bell. When Bettina rushed into the room, Paola pointed to Jax. "Bring out some pieces of osso bucco on a plate."

Just what Jax needed. Spicy, sauce-laden meat. He'd be passing gas all night. Or worse. But if letting Paola feed his dog would earn him favor, Jamie would suffer through it.

Moments later, Bettina set a plate with hunks of meat in front of Jax's nose. Jax lifted his head and sniffed, his nostrils flaring. Ignoring what had to be an expensive cut of meat, Jax put his head down and closed his eyes.

Paola frowned. "What dog doesn't eat meat?"

"He's had an upset stomach lately," Jamie lied. In all likelihood, there were two reasons Jax had refused the food Paola had offered.

Given their patrol often included passenger terminals at JFK Airport, he'd taught Jax never to accept food from strangers. But Jamie would bet there was another reason. Even Jax had the common sense not to accept a gift from someone he didn't like, and he definitely didn't care for Paola Mancuso.

"Bettina!"

The woman appeared out of nowhere. "Yes, ma'am."

Paola pointed to the untouched plate. "Take this out of here."

Bettina took the plate and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Woops. Before they left, Jamie vowed to find a way for Jax to apologize.

"So." Paola took a sip of limoncello. "Tony tells me you have something planned. Let's hear it."

Finally.

Tony gave him an encouraging nod. Jamie had already run a skeleton of the plan by Tony, but for something of this magnitude, Paola had to give it her blessing.

"A couple of years ago," he began, "Port Authority cops at JFK seized over a hundred thousand of those mini-bottles of liquor they sell on airplanes. They were stolen by a bunch of employees working for Air Chefs, the company that provides food and beverages to all the major airlines. They were gonna sell the bottles in the underground market to local liquor stores and bodegas. Retail value is around a million bucks. I wanna grab the bottles

and sell them.”

His buddies, Detectives Palos and Masamoto, worked for the Port Authority’s Office of Inspector General and had fittingly dubbed the case Operation Last Call. Jamie had been part of the takedown raid that had discovered the bottles stashed inside one of the defendant’s garages.

“How do you plan to do that?” Paola asked.

“The cops closed the case,” he continued, “but Air Chefs can’t take the booze back, and it can’t be sold to the airlines. Something about health and safety after it leaves their control. The bottles have to be destroyed. They’re being taken to an incinerator.”

Marco rested his forearms on the edge of the table. “How do you know all this? You only got out of prison a month ago.”

A question Jamie was fully prepared for. This cover story had been tweaked and re-tweaked so many times for holes he’d lost count.

“Right after I got out,” Jamie said, “I bought a used Tahoe off a guy I knew in high school. He’s a manager at Speedy Courier Trucking near JFK. I met him there to buy the Tahoe, then we went out for beers, and he tells me how these two detectives came by to make arrangements for a tractor trailer to take these bottles of booze to an incinerator. One of the cops starts bragging about this big case and how much the booze is worth. Then they started whining about how it’s gonna cost them thousands of dollars just to get rid of it.”

“Stupid cops.” Tony refilled his glass with limoncello. “You’d think they’d be smart enough to keep the booze for themselves. Serves ’em right if we steal it from them. It’s only gonna go to waste. Somebody might as well benefit from it.” Tony downed the glass and grinned.

“Exactly.” Jamie caught the quiet, subtle note of interest in Paola’s eyes. Like any good general, she was content to watch and listen while her troops planned the assault. “They’re driving it to an incinerator this Tuesday. I say we grab the whole truck.”

Marco sneered. “Can *you* drive a tractor trailer? None of *us* can.”

Since Jamie had already discussed this with Tony, Tony hooked his thumb to Jamie. “He can.”

“I used to drive for a trucking company in Ohio.” Another part of his undercover facade, courtesy of the Ohio Departments of Motor Vehicles and Transportation. In reality, he’d gone through CDL—commercial driver’s license—training to assist the feds with a smuggling case involving cocaine

hidden in full-size shipping containers. “My license is expired, but I can still drive.”

Marco grunted, then leaned back and crossed his arms. “How do you know exactly what time they’re gonna move the booze? And how do you know what truck they’re using?”

Jamie chuckled. What he really wanted to do was feed Marco a knuckle sandwich. “By now in the conversation, you can imagine my interest is piqued. So, I keep buying my friend beers. After the fourth beer and the second shot of Jack, I not only squeeze out of him that they scheduled the truck for this Tuesday, but they’re taking it up to Peekskill. I checked, and there’s a municipal incinerator in Peekskill. They plan to drive the booze up in the morning. All the company trucks say Speedy Courier on the side.”

Paola tapped her finger on her chin. “As Marco said, what about timing? How will you know exactly when the truck will arrive at the incinerator? If there are too many witnesses, this will never work.”

“We can’t time this down to the minute,” he admitted. “But here’s the beautiful thing. My friend said the cops want the truck to be at the incinerator when it opens first thing in the morning, so they don’t have to pay the trucking company extra for the truck and the driver while they’re sitting behind twenty other trucks. The place opens at six a.m.”

Marco snorted. “You got *all* this out of a guy after four beers?”

“Yeah, and two shots of Jack.” Jamie leaned back, crossing his arms to mimic Marco. “Amazing what you can get out of people when you’re not being an asshole. You should try it sometime.” Poking the bear was risky, but maybe it was needed to get Marco off his back.

The frosty glare Ianetti sent him was cold enough to freeze Jamie’s balls into round ice cubes. “You sonofabitch. You think just because you saved Tony’s ass you get some kind of special privileges around here? That’s not how things work.”

“Enough!” Paola smacked her hand on the table, rattling the dishes and glassware.

Jax lifted his head. Jamie leaned down and rested a soothing hand between his dog’s ears, keeping it there until he felt the tension ebb from Jax’s body.

“Marco.” Paola’s tone held a subtle warning. “I need more soldiers and more income, and you well know it. I’m ordering you to give Jimmy a chance to prove himself. If he does, he can help us.” She looked at Tony and dipped her chin in the subtlest of nods. “With *everything*.”

Beneath the table, Jamie fisted his hand. Paola was being cagey about divulging anything before he was *in* with the Mancusos, but “everything” could very well be the “big splash” the FBI wanted intel on.

“Fist.” Tony held up a finger. “There’s one thing we need to talk more about. Cops have guns. They hired a driver to move the booze, but won’t there be an armed escort? We can’t be killing no cops or they’ll never stop searching for us. So how are you gonna keep them from shooting our asses off?”

“My friend said only one cop is gonna be in the truck with the driver.” As prearranged, Steve would be the cop, Artie the driver. “Mainly, he’s there to witness the burn. This is booze, not drugs or guns. They’re not gonna send an entire platoon of cops to protect it. There are a few unknowns, but if we bring the whole crew, there’ll be six of us against one of them.”

This time it was Paola who grunted, although hers was one of interest, not disapproval. “How exactly do you plan to hide the whole truck, and what will you do with it afterward?”

“To steal the truck, we’ll use a diversion. I’ve already scouted out the area, and I think this will work.”

For the next five minutes, Jamie outlined the plan he’d worked out with Steve and Artie. Then he waited for Paola to either give him the green light or shut him down.

Paola strummed her diamond-laden fingers on the table. Eventually, she smiled and nodded. “This is just the kind of thinking I like. We need a big influx of cash, and we need it fast.” Another confirmation that whatever she was planning had to be soon. “I love the idea of stealing from the cops, but Marco’s concerns are valid.” In less than a microsecond, the look in her eyes morphed into an unmistakably deadly glint. She pointed a finger at him. “If you fuck with me”—her voice lowered as she leaned over the corner of the table separating them—“you’re gone.”

Jamie had no illusions that *gone* meant he’d be kicked to the curb. Her meaning was as clear as the garish diamond on her finger.

Gone meant dead. A very slow, painful death at that.

Chapter Fifteen

“You gotta get over it, Bella.” Tony poured more wine into a glass. “Ma’s never gonna sell you her share of the Bistro.”

His words echoed in the empty dining room. Mondays, the Bistro was closed. Bella had only stopped in because the alternative—stewing around her house—was worse.

“But she *promised*,” Bella said through gritted teeth. “You know she did, you were there when she said it. She told me it was a loan until I had enough to buy her out.”

“Things change,” Tony said, waving his hand in the air. “The Bistro is part of Ma’s business plan. It’s more important to her now than it ever was.”

“Why?” Bella sat back and crossed her arms. “So she can channel more illegal funds through the Bistro’s account?”

Tony’s eyes flashed with annoyance. “All I can tell you is Ma’s looking to make a name for our family, bring it back to what it once was. To do that, she needs a home base of operations. A place to make it all happen. You’ll see soon enough.”

“Does this have anything to do with the event she booked for next week? And who *exactly* is coming?” Whoever they were, they had to be important, or her aunt wouldn’t be going to all this trouble and on a day when the Bistro was normally closed. Meaning, she wanted to keep prying eyes away from whatever she was up to.

“To answer your first question, yeah, it does.” Tony nodded. “That’s all I’m gonna say.”

“But this is *my* place.” She slammed her fist on the table, venting the frustration rising inside her to the boiling point. “I have a right to know who’s going to be in my restaurant. I don’t want any part of whatever you and Paola are doing. I never did.”

“It’s *not* your place.” Tony’s eyes were as hard and unyielding as Paola’s. “It’s *our* place. It belongs to the family. *We’re* your family. I’m starting to think you’ve forgotten that. My mother raised you, took you in when your parents died. How can you act like this? You were a real bitch to Ma yesterday, you know that?”

“I was a bitch?” Bella choked down a sarcastic laugh. “Paola slapped *me*, not the other way around.”

“Maybe you deserved it.”

“You bastard.” She stood and reached for the glass, intending to throw the wine in his face, but Tony latched on to her wrist, preventing her.

“Some very important people will be here next week.” He released her wrist. “Ma needs you to help impress them. *Capiche?*”

Bella sat back down and let her head fall into her hands. *Yeah, capiche.* She couldn’t say the words, and she didn’t have to. Paola would have her feast here next week whether Bella approved or not.

Tony’s chair scraped on the floor. His footsteps receded, then the back door slammed shut. After a few minutes—or was it five, or maybe ten?—her anger bled away. A lump the size of a giant arancini threatened to choke her, and her heart ached so much she thought it would start gushing blood all over the table.

After the “lovely” talk with Paola last night, she didn’t really have any doubts, but this conversation with Tony sealed the deal.

“God, how could I have been so blind?” she whispered to no one but herself.

The signs had all been there. Paola had paid for Bella to fly to Italy and go to culinary school. She’d mistaken her aunt’s grand gesture as coming from a place of love and caring. But in backing Bella’s pursuits, Paola had only been backing herself. All she’d ever been to her was an investment. She’d missed all that because she’d been stupid. Naive. Full of dreams coming to a resounding and pitiful end.

She looked around the dining room she’d so lovingly renovated and decorated. Then she thought of her employees, friends she’d worked with for years. All that she had to lose, and lose it she would.

But what can I do to stop it?

Losing the Bistro was akin to stabbing herself in the chest with one of Lou’s sharp kitchen knives. She’d worked too hard, invested too much of her heart and soul to lose it. In many ways, she already *had* lost it. If she didn’t

do something, and do it fast, Paola would find a way to push her out completely.

What she'd saved up was enough to buy out Paola's original investment, but not nearly enough to start over on her own in a new place. By her calculations, it would take several more years for her to be fiscally able to walk away.

Walking away might still be the most prudent option.

If her aunt and cousin were ever arrested for their crimes, the Bistro would probably be taken from her. She knew that's how the law worked. After her uncle and Tony's brother were killed, authorities seized nearly all the Mancuso assets. Anything the police and feds could prove was tainted by illegal activity...gone. The authorities would never back down. They'd continue looking into her aunt and cousin's activities, and they wouldn't stop until they found something.

Not for the first time, she reminded herself that *she* could very well get caught in the crossfire. At best, her reputation could be seriously impacted. At worst, she could wind up sharing a jail cell with Paola.

Her gaze landed on the three small white boxes she'd brought in from her car. The puppy cams she'd purchased for the dining room. An idea took root, and as it did, she could hardly believe she was even contemplating such a thing.

Her heart ached even more, but Paola had drawn first blood. Her aunt had taken Bella's love, used it, then thrown it away when she hadn't fallen in line like a good soldier. She wasn't a criminal. She wasn't like Paola and Tony and never could be.

She stood, then walked unsteadily past the bar and down the hallway to the private meeting room. She unlocked it, then flipped on the lights and stared up at the shelving she'd had specially installed about eighteen inches down from the ceiling on all four walls. To add ambience for all the festive occasions she'd hoped to book for this room, electricians had installed electrical outlets in each corner for the strands of tiny white lights plugged in. Strategically positioned pots of fake plants concealed the outlets. With only one strand of lights per outlet, each double outlet had one receptacle free.

Free to plug in a puppy cam.

She drew in a shaky breath. Suddenly, she could barely breathe at all. What she was contemplating was betrayal of her family.

"No." *Not my family.* Not anymore.

But what would she do with any information she recorded? Could she really turn it over to the police or the FBI?

I don't know.

She covered her mouth with her hand, shaking her head. Tears she swore not to shed backed up behind her eyes. She blinked, refusing to let them fall.

I can do this. I can do this.

If nothing else, this could be her insurance policy. Blackmailing The Godmother might get her beloved Bistro back under her control. Or it could get her a one-way ticket to Rockland Cemetery. Worse, there might not even be any remains for anyone to bury. But she couldn't live this way. If she stood by like a quivering little mouse, nothing would change.

As she flipped off the lights, her heart beat faster than a food processor. This was, without a doubt, the scariest thing she'd ever contemplated in her life. And, potentially, the deadliest.

She went back to the bar and unpacked the three cameras, the sim cards, and pulled out the directions.

Fifteen minutes later, she crumpled the directions into a ball and threw them on the bar. No matter how many times she tried syncing the cameras to her phone, nothing worked. Technology had never been her forte, but there were only three steps to follow. Could be a setting on her phone she was unaware of had to change. Then again, her phone was seven years old. Maybe it wasn't capable of syncing to the new cameras.

A soft shuffling sound came from the back of the Bistro. Bella cocked her head to listen. If that bastard cousin of hers had come back to ram home his point she was being a bitch and should take one for the Mancuso team, she'd seriously have to consider clocking him over the head with one of those pricey bottles of wine he loved so much.

The shuffling came again. Bella's hand trembled as she grabbed the only weapon immediately available—the corkscrew Tony had left on the bar after pilfering her wine cooler. Trying not to make any noise, she eased off the stool, cringing when it scraped on the floor. Tiptoeing quietly, she hid just behind the bar.

The sounds got louder. She twisted open the corkscrew, gripping it in her fist with her index and middle fingers on either side of the sharp, twisted tip.

Jeez, she'd never thought of herself as a violent person, but she'd do whatever it took.

Her heart flipped in her chest. Footsteps grew louder. She raised her arm,

readying to strike.

Chapter Sixteen

“Whoa.” Jamie threw his hands in the air, jerking back and pivoting away from the tip of the corkscrew just before it gouged out his right eye.

Jax’s claws clicked as he pranced around Jamie’s legs, not quite understanding what was happening. “Easy, boy. Easy.” Jax’s tail wagged, his body wriggling as he recognized Bella.

“Oh, God,” she breathed. The bottle opener fell from her hand to the floor. “I’m so sorry. I thought you were—”

“Tony?” Jamie and Jax had been out for a long walk. He’d seen Tony’s car and Bella’s Mini Cooper parked in the alley. “I hope it wasn’t *me* you were expecting.”

“No. Of course not.” She shook her head. “I thought you were Tony coming back to—”

“To what?” To all appearances, she’d been ready to take out his eye.

“Never mind. What are you doing here?” She retrieved the corkscrew and set it on the bar. “You do know we’re closed Mondays, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” He nodded. “Jax and I were out for a walk and saw your car.” It was still light out, but after Tony left, he’d been worried about her being here alone.

Get real.

Stopping in hadn’t been the plan. Jax had caught her scent and practically dragged him to the back door. Maybe it was because of what had happened at the lake, or how harshly Paola had treated her last night, but somewhere over the last few days, he *and* Jax had begun to like Bella. *Really* like her. That was something he had to keep in check.

Even though he was nearly certain she wanted nothing to do with the Mancuso Crime Family, he still needed to maintain a healthy distance and keep things professional. Tonight was a primo opportunity to nail down once

and for all just where her loyalties lay.

“Hello, Jax.” She knelt and scratched Jax’s ears. His tail wagged faster, and he leaned in to lick Bella’s cheek. “Thank you. You’re such a sweet dog.”

Sweet? Jamie snorted. Nobody had ever called Jax sweet before. Tough, yes. Scary, yes. Never sweet. But there was no doubting Jax was sweet on Bella.

His dog did something Jamie had never seen him do to anyone but Jamie. It was a ritual they shared at the end of a long work day.

He rested his head on Bella’s shoulder and sighed.

She laughed, gazing up at Jamie, her blue eyes vivid and smiling. A familiar warmth curled low in his belly. He knew that feeling all too well, but this time it was different.

He’d long ago lost count of all the women he’d dated. Liking them and being attracted to them was always a must. With other women, that suffusing warmth usually shot quickly south to his dick. With Bella, it had not only gone south but spiraled upward, wrapping around the inside of his chest.

Not good. He was only there for a job. Bella was Juliet to his Romeo. Lately, he’d come to detest the nickname his friends had given him.

“Has he eaten dinner yet?” She eased from Jax and gave Jamie a bird’s-eye view of the soft, mounding cleavage partially hidden by the scoop-neck tank top she wore.

“What?” He’d heard the words, but his brain was focused elsewhere.

“Dinner?” she asked again. “Has he eaten?”

“Uh.” He shook his head to clear it. “No.”

“Be right back.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Man, he had to get a grip. Minimizing his alone time with Bella was a must, but he couldn’t do that. Finding out what she knew about Paola’s operation was still an essential part of the plan. Though he felt more and more like crap about it with each passing day.

Jamie went to the bar and picked up one of the mini-cameras. A ball of crumpled paper lay next to the opened boxes. He uncrumpled the paper, confirming it was directions for setting up the cameras.

“Here you go.” Bella carried a plate containing a pile of sauceless meat and a bowl of water. “I assume he can eat plain steak? It was a leftover sirloin that didn’t have any seasoning.”

When he nodded, she set the plate and bowl on the floor, and Jax dug in, hoovering the steak and making happy slurping sounds as he chewed. Unlike

with Paola, Jax had no problem accepting food from Bella.

“Where’s Gnocchi?” he asked. If the puppy had been here, Jax would have found him in two seconds flat.

“At home, asleep. I hope. Today tuckered him out.” She picked up a nearly empty wine bottle and a used glass from the table where she and Tony had been sitting. “I brought him to the vet for his first checkup, then bought another crate for the house. Aside from being underweight, he’s a healthy little puppy. The vet thinks he has some Lab in him.”

Jamie watched Jax chow down on the last of the steak. “Need some help?” He pointed to the cameras.

“Actually, yes.” She held up the bottle. “Do you want the rest of this?”

The label on the bottle was for the Il Caggio Chianti, the excellent and pricey wine Paola had served. “I’ll split it with you.”

While she poured, he examined one of the cameras that was no bigger than one of those large square ice cubes that had become popular with Scotch drinkers. He was familiar with this make of camera, having set one up a year ago when his sister had adopted a dog. Despite its size, this particular brand not only recorded clear video but had sensitive microphones capable of recording audio from up to twenty feet away.

When she set a glass in front of him, he held it up for them to clink. “Thanks.” He took a sip. The wine was good but tasted slightly different from what Paola had served. Confusion must have shown on his face.

“What, you don’t like it?” she asked.

“It’s not that.” He pointed to the bottle. “That’s the same label I had at your aunt’s last night, but it tastes different.”

“Sorry.” Bella’s lips curved in an impish grin. “I should have known Paola would serve that at her house. The Il Caggio and Pierazzuoli Chiantis are two of Tony’s favorites. He doesn’t have a key to the cooler where I keep the top-shelf bottles, but he knows where I hide it. He only *thinks* I don’t know that *he* knows where the key is, but I do know. And since he doesn’t pay a dime here, I can’t afford for him to keep pilfering all the good stuff.”

Jamie already knew where she was headed. “You switched the bottles. Or the labels.”

She laughed, then sobered. “Please don’t tell him. My wine distributor and I have an understanding. I feed him *very* well when he comes here, and he gives me spare Il Caggio labels. Every time a delivery arrives, I use a heat gun to remove the original labels off a similar but significantly less expensive

wine, then slap on the Il Caggio labels. Tony can't even tell the difference. He only *thinks* he knows good wine, but he doesn't." Her smile broadened, brightening her face like a ray of sunshine.

"I promise I won't tell." He clinked her glass again. "You're a very crafty woman. I'll have to remember that."

The smile on her face vanished. He hadn't intended for there to be any hidden meaning behind his words. Maybe she was just worried he'd throw her under the bus and tell Tony about her subterfuge.

She cleared her throat, then picked up one of the cameras. "I put all the sim cards in, but I can't get any of the cameras to sync to my phone. I don't know if there's something wrong with them or whether it's because my phone is old."

"Could be your phone's operating system isn't capable of communicating with the camera app." He picked up the camera that was already plugged into an outlet beneath the bar. "Want me to test them out on my phone? That way you'll know if it's the cameras or your phone."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

He unlocked his phone, then set to work downloading the app in the instruction manual. "You need to create a login name and password. Write it down, in case you forget it. You can change it later if you wind up getting a new phone."

She reached for an order pad and pen sitting on the edge of the bar near the waitress station. For a moment, she tapped the pen on the bar, then scribbled something down and slid over the pad. Her login name was *Gnocchi*, her password *Freedom2023!* Freedom from Paola?

Jamie entered the information, creating the account, then popped a sim card into the back of the camera. "Here." He pointed to his phone. "Watch what I do."

Bella stood next to him. She was so close all it would take was the turn of his head and he could kiss her.

Focus. On. The job.

The air conditioning didn't help his predicament any, kicking on and carrying her scent into his nose and lungs.

"See?" He turned to Bella just as she leaned in closer. Warm breath washed over his face as their noses bumped. When her breast grazed his arm, every hair on his body stood up straighter than a class of police cadets on graduation day.

The tip of her tongue darted out, drawing his attention to her lips. Glistening, rosy lips that had him leaning in, just a little.

You can't do this.

Getting information from her was one thing. Kissing her again and doing a swan dive into her pants was an entirely different matter.

When a pink blush crept to her cheeks, it was obvious whatever was going on in her head was similar in nature.

A few seconds and a few beeps later, a blue light blinked on the first camera, then a computerized monotone voice announced, "Sync complete." Soon after, he had the same results on the other two cameras.

Bella took a sip of wine, then licked her lips again, which did nothing to erase the feel of her leaning gently over his shoulder. "I guess that confirms it," she said. "It's my phone. I've been meaning to trade it in for an upgrade. I just haven't had the time."

"That's understandable. Running a restaurant is a labor of love, but it's also a heavy burden. You almost never get a day off." He cued up the camera and tapped the screen.

"So true." Her blond brows rose. "Most people don't know that."

He aimed the camera at Jax, who'd lain down in front of the door and was watching people on the sidewalk. "You seem surprised that I do."

"Well, it's just that..."

"Just what?"

"You're not what I expected. You're...nice."

Jamie laughed. "What *did* you expect?"

"That you'd be—"

"An asshole," he finished for her. "Because I work for Paola and Tony."

Her lips compressed as she nodded. "There is that."

"Yeah, there's that." A solid mark in her favor, and another reason why she hadn't fallen prey to Marco's obvious interest in her. Clearly, she didn't want anything to do with any of Paola's soldiers. Or, he suspected, Paola's entire operation.

He handed her his phone so she could see the image on the screen. "Once they're all installed, you tap which camera you want to look at. You can also set them up to alert you any time it picks up movement. You probably don't want that during business hours, or your phone will be pinging all night. Since you have sim cards, footage can be recorded."

"That's great." She smiled. "So the next time I have to kick out an unruly

customer and he decides to sue me, I'll have proof that he deserved it."

Jamie set the camera on the bar, then pointed to the ledge decorated with small statues and potted plants. Since there were string lights running along the entire ledge, similar to what was in the private banquet room, he assumed there must be electrical outlets in the corners. "I'd suggest putting them up high. That way they can take in more of the dining room. Do you have a ladder?"

"Yes, in the storage shed outside," she said with a note of hesitancy.

"Once you get a new phone and sync up the cameras, I'll install them for you."

"Uh, thanks." She gave him a fleeting smile that never made it to her eyes. Something was up with her, and he'd bet a case of Il Caggio that whatever Tony had said to her tonight had something to do with it.

The cop in him should stay out of her personal life and stick to business, but her personal life, and why he was there in the first place, were inextricably interwoven. Bringing up the argument he'd overheard yesterday between Bella and Paola was the tactically sound move to make. That argument could very well be a touchpoint from which he could segue into getting Bella to open up more, feed him vital information. The man in him—the one becoming increasingly attracted to her—also wanted to, but for totally personal reasons. To help her figure a way out of the spiderweb Paola had woven around her and the Bistro.

"You don't agree with what Paola and Tony do." He really hoped not. "Do you?"

"No," she replied without hesitation, then gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Considering what you overheard yesterday, I guess you already know that."

"What was that really about?" Because it was more than just Paola refusing to let Bella buy out the Bistro. The undercurrents he'd sensed were hot enough to singe his eyebrows.

"My aunt promised me that when I had enough money saved, she'd let me buy out her share of the Bistro. That was the agreement we made long ago."

"And she's renegeing on that promise." Jamie stated the obvious.

Ironically, Jenkins's body wire necklace could help prove Bella's innocence. It still wasn't worth the risk of introducing a wire to the mix. Even if he changed his mind, which he wouldn't, jewelry was something a man gave to a woman he'd either been intimate with or *wanted* to be intimate with. Sleeping with Bella wasn't in his operational plan.

She shoved a hand through her hair, leaving some of it standing more on end than usual and making her look adorable. And sad. “Yes, but I don’t think she ever had any intention of keeping it. I was too stupid and naive to see it then.”

“See what?” he prodded gently.

Again, her lips flattened. “That she was using me right from the start. That this restaurant was part of a craftily orchestrated plan to create—” She covered her mouth with her hand and turned away.

She blinked rapidly, and when the first tear rolled down her cheek Jamie jerked back like he’d been slapped. It wasn’t that he hadn’t seen a woman cry before. Bella’s tears gutted him, tearing at every instinct inside him to help her, protect her, rescue her from her own family.

Protect her from the FBI.

“Hey.” He clasped her shoulder, forcing her to face him again. It was a move he regretted. The defeated, soulless look in her lovely, watery eyes broke down every one of his professional defenses as easily as snapping a twig.

Jamie watched helplessly as his arm lifted to do the unthinkable. He cupped her face, then used the pad of his thumb to wipe away her tears. Her skin was warm and soft beneath his rough, callused fingers. When an errant tear made its way to her lips, he brushed that one away, too. Another huge operational mistake, because now all he could wonder was whether her lips would be as soft and taste as sweet as they had the first time he’d kissed her.

She sniffled delicately. “The worst part is I don’t think she ever loved me. Not really. I might be her blood, but I’m not her daughter. I’m just someone she was forced to take in when my parents died.”

He remained silent, letting her vent what he already knew. That Paola Mancuso might not love anyone. Not even Tony, her own son.

“Maybe she’s right,” Bella continued. “Maybe the only reason this place is successful is because of her, not me or what I’ve done here. Maybe it’s because her name is attached to the deed and everyone knows it.”

“You’re wrong about that.” Jamie shook his head. “They come here for the great food, the atmosphere and hospitality. They come here for *you*. You’re the heart and soul of this place. Not Paola.” He truly believed that.

“I wish that were true.” She wiped at her tears. “But I’m not as stupid and naive as I once was. They come here to dine in the restaurant owned by a—”

“A what?” he asked, but she didn’t have to say it. A powerful criminal.

The Godmother.

Bella's brows drew together. "You know what she is. You work for her. We all do, whether we want to or not. Don't you see?" Defeat flashed in her eyes. "I can't ever get away from her. I'm trapped here in the place I love most in the whole world."

Her pain was killing him, and there was nothing he could do. *Not now, anyway.* "You never know. Hang in there. Sometimes things change."

Slowly, Bella shook her head, looking even more defeated. "They won't. Things never change around here."

What little remained of Jamie's resolve slipped away faster than an avalanche. He leaned in and brushed his lips gently across hers, and he had his answer. Her lips were every bit as soft and sweet as he remembered.

She uttered a tiny gasp but didn't pull away. What Jamie ought to do was stop the madness and back off, but he could no sooner have stopped kissing Bella than he could have stopped breathing.

Her lips parted more, and she melted into him. Their tongues stroked, and he slipped his other hand into her hair, reveling in the silky softness of the short strands. Every stroke of his tongue coated his senses with more of her sweetness, her kindness...her passion. Yeah, he tasted that, too, and wanted more. When she rested her hand on his shoulder, the light touch burned through his shirt, heating his skin.

He angled his head, deepening the kiss. At some point, he must have slid off the barstool because her soft breasts were now pressed against him, his arm around her back, holding her tightly enough to feel her heart hammering every bit as much as his was. Crazy—no, *insane*—thoughts pummeled his brain.

How amazingly good she felt in his arms.

How he could kiss her like this all night long.

And take her to bed.

But there was so much more entrenched in what he was feeling. He wanted to protect her from being hurt, and that was impossible. No matter how things played out, when this case was over and he left, she *would* get hurt. By Paola.

By him.

There was no way to protect her emotions, but he *could* keep her from getting hurt physically. As a sworn law enforcement officer, that was his duty, his obligation. His priority.

As much as it killed him, he broke off the kiss. Their chests heaved as they

drew in breath after breath. The look in her eyes drilled him with desire he felt straight to his soul.

“Bella.” His voice sounded hoarse, scratchy, as if he’d just swallowed a box of nails. “Be careful of Paola. The best thing you can do is stay off her radar. Don’t push her right now about the Bistro.”

He picked up his phone and shoved it in the back pocket of his shorts. “Jax.” His dog scrambled to his feet. Without looking back, Jamie speed-walked through the restaurant and out the back door.

Once outside, he drew in a deep breath. He yanked Jax’s leash from his pocket, then leaned down to clip it on. As they headed through the small yard into the alley, he cursed himself seven different ways in Italian.

He’d crossed a line that should never have been crossed. Being with Bella—in any way, shape, or form—could never happen. That didn’t mean he could snap his fingers and stop caring for her or about her. That’s what worried him the most. He didn’t want her doing something that might get her killed in the crossfire. And there *would* be crossfire.

From everything he’d read and seen for himself, Paola Mancuso was a power-hungry woman with a deadly agenda and an unquenchable drive to succeed. She wouldn’t hesitate to crush anyone who got in her way.

Including Bella.

Chapter Seventeen

The sky was gray, the air thick with humidity as Jamie parked in the alley behind the Bistro to wait for Tony, Marco, and the others. It was barely five a.m. Not even Lou had arrived to start a batch of whatever was the special for the day.

Jax stretched his neck between the headrests, licked Jamie's chin, then lay down on the bench seat. Within seconds, Jax closed his eyes and groaned. What Jamie wouldn't give to be so blissfully at peace.

He flexed his fingers, then curled them around the steering wheel. Every one of his nerve endings was fueled up and lit. If everyone followed the script and played their roles as agreed, things should go off without a hitch. But what they were about to do was beyond dangerous, the outcome of which would either get him in good with the Mancusos...or get someone killed.

He tapped in Detective Steve Palos's number, then hit the call button.

"Yo, buddy," came Steve's thick Long Island-accented greeting. "We're all set here. Driving a Speedy Courier green truck with a gray trailer. Just make sure none of those yahoos are packing."

"Already done." As per the plan he'd gone over in excruciating detail with Tony and his boys, only Jamie would be carrying a firearm. No way would he trust Tony, Marco, or any of Tony's goons with a loaded gun. It was an unspoken Mafia rule to only pack heat when absolutely necessary—a byproduct of the fact that most Mafia soldiers were already convicted felons, so getting caught by the police with a loaded firearm added significant time to any prison sentence.

"Ten-four. Give Jax our regards. Tell him not to chomp on my balls. When this is over, you owe me."

"Copy that. Don't be late." Jamie chuckled as he ended the call. Steve and his partner, Artie Masamoto, were two of the biggest dog lovers on the force

and had known Jax since the day Jamie had partnered with him. With that in mind, he'd have to make sure Jax didn't run up and lick them to death.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, willing the adrenaline thrumming in his veins to stand down.

His warning about being late was no joke. There were a hundred different ways the logistics of this plan could go downhill, the first being if another truck arrived early and managed to jump ahead of Steve and Artie or pulled up behind them. Witnesses could get hurt.

As he sat there doing his best to slow his breathing and lower his pulse to below a hundred, images of Bella flitted behind his lids.

No matter how much she tried extricating herself from the Mancuso grip, they would never let her or the Bistro go. Once the Mafia dug their claws into a person or a person's business, their life would never be their own.

Jamie curled his fingers tighter around the wheel. He couldn't imagine hurting his own family the way Paola was hurting Bella. Even if by some miracle Paola agreed to divest herself from the Bistro, it was too late. Jenkins said the FBI already knew where Bianco's Bistro's bank accounts were located. All it would take was a subpoena to confirm the flow of mob money through the restaurant's coffers, and Jamie had personally witnessed Paola admitting to depositing funds into the Bistro's account. That money tainted everything it touched. The account *and* the Bistro itself.

Soon, the Bistro would be taken from Bella. Worse, it would be *his* witness testimony that would provide the FBI with the evidence to do it.

"Dammit." He hated himself for being the cause of Bella's pain, but that was a foregone conclusion.

Jamie looked up and down the alley, verifying Tony and the others hadn't arrived yet, then punched in another number, dialing *67 first to block his own number.

"Hello?" his mom answered in a tired voice.

"Mom, it's me," Jamie replied, feeling guilty for calling so early, but he might not get the chance to make the call later.

"Oh, Jamie. Thank God. Where have you been? And what number are you calling from? I've been trying to reach you for two days." Fear and panic in his mother's voice screamed through the phone.

"Mom, what's wrong?" Jamie held his breath, praying his mother wasn't about to say the words he dreaded hearing.

That he was too late and his father had already died in prison.

“Jamie,” came his mother’s strangled cry. “Your father is worse. His white blood cell count is very low from the treatments they’ve been giving him, and he has an infection. They don’t have the expertise at Otisville to handle this. He needs to get transferred to Butner soon before he—”

Dies. His mother didn’t have to say it.

Jamie drew in a deep breath, desperately trying not to lose his shit. His mom relied on him and his sister for strength and support, and she needed it now more than anything. Breaking down and bawling like an infant wouldn’t help.

The need to haul ass to Otisville and see his dad in person again was growing stronger with each passing day. The prison was just over an hour northwest of Nyack. But if he broke cover, he could lose his only chance at getting his dad sprung.

“Isn’t there anything you can do to expedite his transfer?” his mother pleaded. “Please, Jamie. He can’t die in there. He just *can’t*.”

He swallowed the baseball-size lump in his throat. “I’m working on it, Mom. I promise. I’ll do everything I can to get him out of there.” As much as it killed him, he couldn’t give his mother false hope by telling her that if all went well, he’d get his father paroled.

A dark-green Expedition, stolen he assumed, rolled up directly behind him and parked. Through the windshield, he glimpsed Tony in the passenger seat and Marco behind the wheel.

“Mom,” he said gently, using the same tone she’d used on him dozens of times when he was a small boy and he’d needed calming after losing a big game. “I have to go. I’ll call you later.” If he was still alive.

After disconnecting the call, he squeezed his eyes shut, struggling to eradicate from his mind how distraught his mother must be. He had to be laser focused right now and pull off this rip without anyone going to jail or getting slaughtered in the process. Thinking about his dad’s or Bella’s dire predicaments would only hinder his ability to think clearly.

Jamie flipped open the center console, tugged out a ball cap and sunglasses, and put them on. To protect against leaving latent prints behind, the other men wore latex gloves, along with bandanas tied around their necks. Jamie’s role precluded the use of gloves or a bandana to hide his face. The cap and glasses would have to suffice, and they’d do a final sweep in the vehicle to wipe away any prints he’d leave behind. Not that it mattered, really, since his prints were on file in a police employee database. This was

all for show, to make the rip look legit.

“Jax.” His dog woke with a snort and sat up. Jamie reached back to clip a leash on his collar. His dog would play a critical role in this operation, one that should prevent any bloodshed.

The key word being *should*.

“Let’s go, boy.” He and Jax got out of the Tahoe.

Nicky and Paulie had stolen the Expedition last night, then swapped out the vehicle’s tags from another SUV. The plan was to drive like a grandmother to the Peekskill Incinerator, so as not to make them a target for one of the fresh-faced New York State troopers Jamie knew had just graduated from the academy.

After the rip, they’d drive to a storage unit he’d rented in his undercover name, and where Sammy would be waiting to help unload the bags of booze. Then they’d ditch the truck and return to Rockland County where they’d abandon the stolen Expedition. If the owner of that SUV was a late sleeper, they could have this whole job wrapped up before they even realized their vehicle was missing. Once the heat died down, they’d go back for the bottles of booze.

The Expedition was one of the largest SUVs on the market, but it would still be a tight fit for five men and a dog. Jamie unclipped Jax’s leash. When he lifted the rear hatch, Jax leaped in, then sat dutifully while Jamie closed the door and got into the back seat.

Nicky and Paulie took up more than two-thirds of the seat. Both wore warm-up suits. Jamie squeezed in next to Nicky. “Let’s go.”

Marco pulled slowly from the curb and headed in a direction that would take them over the Tappan Zee Bridge, crossing the Hudson River into Westchester. As they approached mid-span on the bridge, Jamie glimpsed a state trooper’s patrol car parked on the shoulder. He held his breath as they drove past, doing only a few miles over the speed limit.

A low chuckle came from the driver’s seat. “Cops are such idiots,” Marco said.

When the rest of them laughed, Jamie laughed with them.

And one is sitting right behind you. Idiot.

The rest of the drive north passed in relative silence. Aside from Nicky’s occasional belching and Paulie chomping on sunflower seeds, the shells of which he spat out the window.

“Take the next exit,” Jamie said. “Turn right at the stop sign and go

straight.”

Another aspect of their plan had been to stick to local roads. It added another twenty minutes to their trip, but Route 9 was busy. With other vehicles directly in front and behind, they'd blend in more than on the major highways where troopers were notorious for running radar.

When Marco slowed on the exit ramp, Jax sat up from where he'd been happily snoozing. Jax was as eager to get to work as Jamie was, though for totally different reasons. Jamie wanted to get this rip behind him. Jax wanted his reward—a freeze-dried lamb treat—after his role was executed.

“You said he's gonna guard the cops.” Paulie gave Jax a scratch behind his ears. “How'd ya train him to do that?”

In the rearview mirror, Marco's shrewd gaze pinned Jamie before returning to the road. The man's distrust set the hackles on Jamie's neck swaying back and forth. If there was any part of the plan that could become problematic, he had a feeling Marco would have something to do with it.

“A guy I know got Jax from a trainer. Turn left up here.” He pointed through the space between the headrests. “He wanted more protection for his family, so he bought a dog already trained to guard and attack.” A true story. Some of it, anyway.

Jax *had* come from a trainer in Texas, and he *had* been trained to guard his family and attack if necessary. The part of Jax's history Jamie didn't expand on was the trainer was a certified K-9 instructor, and the family to be guarded was the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and all the innocent civilians who traveled through the myriad of Port Authority access points.

After Marco made the left turn, again his gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. There was no way he knew Jamie was an undercover. If he did, Jamie would already be dead.

The closer they drove to the incinerator, traffic decreased to the point where there was nothing but empty stretches of road in front and behind. Population density had thinned to nothing, until they were surrounded by a dense forest of deciduous and evergreen trees. After all, who would want to live near an incinerator and suck in all those emissions?

The beauty of this isolation was it also played perfectly into their plans. This far from the center of Peekskill, not a single telephone or utility pole housed a camera.

A dusty brown sign indicated the Peekskill Incinerator lay half a mile down the next cutoff. Without being told, Marco turned onto the narrow dirt road

that was barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass, let alone a car and a tractor trailer like the one Steve and Artie were driving. On either side of the road were steep drainage ditches and beyond that, thick stands of trees. All key elements of the plan.

The Expedition lurched and dipped as they continued down the bumpy, rutted road. Clouds of dust swirled around them. Jamie had the plan down to the precise time and location. He glanced at his watch. Within minutes, Steve and Artie would be turning down the same road.

“Stop here,” he ordered when they were approximately twenty feet from a cutout.

After Marco stopped in the middle of the road and shut off the engine, they all got out. This early in the morning, the heat wasn't too bad, but the humidity made the air feel thick enough to wade through.

Jamie went to the back of the SUV and opened the door. Jax hopped out, then spun three times, his jaw cracked as if he were smiling, and his tail whipping back and forth. Jax didn't know the difference between work and undercover work. It was all the same to a K-9.

As the four other men disappeared into the woods, Jamie sat in the driver's seat, then popped the hood. Beneath the hood, he opened the fuse box, then removed the electric fuel injection relay and stuffed it in his pocket. Without the fuel pump relay, no fuel would get to the engine.

Meanwhile, Jax busied himself sniffing the ground, then lifted his leg on a large rock. To make it look good, Jamie rested his palms against the hood, leaning over the engine block and scratching his head, doing his best to look like the Expedition had really broken down. Five minutes later, he was still there. Steve and Artie were late, and with every minute that passed, his adrenaline spiked a little higher.

Movement in the trees told him Tony and the boys were getting antsy. *Not good*. The longer they had to wait, the more amped up everyone would be and the greater the chances one of them would do something stupid. As long as Jamie was the only one with a firearm, there was only so much damage that could be done.

Rumbling came from the end of the main road. A green truck hauling a gray container made the turn, then drove slowly down the dirt road toward him before coming to a stop. With the deep ditches on either side of the narrow road, there was no way the truck could squeeze past.

Behind the wheel, Jamie could just make out Artie Masamoto. The

passenger door opened. The second Steve Palos hopped out, Jamie caught Jax's tail starting to wag, a problem he'd anticipated. Jax was expecting the organic sweet potato treats Steve always had for him.

He needed to down his dog and keep him there. "Jax. Down."

"Car trouble, huh?" Steve strolled over. The top of his head was barely level with Jamie's pecs, but he was built like a tank and tough as nails. A gleaming gold badge hung on his belt next to a holstered Glock.

"Yeah, stalled out on me," he said, knowing Tony and his guys were listening to every word. "Been giving me trouble for the last week. Probably should have brought it in sooner. Do me a favor, would ya? Try starting it while I look under the hood."

"Sure thing, buddy." Steve played his part like an Oscar-winning actor and got into the driver's seat. With no fuel getting pumped, the engine tried but didn't turn over. After a few more attempts, Steve rejoined him at the hood.

Jamie tugged the brim of his ball cap lower. "Heading to the incinerator?"

"Yeah." Steve looked at the drainage ditches on either side of the road. "I don't think we can get around you."

"Sorry about that." He looked over the hood to the cab, inside of which Artie still sat. "With the three of us, I bet we could push it to that cutoff."

Steve looked ahead to the cutoff twenty feet away, then scratched his head, pretending to think for a moment. Eventually, he nodded. "Hang on a sec." Steve waved his arm at the truck.

Detective Masamoto stepped onto the running board and held his arms wide. He wore a green Speedy Courier Trucking shirt. "What the hell?" Before joining the Port Authority, Artie had been a NYPD homicide detective in Brooklyn. He had to be pushing sixty but was packing more muscle than most men half his age. Like Steve, Jamie didn't doubt the man's abilities.

"C'mon," Steve said. "We're gonna help push it to that cutoff up ahead."

"Seriously?" Artie's face twisted. "I don't get paid for this shit."

If the situation didn't have the potential to turn deadly in a heartbeat, Jamie would have burst out laughing. Artie was an even better actor than Steve.

"Look," Steve shouted, "either we help this guy out, or we'll be stuck here all day. So, let's help the guy out. I'll tip you real good."

Even from this distance, Artie's grumble of discontent was loud enough to hear as he hopped down from the running board.

"Thanks, man." Jamie dropped the hood, then got in the driver's side and

flipped the gear shift into neutral.

“Yeah, no problem,” Steve said as he and Artie went to the rear of the SUV. “Let’s do this.”

Stepping out of the Expedition, Jamie kept one hand on the wheel, waiting for Steve and Artie to be in position at the rear bumper. Behind the two detectives, Tony, Marco, and the other men emerged from the trees, their bandanas in place covering most of their faces.

Jamie’s muscles tightened. This was the most dangerous part of the plan. “Jax!” He pointed to his left side, wanting to keep his dog close. Continually looking over his shoulder, he pretended to start pushing with one hand while steering the wheel to keep the Tahoe from careening into a ditch. The Tahoe began rolling forward, inch by inch.

Wait for it. Just a few seconds longer.

Jamie’s heart hammered. One more glance over his shoulder. *Now!*

He whipped the revolver from his waistband and rushed to the bumper just before Tony and his goons made it to the road. “Don’t move! Keep your hands on the bumper.”

Jax barked but remained where he was. Soon, Jax would play a key role.

Steve’s and Artie’s eyes went wide as they took in the gun pointed at them. Both kept their hands on the Expedition.

Tony grabbed Steve’s gun from the holster. Paulie, Nicky, and Marco guarded Artie.

“Toss the gun.” Jamie hitched his head to the drainage ditch, making sure Tony stuck to the plan. He waited for Tony to heave it in the air.

Steve’s upper lip curled back in a snarl. “You motherfucker.” Okay, so that hadn’t been in the script.

“You don’t tell us what to do,” Marco snarled at Jamie, then reached behind his back.

Jamie caught the movement and— *Oh shit.*

Marco yanked out a gun and pressed the muzzle to Steve’s temple. “*You’re the motherfucker now, pig.*”

“I said *no guns*,” Tony shouted. “That was the plan.”

Jamie caught the look of rage in Steve’s and Artie’s eyes, rage matched only by the blood boiling in Jamie’s veins. This was exactly the kind of situation he’d worried about. If either of the detectives got shot because of his plan, he’d never forgive himself.

“Plans change.” Marco smirked, not seeming to notice Tony’s face had

turned livid.

Jamie had to intervene before things escalated out of control. If Marco's finger so much as twitched on that trigger, he was fully prepared to shoot Ianetti in the head.

"Jax!" he shouted over his shoulder. Jax raced over. "Guard!" he said to his dog, pointing to the detectives, then easing his hand to the muzzle of Marco's gun and pushing it away from Steve's head. "Put the gun away," he said in a low voice, glaring at the other man. "Let Jax do the guarding. That's what we brought him for."

Jax lowered his head and loosed a growl at Steve and Artie.

"Do it," Tony ordered. "We don't want a dead cop on our hands. You shoot a cop, and they'll keep looking for us until we're old and gray."

Jamie thanked God at least Tony still had a sliver of common sense.

Not wanting to get between a capo and their lieutenant, Paulie and Nicky wisely kept their traps shut.

"Stick to the plan," Jamie said with a calm he didn't feel. "Put the gun away. Cuff the cop and tie up the driver. Like. We. Planned."

"Do it, dumbass," Tony hissed. "That's an order."

For a few more seconds, Marco's upper lip twitched. The tension in the air was thicker than a C4 briquette. Reluctantly, Marco stuffed the gun back into his waistband. Jamie exhaled a mountain of relief.

"Get back in there," Tony ordered Marco, hitching his head to the stolen Expedition.

Marco complied, but not before shooting Jamie a look that said it all.

He and Marco Ianetti were on a collision course, one that wouldn't end well for one of them.

"We need to get out of here," Jamie said to Tony. "Another truck could drive in any second and block our way out." They needed to be long gone before that happened, and they still had to meet Sammy at the storage unit and unload the bottles.

"Move." Jamie tipped his chin to the detectives, keeping the muzzle of his gun on them. "Into the woods. Try to run, and the dog will take you out. Understand?"

Steve and Artie exchanged worried looks, then nodded.

To make sure nothing else unexpected happened, Jamie followed as Nicky and Paulie shoved Steve and Artie into the woods, then cuffed Steve with his own handcuffs and tied Artie up with duct tape and rope.

“Search ’em,” Jamie said. “Take any keys and cell phones.”

The other men did as ordered, tugging a set of keys from Steve’s pocket and unclipping cell phones—burners Steve and Artie had switched out for their real phones—from both their belts.

None of the other men knew Jamie had prearranged with Steve to use that old academy trick and tape a spare handcuff key to the inside of Steve’s belt. Within seconds after they drove off with the stolen truck, the detectives would be free and searching for the cell phone Jamie had stashed last night behind a rock near the cutoff.

Lifting his shirt, Jamie stuffed the old revolver into his waistband. “Stay here until we’re gone, and I won’t shoot you.”

“You piece of shit,” Artie growled. “You won’t get away with this.”

Jamie snorted. “I just did.”

Now the only question was whether what he’d done was good enough to keep Paola from kicking him to the curb. Or worse.

Chapter Eighteen

Sounds of pots and pans banging around in the kitchen filtered into the private banquet room. Bella glanced at the door, gripping the rail of the ladder tighter. The door was locked, and only she, Paola, and Tony had a key to this room.

On the off chance one of them came in while she was up on the ladder, she'd tucked a packet of replacement bulbs in her pocket, ready to lie her butt off and claim she was changing out some of the dead bulbs in the light strands.

Discreetly getting these cameras in place, so she could test them out well in advance of whatever special meeting Paola had planned for next week, had proven more difficult than she'd thought. Now, with the dinner seating only thirty minutes off, the Bistro's staff was busy setting tables, filling salt shakers, and doing any number of things necessary for a restaurant to function.

She adjusted the ladder, moving it as close as possible to the corner of the room. The building was old, built in the mid-1800s with high ceilings and original stamped-tin tiles.

Part of her still couldn't believe she was doing this—spying on her own family. James Bond she wasn't, but two of the puppy cams were already in position, plugged into the corner outlets and carefully concealed by potted silk ferns.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. This might very well be her one and only opportunity to gather information she could use to bargain with, but she still didn't know if she actually had the courage to go through with it.

Leverage. That's all this was. A bargaining chip.

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. Who was she kidding? *This is blackmail.* Pure and simple. If there was ever going to be a way for her to force Paola's

hand, that's what it would take.

Don't chicken out now.

After blowing out a loud breath, she wrapped the cord of the last camera around her hand so she wouldn't drop it, then climbed up the ladder. The ceiling was so high she could barely reach the electrical outlet in the corner above the ledge.

Near the top wrung, she unwrapped the cord, then plugged in the camera. A bright blue light confirmed the cam had power. She pulled a roll of black electrical tape from her pocket, tore off a tiny square, then pressed it over the light, the same way she'd done with the other two puppy cams. Before shifting the ferns in place to conceal the camera, she tugged her brand-new cell phone from her back pocket and cued up the app to verify the lens angle.

As soon as the store had opened that morning, she'd traded in her ancient cell phone and gotten one with an upgraded operating system. Then she'd logged into her account and followed the directions Jimmy had given her to sync the new phone to the cameras.

Thank you, Jimmy.

Still poised on the ladder, she touched two fingers to her lips and shivered. Kissing Jimmy again shouldn't have happened, but it had. A moment of weakness on her part. She'd been so upset over Paola's and Tony's harsh words.

Forcing herself to acknowledge the truth, Bella shook her head. It wasn't just a moment of weakness. It had been one of sheer unadulterated desire. How was that even possible? How and why was she getting so hot and bothered over someone who was so impossibly wrong for her?

Marco was good-looking and had a thing for her, but he'd never stirred even an iota of desire in her, and the thought of kissing him... Her stomach rolled.

Even if she didn't think of Marco as a cousinly extension of Tony, the man had a simmering violent streak just below the surface. Not once since Marco had come into Tony's circle had she witnessed that violence erupting, but it was as much a part of him as generosity and caring was part of who Jimmy was.

Did she want Jimmy to kiss her again? No.

Again, who am I kidding?

Yes, she did. The practical, logical side of her brain reminded her of who and what he was. Her heart couldn't care less, which stymied her, because

those two organs were normally so in sync.

The mystery of why she was still so attracted to him remained unanswered, but he was very much a part of her aunt's criminal enterprise and everything she despised. Fully trusting him was still off the table. She'd have to keep it from him that she'd placed the cameras in the private room rather than in the dining room like they'd discussed.

The app came up on her phone, as did a live image of what the camera was seeing and the audio picking up. She adjusted the camera for a better angle of the banquet tables, then reset the potted ferns back into place for maximum concealment. When she was done, only a small portion of the camera's view around the edges was blocked by leaves.

Adrenaline and a not so small amount of fear made her hands tremble. "This could actually work," she whispered.

Now to return the ladder to the storage shed before anyone saw her with it. Especially Jimmy. It was Tuesday, so the dinner crowd should be light, but he was still scheduled to work tonight. If he caught her with the ladder, he'd only offer again to help put up the cameras in the dining room.

Something rattled. Bella snapped her gaze to the door in time to see the knob jiggling. Good thing she'd locked it. With her phone still in her hand, she quickly backed down the ladder. Slowly, the door to the private room opened.

Bella gasped, nearly falling off the bottom rung. The phone slipped from her hand, hitting the floor with a dull *thud*. She snatched up the phone, then straightened to find Paola glaring at her.

"What are you doing?" Her aunt's eyes narrowed further as she took in the ladder.

Directly behind Paola stood Tony, Marco, and...Jimmy.

Bella swallowed. Her throat went drier than a grain of uncooked rice. "I was replacing some of the bulbs on the string lights." She glanced up at the ceiling. "They've been out for a while. Makes the room look sloppy and unmaintained. You know?"

Jimmy glanced at the ladder, then to the phone in her other hand. She could practically see his brain putting two and two together. He knew exactly what she'd been doing.

"Whatever." Paola flicked her fingers at Bella. "Just get this place cleaned up. We'll be dining in here tonight."

Wonderful. Since Tuesdays were generally slow, the Bistro wasn't fully

staffed, but Paola wouldn't care about mundane details like that. Bella slid her phone into her back pocket, then closed the ladder.

"I've got it," a voice said over her shoulder. *Jimmy*. "Storage shed outside?"

She looked up into his handsome face expecting to see...what? Admonishment? Anger? None of those things were decipherable in his deep brown eyes. He hefted the ladder as if it weighed no more than a five-pound bag of flour.

"Yes. Thank you," she said, then watched as he headed to the door.

He hadn't said anything to Paola or Tony. *Yet*. Maybe he was just waiting for the right moment to rat her out. God help her if he did. She might be Paola's niece, but that wouldn't matter if she was caught surveilling her aunt's private meeting room.

A bubble of fear rose in her throat as she recalled the rumors about how ruthless her aunt could be. Did that apply to family, too? She had to find out exactly what Jimmy's intentions were.

Marco's eyes softened. "I would have helped you with that. All you had to do was ask."

"I know," Bella answered, feeling somewhat guilty she could never return Marco's feelings. "Thank you." She turned her attention back to Paola. "I thought your special event wasn't until next week."

"It isn't." Paola strode to a table and set down her purse. A very expensive looking leather Chanel.

Tony clapped his hands together. "We're celebrating something else. Jimmy did good today. *Real* good. He's one of us now. You still have more Pierazzuoli or Il Caggio?"

One of us now. Bella's heart squeezed with disappointment. Whatever Jimmy had done must have been noteworthy enough to officially ingratiate himself into Paola and Tony's organization. Whatever that something was, she didn't doubt it was highly illegal.

In the end, she didn't care what they were celebrating. The only things of any consequence were the logistics. "I don't have enough waitstaff for a private party tonight."

"Then *you* wait on us." Paola waited for Tony to pull out a chair for her.

Her aunt *had* to be kidding. "You can't just walk in here and order me around. When I said I don't have enough people to serve you, I meant it."

The back door of the Bistro slammed shut, and a few seconds later Jimmy

returned. He shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the doorframe.

Paola threw her a look hot enough to scorch a cast iron pan. "I've had about enough of your attitude. There will be seven of us this evening. Make it happen."

Heat flamed Bella's face as she tried not to scream. Any lingering doubts about whether she'd done the right thing by placing those cameras flew out the window. "And have you finalized how many guests we'll be serving next week?"

"Twenty-five," Paola said. "Don't forget, I want the most expensive items on the menu, plus a few other things I'll have Bettina email you about. Top-shelf liquor and wine. Spare no expense."

Bella crossed her arms. "With all the money you just deposited into the Bistro's account, at least I'll have money to pay for all that." And the overtime. Even though the event was on a Monday when the Bistro was closed, an eight-course meal required all hands on deck, and she'd have to pay Lou and her sous-chef, Tom, extra to come in at least a day early to prep.

Paola unclipped her purse and took out her cell phone, summarily dismissing Bella.

With her hands fisted so tightly her blunt nails dug into her palms, Bella spun and walked to the door. Before leaving the room, she resisted the urge to look up at the potted silk ferns concealing the nearest puppy cam. As she brushed past Jimmy, her shoulder grazed the thick muscles of his arm.

"What are you *doing*?" he whispered harshly, his dark gaze full of censure.

Ignoring his question, she kept right on going, aiming straight for the bar. To hell with him. To hell with *all* of them. A shot of tequila sounded perfect right about now. Anything to quench the frustration burning a hole in her belly.

Sierra paused at the kitchen door, where she'd been talking to Lou. "Bella?" Her friend frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she bit out, knowing Sierra would see right through her lame attempt to allay any concerns. Sierra had known her too long to buy it but also knew when Bella wanted to be left alone.

Luckily, the dining room only had a few early evening customers, and the bar was still empty. She reached for the top-shelf bottle of Patron, then grabbed a shot glass from beneath the bar. The second she uncorked the bottle, the tequila's crisp, spicy aroma wafted to her nose.

“What did you do?” a deep voice growled.

Jimmy loomed over her. Ignoring him, she filled the shot glass then threw back the contents. She closed her eyes, letting the tequila burn a slow path down her throat to her belly.

“Bella?” The way Jimmy said her name, drawn out in a censuring tone, sounded more like *Bell La*. “Answer my question.”

Now that he was officially part of what Bella understood was *unofficially* dubbed the Mancuso Crime Family, she was in deep trouble.

She’d been a fool to think he could possibly be anything else and an even bigger fool to let him kiss her again.

She poured another shot, tossed it back, then locked gazes with Jimmy. “I’m doing what has to be done.”

If he ratted her out, so be it. She accepted the consequences. No matter how deadly.

Chapter Nineteen

“You need to stop this.” Jamie looked around the dining room, keeping his voice low. “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“On the contrary.” Her eyes, so unlike that of her aunt’s and cousin’s, flashed with fire. “I know exactly what I’m doing. The only question is whether *you’re* going to do anything about it.”

Meaning, would he rat her out and tell Paola or Tony that she’d installed surveillance cameras in the private dining room. The same room where Paola was holding a special event next week for twenty-five guests. That kind of intel was important enough for him to notify Special Agent Jenkins.

“Well?” She thrust out her chin, daring him to dime her out.

“You’re playing with fire, and you could get hurt.” Or killed. Something that sat about as well with him as stepping on a land mine. “Paola Mancuso might be your aunt, but she’s dangerous and ruthless. You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“Au contraire.” She stepped closer, and the pulse at her neck thumped faster. “I know *exactly* who I’m dealing with, and so do you.”

Jamie knew the moment the tequila hit Bella’s bloodstream. Her cheeks pinkened, and she poked a finger at his pecs. This fire and brimstone thing she had going on was addictive. All he could think about was kissing that petulance off her lips and feeling her body pressed against his. “You *need* to back off.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. This is *my* restaurant. If this is the only way I can regain control of it, then so be it. Jimmy, please. Don’t say anything. *Please.*”

Her scent filled his lungs, edging him closer to a steeply dangerous precipice. Blue eyes shimmered, and she blinked quickly. If she cried, he was toast. Again, he looked around the room before leaning down to whisper,

“Did you install all *three* cameras?” She nodded. “And the other two sim cards?” He’d installed one of them. Again, she nodded. “What are you going to do with the footage you record? Turn it over to the police or the FBI?”

The FBI wanted him to get probable cause to install surveillance equipment in Paola’s house *and* the Bistro. The Bistro was as much Bella’s property as it was Paola’s. She had every right to install cameras, whereas he’d need a court order. Even if she hadn’t changed her login yet, and his phone was still synced to the cameras, anything he got from them probably couldn’t be used in court. But he could get a search warrant for the sim cards. Bella had just made his job a lot easier.

From a professional standpoint, he wanted her to leave the cameras in place. From a personal perspective, he wanted her to take them down before they were discovered. If they *were* discovered, Paola would know who’d put them there. He didn’t want to think about what The Godmother would do to her niece if she betrayed her. Hell, she already had.

“I—” Bella bit her lower lip. “No, not the FBI or the police. I could never do that.”

Blood ties. “Then what are you going to—” *Oh shit.* This was beyond bad. She was going to blackmail her aunt and force her into signing over her share of the Bistro.

Jamie couldn’t say so, but Paola Mancuso had no intention of doing that. Ever. Bianco’s Bistro was the epicenter of her operation. A money laundering hub for all the proceeds of her illegal operations and a private place where she could safely conduct business. It was far too valuable.

Gently, he clasped her upper arms. “You can’t do this. It’s too da—”

“Jimmy.” Marco glared at him from the open end of the bar then hitched his head. “Paola wants you.” There was no mistaking the animosity shooting from the other man’s eyes. He’d just caught Jamie with his hands on Bella, something he obviously didn’t like. To Bella, he said gently, “Do you need help with the wine?”

Bella sighed, then shook her head. “No, thank you.” She took a tray from beneath the bar, then pulled wineglasses down from the overhead rack.

“We *will* talk later.” Jamie left her standing there, her eyes still shimmering, as if she was only now realizing the consequences of her actions.

He wanted to drag her out of there and talk some sense into her, but he had to remain focused on the job. Leaving those cameras in place was the fastest

way to get the evidence he needed. Evidence he fully intended to turn over to the FBI in exchange for getting his dad sprung. With his dad going downhill fast, that was all that mattered. Still, he felt miserable about what that would do to Bella.

As he walked from behind the bar, Jamie didn't look at Marco but felt the man's animosity as sharply as a knife stab to the chest.

In the private dining room, Tony and the others sat at the table with Paola. Marco came in last and closed the door behind him.

"The man of the hour." Tony stood, then clapped Jamie on the back. For the first time, he didn't massage Jamie's back for wires. "Everything went like clockwork, just like he said it would."

Like he'd *hoped* it would. For a moment there, he'd thought Marco was about to blow a hole in Steve's head.

Like Tony and the other men, Ianetti was a convicted felon. He'd been arrested on drug trafficking and assault a few years back for beating a man to a pulp. Jamie couldn't wait to tack on unlawful possession of a firearm to the long list of charges Marco would face when this was over. Begging the question... Where was that gun now? There was no bulge beneath Marco's shirt, and he wasn't wearing an ankle holster.

"Sit." Paola indicated the chair next to her. "I want to hear all about it."

Jamie pulled out the chair and sat. "Things did go well," he began. "We—"

Paola held up her hand, silencing him as the door opened. Bella came in, balancing a tray loaded with glasses and two bottles of wine.

"There it is." Tony grinned. "The good stuff. I knew you had more."

Ignoring her cousin, Bella set the tray on the table, then began pouring wine into each of the glasses. When she set a glass in front of Jamie, she refused to make eye contact with him.

Marco's gaze tracked her every move like a hawk circling prey right before grabbing it in its sharp talons.

After Bella had left the room, Tony lifted his glass. "To Fist, for a job well done."

"Bravo!" Paulie, Sammy, and Nicky said simultaneously.

Marco picked up his glass but didn't drink.

Paola clinked glasses with Jamie's. "Now, tell me everything."

Sticking to the salient points, he succinctly described how it all went down, leaving out the part where Marco had pulled a gun on Steve and Artie. He still hadn't had the opportunity to call them to make sure they'd gotten free as

planned. After what had happened, he owed them more than just a good steak dinner.

“And where are the bottles now?” Paola asked.

“In a storage unit outside Peekskill,” Jamie said. “We ditched the truck behind a deserted factory up there. As soon as the heat dies down, we’ll head back and start selling the booze to delis and bodegas. I’ve already got a list of places ready to take them off our hands.”

“Excellent. You’ve done well.” Paola tipped her head to Tony. “Take him with you to Stewart tomorrow.”

“Stewart Airport?” Jamie looked between the two of them. Instinct told him he was about to be read into whatever Paola was planning next.

Again, the door opened. Bella and Sierra carried in trays of appetizers. All conversation about Stewart Airport ceased while the platters of food were set out. As she’d done last time, Bella refused to look at him. Her face was a blank mask, but Jamie felt the tension flowing off her like a tidal wave of fury.

After Bella and Sierra left, Tony cleared his throat. “We need to make a pickup tomorrow.”

Jamie paused mid-sip. “Pick up of what?”

Tony opened his mouth to reply, but Paola interrupted. “You’ll find out when you get there.”

Jamie nodded in understanding. Whatever was going down at the airport, Paola wanted to keep the circle in the know tight until the very last minute. But this was a good start.

Stewart International Airport was a fairly large airport about two hours north of the city. The Port Authority had jurisdiction there, but the cargo inspection team was significantly smaller than at the other major New York City airports. Jamie would bet Paola was smuggling something into the country and was smart enough to do it through a port of entry where the chances of getting caught were significantly less. He also had to consider they could be picking up a passenger, not smuggled contraband.

Paola took one of the stuffed clams from a platter. “If we’re successful tomorrow,” she continued, “the rest of you will do pickups at the other airports as scheduled.”

A hundred questions pinged his brain, but he had to tread lightly. Smugglers typically utilized multiple ports of entry. If Paola was smuggling contraband, she’d spread it out at different airports. Any smuggling operation

had acceptable losses. If one of their shipments got caught by authorities, chances were still good at least some of their other packages would make it through.

“Gentlemen.” Fierce determination lit Paola’s eyes as she looked around the table. “We’re on the brink of success. By this time next week, I will have accomplished something no other woman in this country ever has. The power bestowed on me will enable us to rebuild. To take back what we lost. What was *taken* from us.”

Next week. The big event set to take place in this very room, maybe.

“To the family.” Tony pushed back his chair and stood, raising his glass to his mother.

“To the family.” Jamie followed suit, as did the other men.

As he drank to Paola Mancuso’s impending success, he looked over the rim of his glass to a corner of the ceiling where Bella had hidden a camera. He swallowed the expensive wine. It soured in his mouth. The war of conscience waging in his head became more brutal, pounding relentlessly from both sides.

Bella’s cameras could be the key to saving his father’s life.

They could also be the very things that might get her killed.

Chapter Twenty

The sky-blue silk nightie slithered down Bella's body as she pulled it over her head. She ran her fingers through her still-damp hair, leaving it in unruly spikes that matched her mood. Edgy. Worried. Unsettled, to say the least.

Waiting on her aunt tonight like a lowly servant had nearly driven her insane. She'd wanted to dump those bottles of wine right over Paola's expensively coiffed hair. With every course she'd served, her nerves had ratcheted tighter, waiting for her aunt to confront her about the cameras. She never did, so Bella could only conclude Jimmy hadn't spilled the beans.

Since locking up the Bistro at ten o'clock, she'd driven home, then taken an extra-long shower. Some days, it seemed like the smells of the restaurant—garlic, herbs, onions—were permanently embedded in her clothes, hair, and fingertips.

She rested her palms on the edge of the vanity, taking in her reflection in the mirror and wondering if Jimmy would eventually say something. The first thing she'd done after getting home was to cue up the cameras on her phone. They were still in place. For now.

Jimmy had said he'd wanted to talk. *Yeah*. Talk her into taking down the cameras. She fisted her hands on the vanity. *I won't do it*. That ball had been set in motion, and she had to stand firm. Jimmy could easily take them down himself. Maybe he would.

Was she a terrible person for wanting to blackmail her aunt? *Maybe*. *Maybe not*. She was sick and tired of being bullied, being strung along and, above all else, being used and lied to.

Bella twisted off the cap of her nightly moisturizer, squeezed some onto her fingers, then began vigorously rubbing it on her face and neck. She was done being manipulated. By anyone.

She flipped off the bathroom light, then went into the living room to check

on Gnocchi. He was curled up into a tight little ball, fast asleep. After their nightly walk, it had taken an hour to calm him down and coax him into the new crate. Waking him now would be stupid, but he was always up for a good cuddle, and she needed the physical contact. To know she was important in someone's life. Even a puppy's life.

The moment her fingers touched the latch, Gnocchi woke, giving her an enthusiastic yip as he raced for the open crate door and straight into Bella's arms. The puppy's tongue was wet and rough on her chin. Instantly, the gloomy pall of the evening brightened. Some, anyway.

She gave Gnocchi a scratch beneath his chin. "Would you like to sleep with me?" In response, he licked her chin again. "That's what I thought."

Lying on her side on the bed, she tucked Gnocchi against her, urging the pup to settle and hoping he didn't pee on the comforter in the middle of the night. He made an adorable little sigh, then closed his eyes.

The air conditioner kicked on, whirring softly. After a rough night at the Bistro, the gentle hum normally lulled her to sleep. Tonight, sleep refused to come. Being thoroughly exhausted—body *and* mind—wasn't enough to keep her from playing out the endless loop of scenarios her actions tonight might have kicked off. None of those scenarios ended pleasantly.

Through the open blinds, a full moon hung over the river, glowing in the darkness like a giant round lightbulb. Somewhere, she'd read that a full moon marked a big build-up of energy, both light *and* dark.

She laughed to herself. The only energy pulsing through her house tonight was dark. Definitely dark.

Headlights glinted off the window. A moment later, they shut off. Jimmy was home. She and Sierra had been closing up for the night when Paola had left. Jimmy and the others had gone down the street to a tavern. Knowing her cousin, Tony had probably picked up a buxom blonde, his favorite taste in one-night stands since dumping Misty Morris, the bank teller.

What kind of woman did Jimmy prefer?

Probably a supermodel type of woman. The antithesis of her slightly overweight, five-foot-three frame.

Bella turned again to her other side and whacked the pillow with her fist. Just because he'd kissed her didn't mean a thing. Guys kissed women all the time, and both times he'd kissed her, she'd been upset. First, right after being attacked at the lake, then after having it out with Tony.

She turned her face into the pillow and groaned. Was that all she was good

for—a pity kiss? And why couldn't she stop thinking about him? She didn't *do* mobsters.

Seconds later, the basement apartment door opened, then closed, only to open and close yet again. Jimmy must be taking Jax for a walk. He and Jax probably made quite an impression in the neighborhood. Jax was a big, beautiful German shepherd. Jimmy's long, muscular legs filled out his jeans and slacks perfectly. And the way all those polo shirts clung to his upper body, outlining his rock-hard pecs and abs...

She flipped onto her back and clapped a hand to her forehead. *Lust*. She *had* to stop lusting after the man. There was absolutely nothing good that would come of it.

The doorbell rang. Bella tensed, fisting the sheets in her hands.

Gnocchi yipped, then leaped off the bed and raced from the room.

Bella threw back the sheet, then followed Gnocchi. She looked through the peephole. Jimmy and Jax stood on her porch. She drew back, her heart racing. Should she let him in? Did she *want* to let him in?

No. Yes. Maybe. Bad idea.

She looked down at Gnocchi, as if the puppy held the answers. Gnocchi cracked his jaw, wagging his tail faster. Had she somehow transmitted the identities of who was out there? Relying on Gnocchi's clear preference could be another mistake. Of course, technically, she didn't have to let them in. Whatever he'd come to say he could say right there on her porch. A compromise.

Bella grabbed a blanket from the back of the sofa and draped it over her shoulders before throwing open the deadbolt and opening the door.

For a moment, Jimmy didn't say anything. Jax's tail whipped back and forth, but he stayed at Jimmy's side. Seeing Jax, Gnocchi barked with glee and rushed to him, begging for attention.

"May we come in?"

Both dogs' heads turned to look up at her, neither making a sound.

No fair. Three against one.

The moment of truth had arrived. Although she'd known the answer to Jimmy's question when she'd unwisely opened the door.

She stepped aside, waited for them to come in, then closed the door. The blanket slipped off one shoulder, and she caught it just before it would have hit the floor, but not in time to prevent giving Jimmy a quick glimpse of how her favorite silk nightie was perhaps a size too small to gracefully

accommodate the fullness of her curves.

Sure enough, his gaze dipped briefly, although she couldn't be certain if the clenching of his jaw was a sign of genuine appreciation or merely an auto-response at the prospect of catching a woman wearing nothing but a thin scrap of clothing.

A flash of heat warmed her, and she hugged the blanket tighter, being careful to cloak every inch of her body from the tops of her thighs to her neck.

Jax trotted into the kitchen, sniffing every corner. Gnocchi followed Jax, as if he were the bigger dog's shadow.

Bella readjusted the blanket. Aside from crossing his arms, Jimmy hadn't budged. Now it was her turn to ogle his thick biceps and the flexing of his forearms.

She swallowed, praying he didn't pick up on the subtle vibration of energy humming through her veins and lighting up every one of her nerve endings. "What do you want?"

"To talk," he said in a low voice laden with warning.

"About what?" *Duh.* The giant elephant in the room.

Bella padded into the kitchen, sidestepping the dogs, who'd found something interesting to sniff in front of the sink. She filled a glass with water from the tap. Not that she was thirsty. With all that nervous energy, she needed something to do with her hands.

Jimmy followed her into the kitchen, which wasn't that big to begin with. Now the tiny space was saturated with his powerful presence. As if someone had said the word "bacon," Jax and Gnocchi sat, looking expectantly from Jimmy to her, then back again.

"Don't play games with me." He leaned back against the granite counter, again crossing his arms. "You know *exactly* what we need to talk about. The cameras. You're playing with fire, and you're going to get burned."

She huffed. "What's a few singed hairs if it gets me my restaurant back?"

Jimmy's lips compressed. "I'm worried it will be more than just a few singed hairs."

"Are you *ordering* me to take them down?" She advanced on him, stopping a few inches short of bumping into his wide chest and craning her neck to meet his gaze. "Are you?" she prodded when he didn't respond.

He took a deep, openmouthed breath as he glanced briefly to the ceiling. "No."

She jerked back, raising her brows. That wasn't the answer she'd been expecting. "Then why were you so angry that I put them up in the first place?"

A deep frown line creased his brow. "I told you. You could get hurt. Badly."

"That's *my* problem. Not *yours*." She planted her hands on her hips, not caring that the blanket, while still draped over her shoulders, had gaped open and no longer hid a thing. "I'm her blood. In the end, I don't think she'd ever hurt me." Then again... She still wasn't completely certain of that.

"No," he bit out. "*She* wouldn't. She'd order someone else to do it."

"Meaning, someone like *you*?" she said more than asked. He was one of Paola's soldiers, after all. "Would you really take me out? Pop me in the kneecaps? Activate my dental plan, or feed me to the fishes?" She'd seen *The Godfather. Leave the gun and take the cannoli.*

"No," he snapped. "*I* would never hurt you."

Dark eyes bored into her with such impact he might as well have smacked her.

She believed him. For some inexplicable reason, she did. Jimmy would never hurt her. That's why he hadn't told Paola or Tony about the puppy cams.

She shook her head. "I don't understand. Why are you covering for me?"

A loud snort came from behind them. The tips of Jax's ears tickled her legs, then he head-butted the backs of her calves. Her knees buckled and she fell forward. Right against Jimmy. The next thing she knew she was plastered against his body from the tips of her bare toes to the top of her head.

Big, strong hands at her waist steadied her. The blanket slid to the floor. The cool air on her bare skin should have made her shiver, but the smoldering, sinful heat in Jimmy's half-closed eyes had the same effect as sitting outside in a hundred-degree day.

She was burning up. Heat flared deep in her belly. A muscle in Jimmy's cheek jumped, calling attention to all the planes and hollows of his lean, handsome face. Bella held her breath, wishing she didn't want him to kiss her. But she did.

He released her waist, and when she'd expected him to push her away, he slipped his fingers into her hair. Her scalp tingled, as if a hundred butterflies were dancing on top of her head. When he leaned in, the breath she'd been holding whooshed from her lungs, then she couldn't get enough air and began

breathing faster, practically panting with anticipation as his head lowered more, his lips parting.

Walking away—no, make that running—was what she ought to do, but as the space between their mouths closed, her hands slid up his hard chest, locking around the back of his neck as he hauled her against him. Then his lips were on hers, her body melting into him.

She'd sworn never to be with a mobster, in any sense of the word, yet here she was, her toes barely touching the floor, her breasts plastered against Jimmy's chest as he kissed her.

His lips were warm. Soft *and* hard at the same time as he urged her to open her mouth for him. Their tongues stroked, his tasting smoky and spicy, like whatever whiskey he'd been drinking. One of his hands remained in her hair, the other sliding down her back until he was cupping her bottom, tucking her against the hard bulge behind the zipper of his jeans.

Pressure built inside her body. Her belly tightened, and she rocked against him. *Closer*. She had to get closer. As if reading her mind, he reached down and hooked his hand behind her knee to wrap her leg around his waist. He spun, then planted her bottom on the counter, deepening the kiss and stroking the inside of her mouth with a ferocity that had her moaning with need.

He nudged her legs apart, standing between her outstretched thighs with his erection pressed intimately against her dampening panties. Still kissing her, his hands went to her breasts, massaging them gently, then catching her nipples between his fingers.

She wasn't a particularly religious person, but *oh Dio*. The sensation of his erection at her cleft and his magic fingers on her breasts was too much. If he didn't get inside her, she'd go up in flames.

He tugged her to the edge of the granite counter, then cupped her, stroking her through her panties until she writhed against his hand. When he slipped one finger beneath the elastic waistband and pushed it into her channel, her brain went to war.

If this was so wrong, why did it feel so good?

There'd always been something different about Jimmy. No matter how wrong being with him was, she wanted him. Wanted him deep inside her, stroking her from the inside out until they both screamed their release.

Chapter Twenty-One

On a scale of one to ten of bad ideas, ten being the absolute worst, this rated a fifteen. Man, he was racking up mistakes by the bucketload.

Make that a front-end loader.

Showing up at Bella's door had been Jamie's first mistake. Kissing her had been the second. Planting her pretty ass on the counter, then touching her breasts and the sweet warmth of her pussy was a colossal error of the highest order.

Damn you, Jax. His dog had intentionally pushed them together. Jamie was supposed to get close to her. Not *this* close. But he couldn't stop. His body was on autopilot.

His heart hammered as he pressed his lips to her soft, warm neck. He hadn't thought he could get any harder, but when she leaned back and sighed, he did. Painfully so. His dick wanted to be where his finger was. Deep inside her hot, wet warmth.

Smooth, silky wetness coated his finger as he plunged deeper, faster. She rocked against him, her nipples tightening and puckering beneath her nightie. He had to taste those tiny buds or he'd go nuts.

When he pulled his finger from her core, the tiny moan she made was one of disappointment. He began tugging off her nightie when she grabbed the hem, preventing him.

"No, don't!" A look of horror passed over her features.

"Why in the world not? I want to see you. *All* of you." The grin he gave her was meant to put her at ease. Instead, she pulled her nightie down even more. "What's going on here?" Had he misread things? Judging by how wet his fingers were, he didn't think so. On the other hand, if she ended this now, it would be the best thing for both of them. Wouldn't it?

"I, um," she began. "Can we turn off the lights?"

“Then I won’t be able to see you.” Despite the war in his head, he really, *really* wanted to see Bella’s totally naked body.

“That’s my plan,” she answered shyly, averting her eyes.

Where was the spunky little spitfire he’d come to know?

“But why?” When she started to turn away, he clasped her chin, forcing her to look at him. “You’re beautiful. Why don’t you want me to look at you?”

She twisted her lips into the cutest little pout he’d ever seen, one he wanted to kiss away. “It’s just that you’re so body-perfect, and I’m so...not.”

Ah. Now he understood.

Bella had told him she’d wanted to shed a few pounds, and that was why she’d been running at the lake. She was insecure about the way she looked, but she shouldn’t be.

“You’ve got nothing to hide and nothing to be insecure about.” He gave her chin a gentle shake. “I already told you that you’re perfect just the way you are, and I meant it. You don’t have to be a supermodel to be beautiful. To me, you *are* beautiful. Inside *and* out.” Words he should never have uttered, but he meant them. Every last one. “I want to *see* you. *All* of you.” Then taste her and make love to her for the rest of the night. He released her chin, then slid his hands along the insides of her thighs, not stopping until his thumbs teased her wet folds. He leaned in to give her a deep, wet kiss. “You feel me?”

She sighed, closing her eyes. “Oh, yeah. I do. I *really* do.”

He caught the hem of her nightie, then cautiously tugged the gossamer-soft garment up and over her head, tossing it aside. Jax snorted. The nightie had landed partially on Gnocchi’s head and partially on Jax’s.

Both dogs shook, sending the nightie flying against the dishwasher and reminding Jamie of another problem he couldn’t ignore.

A canine audience.

Having Gnocchi and Jax watch them have sex was a no-go. “Jax.” Jamie snapped his fingers and pointed to the front door. “Guard.”

Jax turned to leave, but Gnocchi stood right where he was, standing in the middle of the kitchen, looking up at him and Bella curiously. He pointed to Gnocchi but looked at Jax. “Take Gnocchi with you.”

Jax paused to look over his shoulder and utter a low snort, as if to say: c’mon, kid.

Gnocchi obediently followed Jax. When his dog lay down directly in front of the door, Gnocchi snuggled beside him, resting his head on Jax’s front

paw. Anyone trying to get into the house would be in for a nasty surprise of the canine order.

“Now, where were we?” His question elicited a sexy grin curving the corners of Bella’s lips. Lips he wanted to kiss again and soon, but there were other parts of her enticing body demanding his attention first.

Jamie leaned over and blew air alternately across one of her nipples, then the other, fascinated at how quickly they puckered and tightened into tiny little buds the size of small berries.

He sucked one of them into his mouth and was rewarded with the sexiest sigh he’d ever heard. Bella clasped her hand behind his head, urging him to suck harder. *Don’t gotta tell me twice.* He sucked and licked and nibbled gently, twisting her other nipple between his fingers.

Eventually, he lifted his head, gratified to see both nipples pert, glossy, and standing at full attention. He could easily nibble on them all night, but again, other parts of Bella’s body needed tending to.

Slowly, he kissed his way down her belly, stopping short of her itty-bitty white panties. He skimmed his fingers along the insides of her thighs, loving the feel of the baby-soft skin there. “You’re what’s on the menu tonight. Will you let me taste you?” *Say yes.* If she didn’t, he’d die on the spot, a supremely frustrated and horny man.

“Yesss.” She sucked in her lower lip, biting it.

He knelt on the floor, then hooked his fingers on her panties and drew them down her legs, revealing the triangular thatch of blond hair. He tugged her even closer to the edge of the counter and spread her wide. “Nice. Very nice.”

Her folds were plumped and slick. When he swiped her with his tongue, she bucked beneath his hands. He tasted the sweet heat of her passion. When he drew her clit into his mouth, she began thrashing her head from side to side, her fists clenched in his hair.

Gently, he fastened his teeth on the swollen nub. Her belly quivered and her thigh muscles tightened. He inhaled her musky-sweet scent, wanting to draw out her pleasure for as long as possible.

Her hips bucked faster, then her body bowed, her breasts thrust in the air as she orgasmed with a throaty cry. As Jamie watched the pulses of Bella’s orgasm wash over her, he felt blessed to witness the stunning intensity of her feminine beauty. Her eyes were closed, her breath coming in soft gasps as her chest rose and fell. He gathered her in his arms, then carried her limp body to the bedroom and laid her on the bed. Unable to stop feasting his eyes, he

waited for her breathing to return to normal before tugging his shirt over his head.

Breathing easier now, she watched him kick off his boots and pull down his jeans and underwear. When her gaze lowered and her tongue flicked out to lick her lower lip, Jamie's brain went in the only direction it could possibly go. One singular image came to mind, obliterating all other thoughts.

Bella's lips wrapped around his cock, which was currently jutting out stiffer than the steel barrel of a shotgun. A tiny bead of cum appeared at the tip.

She crawled to the edge of the bed and crooked her finger. "Come here," she whispered in a husky voice.

"Yes, ma'am." He went to the bed because right now, he'd do anything she ordered him to.

She touched her finger to the bead of cum, swiping it away. His balls tightened to the point of pain. When she touched that same finger to her mouth and rubbed the pearly droplet over her lips until they were glossy... What a turn-on.

Bella grinned then did the one thing destined to drive him absolutely out of his mind with lust. She licked her lips.

Oh man. Pressure built at the base of his cock, and he wasn't even inside her yet. She closed her fingers around him and stroked, slowly at first. Jamie squeezed his eyes shut, his body taking over, his hips thrusting as she stroked faster, harder.

He groaned deep in his throat. This was good. *Too good.* He wanted to come inside her.

With so much reluctance it nearly killed him, he pulled his rock-hard erection from her amazingly talented hand, dug out a condom from his wallet and broke every condom-rolling speed record in American history.

He pushed her backward on the bed. As he gazed into her lovely eyes, his chest tightened, and he froze. He was 110 percent certain she wasn't willingly involved in any criminality. So being in her bed—about to make love to her—wasn't necessary. Once he stepped over that line, he could never come back. So was he using her?

Before his heart could beat one more time, the answer to his question came into focus.

He was a bastard, and this was, quite possibly, the most selfish thing he'd ever done in his life. Using her to get what he needed—or was it what he

wanted?—made him no better than any of the Mancusos. Like a thief or an addict, Bella was a delicious temptation he had to have. Not for the case. This was for him and *only* him.

“Jimmy?” In a gesture so gentle and so full of genuine caring, she cupped his face, trailing her fingers down his chin. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, then pushed inside her warm, wet core and thrust deep.

She met him thrust for thrust, arching her back and curling her fingers around his biceps. He felt all of her, and he felt her everywhere. Gripping him, stroking him, driving him to the brink.

The need to come pounded louder and louder in every cell of his body. Bella’s eyes were half closed, her lips parted. In the supreme ugliness that had become his life, she was a gift. The most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

An agonizing moment of sheer bliss blanketed his soul. There was no place he’d rather be than right here, wrapped around Bella, inside her, absorbing her warmth, her light, her passion.

As he leaned down to fasten his mouth on hers, his skin tingled, and the hair on his head seemed to be standing on end. It was an eerie sensation he’d never had before.

Her muffled cry broke the kiss. She arched beneath him, the orgasm tightening her body like a bowstring. Jamie pressed his lips to her neck, breathing in her scent as he found his blissful release.

• • •

“Mmm.” Keeping her eyes closed, Bella stretched her arms over her head. The sheet slipped down her body like a cool caress. Every one of her muscles, including those in her core, felt deliciously used. Then it hit her.

I slept with Jimmy Santoro.

Her throat constricted with a serious twinge of worry. The pitfalls of making love with one of Paola and Tony’s boys were many and convoluted. So what did this mean moving forward?

This could very well have been a one-time thing that had just happened. A relationship didn’t seem possible, and yet...

“Jimmy?” Her seeking hand found nothing but cold sheets.

The little antique clock on her bedside table said it was midnight. She’d slept for at least an hour. Her heart squeezed at the obvious. He’d snuck out while she’d been asleep.

Bella propped herself up on her elbows and let out a sigh of relief. Jimmy’s

boots and shirt still lay on the floor where he'd dropped them after peeling off his clothes in the most erotic striptease she'd ever watched. Not that she'd seen many. Only one other, in fact, at Sierra's bachelorette party in Rome. Jimmy's was better.

A low voice drifted down the hall into the room.

She slipped from the bed to grab a robe from the overstuffed armchair in the corner and drape it over her shoulders. Who would he be talking to at midnight? Tony or Paola? Or someone else?

Another woman.

She hadn't even considered the possibility. *You should have, idiot.* No man who looked like he did could possibly be serious about her.

As she padded down the hallway, another thought occurred to her, this one even worse. Was Jimmy only using her, trying to get close to her so he could rise faster in the ranks of her aunt's operation?

If that were the case, he'd be sadly mistaken. Associating with her wouldn't help him. If anything, it would only hurt his chances.

He sat on the sofa with his broad back to her. Gnocchi lay next to him, curled into a tight little ball. Jax sat in front of the sofa, his head on Jimmy's jean-clad thigh.

"Please, don't cry," he said softly into the phone pressed to his ear.

Her heart felt as if it were shrinking three sizes. She'd been right. He *was* talking to another woman. Not that men weren't capable of crying, too, but the tone Jimmy had used was definitely meant for a woman.

Tension knotted his thick shoulders. "Ma, I'm working on it."

He was talking to his *mother*?

Relief nearly had her sinking to the floor. Jax's ears twitched as he caught sight of her but didn't move.

Jimmy leaned forward, resting his hand on Jax's head. "I promise. Somehow, I'll get him out of Otisville. I'm working on it as fast as I can."

Otisville? There was only one thing of note in Otisville. A federal prison.

A long time ago, before they'd been killed, her uncle and Tony's brother, Angelo, had been sentenced to a year in that awful place. She'd been very young at the time, and Paola had dragged her along for a weekend visitation. The only things she remembered were the terrible stench of sweat and urine, and her aunt crying.

"I have to go. I'll call you in a couple of days." Jimmy ended the call on a deep sigh, then set the phone on the coffee table. For a long moment, he sat

there, unmoving and as rigid as a board. Then his shoulders bowed, and he let his head drop into his hands.

Someone Jimmy cared about was in prison. His brother? Father? Emotion clogged Bella's throat, and her heart went out to him. Hearing her approach, Jimmy stiffened. Jax lifted his head. His tail swished softly on the hardwood floor. Gnocchi's eyes opened, then closed again on a cute little puppy groan.

Bella knelt beside Jax in front of the sofa and rested her hands on Jimmy's thighs. His chest heaved as he tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. If she wasn't mistaken, his eyes glistened. "Are you okay?" Without looking at her, he nodded. "Liar." Her statement had the desired effect, and she was rewarded with a tight grin. Not a happy one, but a grin nonetheless. "Want to talk about it?" Lord knew she'd unloaded to him about her own family issues.

He cleared his throat. "My father is sick. Cancer."

Bella raised her brows. "And he's in Otisville? Not the best place for cancer treatment."

"No," he agreed, fisting his hands on his knees. "Otisville doesn't have experienced oncologists. Butner—a prison in North Carolina—has cancer treatment programs, but there are no beds available. His application to get transferred there was denied. I have to get him out of Otisville. Fast."

"How can you do that?" She rested her hands atop his. "I mean, is he due for parole soon?"

"No." Jimmy shoved a hand through his hair. "He's got two more years. He won't make it another two years, and even if by some miracle he does, he'll walk out of there a dying man. His only chance is to get out. Now."

"How? Can you make an appeal to the prison board?"

Jimmy grunted. "Already tried. We've exhausted all the usual channels."

"What did he do?"

"Something stupid." Jimmy shook his head. "He'd been laid off from his job for months and couldn't find work anywhere. Money was tight. We were about to lose our house."

Before continuing, Jimmy exhaled heavily. "He was the getaway driver for a bank robbery. He agreed to it because he was desperate. One of the guys he was with shot and killed someone inside the bank. My dad wasn't even armed, but it didn't matter. He was a co-conspirator and was charged the same as everyone else. That's the way the law works. He was lucky he wasn't sentenced to life in prison. The triggerman was."

"I'm sorry." Bella squeezed his clenched hands. Her parents had died

young and unexpectedly. She'd never had to go through what Jimmy was experiencing. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No." He shook his head. "But thanks. I'm working on something to get him out. I've just gotta work faster."

"Is it something I can help you with?"

He lifted his gaze to hers then gently cupped her face. "You already are." The lines on his forehead creased deeper, the pain in his demeanor so intense she could actually feel it radiating off his body.

"But I haven't done a thing," she countered, rubbing the tops of his thighs and wishing there really was something she could do to help.

"Haven't you?" He slid his hand to her nape and pulled her in for a gentle kiss. "You're here with me. That's all I need."

Of all the things he could have said to crack her heart open to him, just a tiny bit, that was it. There may not be anything she could do logistically to help him, but she did know a way to ease his pain, if only temporarily, and for a few short moments make him forget.

When she reached for the button on his jeans, he let her. She popped it open and slid down the zipper. As she began tugging off the jeans, he lifted his hips, the ridges of his abs bunching and flexing. She turned to throw the jeans on the table and found herself pinned by Jax's and Gnocchi's watchful stares.

"Jax." She gave him a quick conciliatory scratching behind his ears, then took a play out of Jimmy's handbook and pointed to the front door. "Guard." Jax lowered his head and made the most human whine Bella had ever heard a dog utter. "Please? And take Gnocchi with you. I can't do this in front of a child." She caught the quick nod Jimmy gave his dog in the direction of the door.

Bella gave Gnocchi a gentle nudge. The puppy jumped off the sofa and followed Jax to the door, where they both lay down exactly as they'd done earlier. Jimmy's eyes glittered, his lips quirking.

"Now, where were we?" she asked, using the same words he'd said to her in the kitchen not two hours ago. Her question elicited the sexiest smile she'd ever seen grace a man's lips.

She leaned over to blaze a trail of kisses along the inside of his thighs. The coarse hairs on his legs tickled her lips. His muscles tightened, and he shifted to the edge of the sofa to spread his legs wider.

The robe slipped from her shoulders, only this time she didn't care so much

about her nakedness. The sincere appreciation in his expression told her everything she needed to know. He really thought she was beautiful.

She took the tip of his length into her mouth, stroking the rest of his erection with her hand while he cupped her breasts, kneading them gently. He was hot, hard, and slightly salty. Steel sheathed by smooth, taut skin.

He groaned deep in his throat and shifted to pump gently into her mouth. The rest of his body tightened, and his breath came in gasps.

“Bella!” He pulled her off him. “Come here. I don’t want to come in your mouth, but I don’t have another condom with me.”

“Did I mention that I was on the pill?” she asked.

He arched a brow. “And why exactly are you on the pill? You got another boyfriend I should know about?”

Another boyfriend? She smiled, thoroughly liking the implication that Jimmy had indirectly referred to himself as her boyfriend. “No, but about two months ago, I decided to give online dating a whirl, and I wanted to be prepared in case any of those dates went anywhere.”

“Did they?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Not even close.” She laughed softly. “The last one I went on was in Manhattan. I met him at a restaurant.” That was when things had gotten weird. *Really* weird. “There was something odd about this guy that I didn’t pick up on when we chatted online.”

Jimmy grinned. “This sounds interesting.”

Again, she laughed, remembering the awkwardness of what had come next in the conversation. “I was making small talk, trying to get to know him better, so I asked if he had any hobbies.”

“I can hardly wait to hear this.” Jimmy’s grin broadened.

“He said he liked to meow.”

“Huh?”

“Seriously, that’s what he said. He liked to meow like a cat. So, I took the train all the way downtown, paid for a cab, which, I might add, is ridiculously expensive, then he tells me about his bizarre meowing fetish and sticks me with half the dinner bill.”

Jimmy threw back his head and burst out laughing. “You’re kidding.”

“Don’t laugh, I’m dead serious.” She punched his shoulder. “In the end, I told him, ‘You do you, I’ll do me.’ Just not together.”

Jimmy cleared his throat, his expression sobering. “I can’t believe he actually made you pay for half the meal. Sounds to me like the guy was a real

pussy.”

A quick snort of laughter erupted from Bella’s mouth. Laughter that was short-lived, as he leaned over to clasp her bottom and haul her on top of him. “No pussies here,” he whispered against her lips as he slowly lowered her, inch by inch, until he was fully sheathed inside her. With his powerful arms raising and lowering her again and again, friction between their bodies soon had her writhing and keening as he brought her closer and closer to the edge.

When she couldn’t hold it in a moment longer, she cried out. Jimmy surged upward, holding her down as he tensed, then groaned.

“Bella, look at me!” His nostrils flared wide, and he sucked in air through his open mouth. “You. Are. Beautiful,” he breathed. Then he pulled her down for a kiss so hot, so searingly filled with passion, it stole the very breath from her lungs, leaving her boneless and limp in his arms. And feeling like she didn’t care who or what Jimmy Santoro was.

Somehow, she had to find a way to reconcile her moral crisis because, whatever he was, she wanted him. All of him, and not just for one night.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Warm. Wet. Urgent. *Raspy?*

Jax. Specifically, Jax's tongue on Jamie's face, urging him to wake up.

Reluctantly, he cracked open his eyes. Three things immediately became apparent. First, the sun was in full blast mode, blaring at him through the window. Second, Bella lay draped across his chest, her short hair tickling his chin. Third, Jax sat beside the bed, his furry face barely an inch from Jamie's.

Looking over the mattress, Gnocchi, too, stared up at him from the floor. Not the subtlest of wakeup calls.

A faint buzzing came from somewhere in the house. His cell phone. He'd left it on the coffee table in the living room when...

He grinned.

...Bella had used him like a popsicle and driven him absolutely out of his mind.

"Okay, okay," he whispered, not wanting to wake Bella, who'd fallen soundly asleep after they'd made love for the third time last night.

As gently and quietly as possible, he slipped from beneath her. She sighed, then wrapped her arms around the pillow. When Jamie stroked his fingers down her bare back, a tiny smile lifted the corner of her mouth.

She'd known just where to touch him and just how to make his body light up like a warehouse full of fireworks, and he *had* lit up. Several times, as he recalled.

Still naked, he padded into the living room and picked up his phone. It was nine o'clock and— He'd missed four calls. Special Agent Jenkins; one of his best friends—Kade Sampson; Jamie's sister; and Tony, who'd called twice. Prioritizing, he returned Tony's call first.

"Where you been?" Tony shouted so loudly Jamie had to hold the phone from his ear.

Having the best sex of my life with your cousin.

“Sleeping. Had a few too many last night.” When Tony and the rest of the Mancuso goon squad had switched from chugging wine to tossing back shots of whiskey, Jamie had managed to fake it, occasionally dumping his shots beneath the table onto the floor.

“We’ve gotta get to the airport. Get your ass out of bed and swing by to pick me up in thirty minutes. Bring Jax. We can use him if anything goes wrong.” Tony hung up.

Half an hour didn’t give him much time. Another round of amazing sex with Bella was definitely off the morning’s activity list.

Jax spun then bolted to the door. He lowered his head, peeling back his lips to reveal sharp white incisors. Gnocchi raced to Jax’s side, mimicking his dog and loosing with a high-pitched version of Jax’s warning growl.

Outside, an engine cranked over, followed by the sound of a vehicle driving off. Jamie looked out the window in time to see a silver Escalade turn the corner. Too far away for him to catch the tag or see the driver.

Last night, Marco had been driving a silver Escalade. Jamie had made sure he wasn’t followed, but Marco could have pulled up after he’d gone inside. Had he been parked outside all night?

“Easy, Jax.” He rested a hand on Jax’s head, feeling the tension in his dog’s body. Tension he was starting to feel, too. If that *had* been Marco, it could mean only one thing.

The man’s suspicion about Jamie was escalating. Possibly along with his hatred.

When he returned to the bedroom, Bella was still asleep. He dressed quietly, wishing he didn’t have to leave, but going with Tony up to Stewart Airport came first. Whatever—or *whoever*—they were picking up was the next step in gaining critical intel on Paola’s big plan.

Before heading out, he sat on the edge of the mattress. Not saying goodbye wasn’t how he operated. He leaned down to drop a kiss on the back of Bella’s neck, and as he did, he inhaled her sweet scent. Not to be outdone, Jax craned his neck to press a wet kiss on her cheek.

She moaned, then a slow smile crept to her lips, and her eyes opened. “Good morning, Jax.” She reached out to scratch Jax under the chin.

“Do I get a scratch, too?” Jamie skimmed his fingers down Bella’s spine to the soft globes of her ass, stroking them lightly.

She giggled. “Maybe later. After coffee.”

“Can’t. Gotta go meet Tony.” When the smile on her face faded, he wasn’t sure if it was because he was leaving or because he was meeting Tony. Both, probably. “I’m sorry.” She had no idea just how sorry he really was. Someday, he’d tell her. Today wasn’t the day. He leaned down and dropped another quick kiss on her lips. “I’ll see you later at the Bistro.”

Seeing the worry and disappointment on her pretty face only added to the anxiety brewing in his gut. With his father’s application for a transfer to Butner denied, the sense of urgency to get him released had just increased exponentially.

Unable to bear the hurt look in Bella’s eyes a moment longer, Jamie stood. “Stay in bed. I’ll take Gnocchi out with Jax.”

Outside, he cued up Special Agent Jenkins on his cell while Jax and Gnocchi trotted around Bella’s tiny yard, sniffing the grass for just the right place to take care of their business. With barely enough time to shower and get to Tony’s, he had to multi-task.

“Where’ve you been?” Jenkins snapped. That seemed to be the question of the day.

“Busy.” When the dogs had finished, Jamie put Gnocchi back in Bella’s level of the house, then went down to his apartment. “I don’t have much time.” As he scooped out Jax’s kibble and poured it into his bowl, he recapped the situation happening at Stewart Airport. “There are other pickups happening at other airports, I just don’t know *which* airports, and I don’t know if we’re picking up people or contraband. Whatever it is, it has something to do with a big event Paola’s planning at the Bistro next week on Monday. Twenty-five people are coming.”

“When did you hear all this?” Jenkins asked, his tone suspicious.

“Last night.” Jamie cranked on the shower.

“Then why didn’t you tell me this *last night*?”

“I’m telling you now.”

Jenkins swore under his breath. “This could be it. The big splash we’ve been waiting for.”

“Agreed.” Keeping the volume low, Jamie put the call on speaker while he went into his bedroom and kicked off his boots. “Whatever she’s planning is about rebuilding the family and taking back what she’s lost.”

“Jesus. That sounds like a coup. A freaking big one. What do you think your chances are of getting PC to plant bugs in the Bistro before this big event next week?”

“Yeah, about that.” Jamie pulled his shirt over his head. “We may not even need PC.” As he stripped off his jeans, he told Jenkins about the cameras Bella had hidden in the private banquet room. “All we’ll need is a search warrant to seize the sim cards. You can get a court order to listen to the recordings later.”

“She bugged her own restaurant? Why?”

“Because she’s not involved in this,” Jamie continued. “She’s got nothing to do with Paola and Tony’s operation and never wanted anything to do with it. She’s not a target anymore.”

“Says you.” Jenkins’s tone held a note of sarcasm.

“Yeah, says me,” Jamie snapped, not liking Jenkins’s response. “The only reason she planted those cameras is to get something to bargain with. She’s been trying to convince her aunt to sell her share of the Bistro, but Paola refuses. If she can record something on her aunt, she plans to blackmail her with it.”

“Did you give her the necklace yet?”

“No.”

“Well, gee whiz. Maybe if you had, or if *you’d* worn a wire, that conversation could have been recorded.”

The man was right, but what a shitty thing to do to Bella.

“Paola will never let the Bistro go,” Jenkins continued. “She needs it to launder her money. The only thing blackmailing Paola Mancuso will get Bella Bianco is dead.”

“Not if I can help it.” He’d kill Paola with his bare hands before he’d allow her to hurt Bella. “I gotta go.”

“Keep me post—” But Jamie had already punched off the call. Two seconds later, he realized he hadn’t gotten around to telling Jenkins the cameras were synced to his phone. For the moment, anyway. Sooner or later, Bella would change the login, and he’d lose access.

Calling his sister back could wait until he had some good news to share. For now, he didn’t. Before jumping into the shower, he cued up one of his best friends, Kade Sampson, a Homeland Security K-9 officer.

“Sampson,” Kade said.

For safety reasons, none of Jamie’s friends’ numbers were programmed into his phone, but he’d long ago memorized all of them.

“Kade,” he said. “It’s Jamie. I don’t have a lot of time.”

“What’s up? You okay?”

“I want you to promise me something. If anything happens to me, I need you to look after my mother and sister. With my dad still in prison and...” Emotion clogged his throat, preventing him from finishing his sentence.

A beat of dead silence, then, “You’ve got it. But what’s going on with you? First you ghost us for six months, and now this?”

“Just promise me. I need to know they’ll be taken care of.”

“Of course, I promise. I’ve got your back. We’ve *all* got your back. You know that, right?”

“Yeah.” He did know that.

“You remember our pact? If the shit goes down, we’ll be there for you. Any time. Any place.”

He *did* remember their pact. If any one of them was in a bad jam and needed assistance ASAP and without official blessing, the rest of their group would respond without hesitation. In a choked voice, Jamie replied, “Thanks, Kade.”

He ended the call then set the phone on the vanity. Jax stuck his head through the half-open door, watching with a concerned look on his furry face. It never ceased to amaze him how his dog always knew when the shit was about to fly.

Jamie didn’t doubt Kade’s promise and understood the pact they’d made would remain in effect in perpetuity.

As he stepped into the shower, he hoped he’d never have to make that ultimate ask of his friends.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“The boys all like you,” Tony said as Jamie turned onto the road leading to Stewart International Airport. “Even my mother likes you, and she’s the most important person you need to impress. You did that yesterday. I knew you’d do good for us, and not just because you saved my ass in Sing Sing.” Tony chuckled. “You’re no hump. You’ve proven you’re an asset to the family.”

Jamie snorted. “I don’t think Marco sees it that way.”

“Don’t worry about him. He’ll come around.”

Doubtful. When the time came, Jamie planned to put the *habeus grabus* on Marco Ianetti himself. Snapping cuffs on that guy would be sweet.

He took the next turn, and Stewart’s one and only terminal came into view. Set in New Windsor in Orange County, New York, Stewart Airport boasted a twenty thousand square foot international arrivals facility, yet being two hours north of the city, it was significantly less traveled than JFK or LaGuardia. Jamie didn’t doubt that figured into Paola’s plan.

Tony glanced at his watch. “Pull over in front of the American Airlines sign and wait for me. Those dumbass Port Authority cops might kick you out. I’ll text you when I’ve got the package. I don’t want to be standing outside in front of the cops waiting for you.”

Jamie pulled curbside behind several other cars. “Got it.”

Tony grabbed the cardboard sign at his feet that read *Smith*, then got out and headed into the terminal.

“Dumbass Port Authority cops, huh?” he threw over his shoulder at Jax, who, like him, *was* one of those cops. He couldn’t wait for the moment when he could say to Tony: *Who’s the dumbass, now?*

When Jamie had first seen the sign, it confirmed they were picking up a passenger, not contraband. Having been stationed at Stewart for a few months early on in his career, he knew American Airlines was the primary carrier at

this airport and flew daily to and from Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland. From Reykjavik, other European cities, including London, Paris, Berlin, Dublin, and Brussels, were only a connecting flight away. Whoever they were here for could have come from virtually anywhere.

Including Italy.

Jamie scanned the curb in front and behind him in the rearview mirror. The Port Authority P.D. must have been short-staffed today. Not a single uniformed officer patrolled in front of the terminal.

Ten minutes later, he began tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. Behind him, Jax gave a bored sigh. Sitting around waiting wasn't the kind of work either of them was used to. He opened up the puppy cam app on his phone to verify whether Bella had changed her login. One by one, three images appeared on the screen. The cameras were still active. One was angled perfectly at the head table. Again, not that he could use anything he witnessed as evidence, but it was a miracle Bella hadn't changed her password. She could still do that at any time.

Why hasn't she?

Did she really trust him that much? The question made his guts twist.

After last night, things between them were more complicated than ever. When she found out who and what he really was, let alone why he'd infiltrated her family...

He didn't know if there was any way he could make her understand.

His deception would sting worse than a swarm of killer bees. If he could somehow manage to control the circumstances, tell her the truth when the time was right and in his own way, it would ease the shock, and that was important to him.

When this was over, he wanted to see where this thing between them would go.

A text bubble from Tony appeared on his screen. *Coming out now.*

Moments later, Tony came through the sliding glass doors. Walking beside him was a man he didn't recognize. Jamie's brain went into cop mode.

The other man was about fifty, a hundred and seventy pounds, dark-haired, olive skin tone, the same approximate height as Tony and wearing gray slacks and a black short-sleeved shirt. He carried no luggage, but Tony did—a small brown satchel. For Tony to be this guy's lackey, the other man had to have status.

Jamie noted the time. Later, he'd use his Port Authority contacts to check

the video feed from all the cameras inside the terminal and at the gates. Most people didn't realize when they were inside a major airport, particularly one operated by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, nearly every move they made was recorded.

By the end of the day, he'd know this guy's name, what airline he'd flown in on, and the flight number of the aircraft. With that information, Jenkins could run the guy's entire life history. Then they'd have a better idea of exactly what Paola was planning.

Tony opened the front passenger door and waited for the other man to get in, another indication of the mystery man's status. The guy didn't say anything to Jamie, merely gave him a curt nod. As soon as Tony slipped in next to Jax, Jamie pulled from the curb.

"Did you have a good flight?" he asked, hoping to draw the man out.

"Si." He nodded, adding, "Yes." Even if Jamie hadn't suspected the man's nationality, there was no disguising the thick Italian accent.

He took a chance. "I'm Jimmy."

Instead of introducing himself as Jamie had hoped, the man replied, "Nice to meet you."

This guy was cagey, so Jamie didn't push. He flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror. Jax panted happily, gazing out the side window. Tony had his phone to his ear.

"We have him," Tony said. "I will, Ma." He placed three more quick calls, stating the same thing each time. "Things went well. Make your pickup."

Jamie would bet the calls had been to Marco, Paulie, Nicky, or Sammy, who'd be making similar pickups at other airports. The man sitting beside Jamie was a test run.

"Everything good?" Jamie asked over his shoulder.

"Better than good." Tony grinned at the rearview mirror. "This is gonna be one helluva party."

And if all went well, the Feebs would crash the party and take lots of prisoners.

Jamie took the ramp for I-87 heading south. The rest of the drive passed in silence. He expected that from the mystery man, but for Tony to keep his mouth shut for over thirty minutes was rare. Aside from drinking wine, Tony's favorite pastime was talking. About anything.

Fifty minutes after departing Stewart Airport, Jamie pulled into Paola's driveway. The door to the house opened, and Paola clapped her hands

together, as if she were about to meet the Pope, and she'd dressed for the occasion. Standing on the top step, the woman looked like Fort Knox, her glittery skirt and short-sleeved jacket sparkling in the midday sun like spun gold.

The man beside Jamie made no move to open the passenger door, clearly waiting for Tony to do the honors.

"Enjoy your stay," Jamie said.

The man turned to him, saying nothing but giving another curt nod. It was only then Jamie realized his eyes weren't brown, as he'd assumed they'd be on a guy with such dark hair and skin. They were green.

Tony opened the door and the man got out. Something else caught Jamie's attention. Mystery guy wore thick-heeled shoes. Shoes, not boots, and the heels were at least two or maybe even three inches thick. Jamie wasn't a fashionista by any stretch, but it struck him as unusual for a man to wear high-heeled shoes. Which meant he wasn't nearly as tall as Tony, after all.

Tony shut the door, and Jamie started to pull away. In the rearview mirror, he watched Paola embrace the man, then say something to Tony.

"Fist, wait!" Tony called out. Jamie hit the brakes and rolled the window down the rest of the way. "We're having a welcome dinner tonight for all our guests."

"There are more coming?" Based on the three calls Tony had made up at Stewart, he'd guessed that. But in order to drag as much information out of Tony as possible, he needed to play dumb.

"Yeah, three more." Tony jerked his thumb to the house. "As soon as the boys finish making the pickups, they'll bring 'em back here."

"Why didn't they all come into Stewart?" he asked. Getting Tony to keep talking was easy. Getting him to spill without being obvious, not so much. "Would have been easier."

Tony made a dismissive gesture. "Ma's idea. Stewart was the test run."

"Ah." Jamie nodded. "The boys went to other airports."

"Now you're gettin' it." Tony nodded emphatically. "Ogdensburg, Plattsburgh, and Massena. Anyway, everyone will be here tonight, and Ma wants you to come. She wants a show of solidarity and family. A show of force. Anything to make our ranks look bigger."

"Got it." He'd always thought Paola's crew was on the small side, probably one of the reasons he'd been granted entry into the family business so soon. "Bella won't be happy about that. I'm supposed to work the bar tonight."

“Yeah, well.” Tony laughed. “She’s in for an even bigger surprise. She doesn’t know it yet, but Ma wants her there, too. What Paola Mancuso wants she gets. You know?” Jamie *did* know. “She said to bring Jax. I think she still wants to win him over, and she never backs down from a challenge.”

“You got it.” Not that Jax would be happy about it. Like Tony said, whatever Paola wanted, she got.

As he pulled from the driveway and turned onto Broadway, his brain’s radar was pinging like crazy. Something was off here. *Royally* off, and he had a feeling he knew what.

Unexpected green eyes could have been colored contact lenses. Shoes intended to change a person’s height. If this man had needed to alter his appearance that much, then Jamie suspected the name on his passport wasn’t his real name. It had to be an alias. And what about the other pickups?

Paola is smuggling people.

What people, and why did they have to be smuggled in?

He braked at a stop sign. Several categories of people couldn’t travel openly. Those who’d been kidnapped, which this man clearly hadn’t been. Those wanted by the law and with outstanding arrest warrants. Or those who were restricted from traveling outside their country, a common bail condition placed on an arrestee by a judge to make sure they couldn’t flee the country.

Jamie turned right onto 6th Avenue, heading for his apartment. He parked in the driveway, then let Jax out to do his stuff. While his dog sniffed the grass and chased a disgruntled squirrel, Jamie called Lt. Diallo Achebe, the Port Authority precinct supervisor at Stewart Airport, and made a formal request to have the mystery man’s movements traced backward from the moment he exited the terminal to the moment he got off the plane and to get an ID. Lt. Achebe could get the guy’s passport information. Jamie stressed the urgency of his request.

His next call was to Jenkins, to give him an update on the airport pickups. Once Jamie had the IDs, the FBI could run complete background checks on the aliases these men were using. But it wouldn’t answer the other question simmering in Jamie’s head.

Paola had said there would be twenty-five people at her event. She’d want her only son and capo present. He had to assume mystery guy and the three other people being picked up today would be there. Even if Marco, Sammy, Paulie, and Nicky were invited, which Jamie doubted, considering they weren’t capos, that still left at least fifteen other people expected for the

event.

Who else was coming? *More* smuggled people?

Possibly, but neither Paola nor Tony had alluded to more pickups, and the man Jamie had driven to Paola's house had been the test run. Which meant whoever else was attending Paola's event...was already here.

When Jenkins's voice mail kicked in, Jamie hung up, then deleted everything from his call history. Knowing who these men were was critical. Eventually, Jenkins would see the missed call and get back to him. Leaving messages would have been a rookie mistake, and he didn't want to wind up dead like Jenkins's last informant.

Wearing a wire to the dinner tonight would be ideal, but he couldn't be completely certain he wouldn't be scanned or patted down again. Bella, however, wouldn't be.

Jamie shoved a hand through his hair. Christ, he was a dick, but it had to be done.

He had a theory. It was only a theory, but if he was right, this investigation was bigger, more dangerous, and wider reaching than the FBI could possibly have imagined.

And a shitstorm was about to rain down on the little town of Nyack, New York.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Bella yanked on her black satin sandals, the ones with the tiny faux gemstones on the straps. Being summoned away from the Bistro for an entire night irritated the piss out of her. Wednesdays were when business started picking up during the week, and she hated not being there.

She smoothed out her favorite LBD in front of the full-length mirror. She loved how the halter neckline accentuated her bare shoulders, one of the few assets on her body, in her personal opinion, that was fine the way it was. As she turned, the asymmetrical hemline fluttered against her calves, and the beaded, sequined flowers glittered and sparkled against the black silk. Would Jimmy like seeing her in this dress?

Since all of Tony's crew would be at the dinner tonight, she assumed he would be, too. At least her regular bartender had come back to work. She'd have to talk to Jimmy about taking some part-time shifts. Then again, after whatever he'd done to get firmly ensconced in her aunt's operation, he might not have time. Tony would want him to do lots more of whatever illegal thing he'd done.

Heaviness tugged at her heart. She didn't like thinking about Jimmy doing bad things because he wasn't bad, just on the wrong track. He needed to realize there were other things he could do with his life. *Good* things.

Bella went into the bathroom and rummaged in the top drawer for just the right shade of lipstick. Coral, blush, or plum. After selecting the darker of the three—plum—she uncapped the lipstick and ran it across her lips, blotting with a tissue and wondering if Jimmy would like this color on her.

She groaned and gave a quick shake of her head. Okay, so he'd kissed her goodbye before bolting out the door exactly ten hours and twenty-seven minutes ago. Not that she was keeping track. Sleeping with men wasn't something she did on a regular basis. First, she had to really like a guy. Then

she had to be attracted to him. After that, it was all about chemistry, and wow, did they have it. Her belly flipflopped because mobster or not...

She'd already begun falling for him.

The doorbell rang. Gnocchi raced from his open crate, yipping his little heart out. From the other side of the door, Jax barked. She flipped off the bathroom light and snagged her dress's matching silk wrap from the bed. When she opened the front door, Jimmy was indeed on her front porch, wearing a charcoal-gray suit, a white dress shirt, and a navy-blue tie.

Lest she drool, Bella swallowed. Jimmy was good-looking in jeans and a T-shirt, but in a suit... *Oh my, and be still my crazily beating heart.* He looked amazingly handsome and hotter than a crepe fresh out of the pan and drizzled in decadent hot fudge and yummy thick caramel sauce. Yes, she wanted to lick him, *all* of him, from his head to his toes because he was absolutely, indisputably *de-lic-ious*.

He cleared his throat, and Jax made a closed-mouth snorting sound, as if he, too, were clearing his throat. "You look beautiful." His eyes dipped appreciatively down, then up her body. "I'm sorry I didn't call you earlier. I was helping Tony with something."

Gnocchi cavorted around Jax on the porch, landing harmless nips on the bigger dog's flanks.

"That's okay," she said. "Really. I mean, I get it. If last night was a one-time thing, that's okay. I just don't want anything to be weird between us, particularly with you living under me." She grimaced at her inadvertently suggestive words. "You know what I mean."

"No. I don't." He took her by the arm and pushed her gently back inside as he closed the door behind all of them.

"What are you—"

"Shhh. I promise not to meow."

He pinned her against the door, shoved his hands through her hair, and kissed her. Soundly. Deeply. Hotly, until her internal temperature soared, and her heart hammered louder than when Lou pounded out chicken breasts for chicken piccata.

As abruptly as the kiss started, it ended. Jimmy drew away, his chest heaving, the vein in his strong neck pulsing rapidly. "There's nothing weird about living...under you." He grinned. "Can I give you a lift?"

"Huh?" Hadn't he just done that?

"To Paola's. That's where you're headed, right?" She nodded. "Jax and I

were invited, too.”

Hearing his name, Jax stepped between them, demanding to be petted, and Bella happily obliged. “Paola invited *Jax*?”

Jimmy shrugged. “Who am I to say no to your aunt?”

“So true.” She forced a smile she didn’t feel. “Let me put Gnocchi in his crate.” When she picked him up, he wriggled rebelliously, somehow knowing he was about to be left behind. “Sorry, baby dog.” Bella gave him one last kiss before latching the crate.

Jimmy opened the front door, then closed it again, turning to face her. A look of indecision crept to his face.

“Change your mind about going to the party?” she asked. “We could be rebellious and stay in tonight.” She slid her hands up his chest, hoping to convince him there were other, significantly more fun ways to spend the night.

“I wish.” He smiled briefly, then tugged a red jewelry box from his pocket. “I want to make up for leaving the way I did this morning.” He handed her the box. “Sorry. I didn’t have any wrapping paper.”

Bella’s mouth fell open. “That’s okay.” Seriously, because he was giving her jewelry, so who cared if the box was wrapped? She flipped open the lid. Inside was an antique gold pendant with different-colored enameled flowers surrounding a large amethyst. She picked it up by the chain, examining it more closely. “Oh, Jimmy. It’s beautiful.” And it was, the colors perfectly matching the flowers on her dress.

In reality, she wouldn’t have cared if it was the ugliest piece of jewelry in the world. Jimmy had given it to her, and that was what mattered. It said he cared about her. Maybe *more* than cared? So much warmth whispered through her at the thought, she worried she might be glowing.

Then again, was he only giving it to her because he was living here rent-free?

“You really like it?” He took it from her hands and undid the clasp.

“Like it? I love it.” Regardless of the motive behind his gift, she really did. She turned so he could put it around her neck. “Did you get it from one of the antique stores in town? I’ve always admired the jewelry in some of those stores.”

“Uh, yeah.” He cleared his throat. “We should go, or we’ll be late.”

When he opened the door again, she stopped him. “Wait.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him. “Thank you. This was a very thoughtful gift.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled. For some reason, the smile seemed forced. “Let’s go.”

Five minutes later, they were greeted at the front door of Paola’s house by Bettina, who wore her typically dour expression.

“Everyone is in the living room.” Bettina beckoned them inside while arching a brow at Jax, who was in the process of giving her shoes a thorough sniffing.

Jimmy snapped his fingers. “Jax, heel.”

Jax abandoned his quest for whatever was making the woman’s shoes smell so appetizing. “Good boy. Now.” He pointed a finger at Jax. “I want you to be on your best behavior tonight. When I tell you to shake hands, you shake hands. Got it?” Jax dipped his head down then up. “And if I tell you to kiss our hostess, you plant one on her cheek. Got it?” Again, Jax dipped his head but instead of raising it, he peered up at Jimmy as if he didn’t like that last command. “Jaaax?” Jax huffed then raised his head.

Bella giggled. “I swear he understands exactly what you’re saying.”

“He does. Kind of.” Jimmy touched his hand to the small of Bella’s back, urging her into the living room.

Laughter greeted them, along with Vivaldi piping from speakers in the ceiling. A waiter dressed in black slacks, a white shirt, and bowtie carried a tray of crystal flutes filled with bubbling Champagne.

In front of the fireplace, a circle of men surrounded Paola. Bella couldn’t hear what she was saying, but everyone—Tony and his boys and four men she didn’t recognize—listened with rapt attention.

“She certainly knows how to command an audience.” Bella couldn’t contain the bitterness in her tone.

“You *and* Jax need to be on your best behavior.” Jimmy gave her waist a little squeeze. “I mean it. Don’t provoke your aunt again.”

“Is that an order? I’m not a dog.” She glanced at Jax. “Sorry.”

Jax snorted, as if acknowledging her apology and accepting it.

Jimmy’s voice softened. “It’s a friendly warning. One you need to be continually reminded of.”

Tony’s face brightened as he caught sight of them. “Jimmy! Bella!” He waved them over.

As they approached, Bella whispered, “Who are those men?”

“Good question,” he muttered under his breath.

“I see you brought Jax.” Paola handed her flute to Marco then leaned over

to pet Jax between his ears.

“Shake hands.” Jax lifted his paw to Paola, who laughed and shook his paw. “Now, give our hostess a kiss on the cheek.” Jax hesitated a moment, then stretched his neck to touch his nose to Paola’s cheek.

“Magnificent.” Paola clapped her hands together, startling Jax, who slunk away and curled up on the rug in the farthest corner of the room he could find.

Bella rolled her lips inward. Her aunt was clueless, completely oblivious to Jax’s body language. Paola might be infatuated by Jax, but Jax did *not* return the sentiment.

Paola raised a bejeweled hand in the air, signaling for the waiter. When Jimmy and Bella had flutes in their hands, Paola raised her glass. “Welcome to our guests. Signors Rossi, Gallo, De Luca, and Bruno.”

Yeah, right those are their names. Those surnames were some of the most common in all of Italy. It was equivalent to calling them Misters Smith, Johnson, Williams, and Brown. Whoever they were, Paola was being extremely discreet about their identities.

“This is my niece,” Paola said, “co-owner of Bianco’s Bistro.” Bella’s stomach churned at her aunt’s emphasis on the word *co*. The men nodded enthusiastically, as if they’d already heard of the Bistro. “And this is Jimmy Santoro.”

While Jimmy shook hands with the men, Bella slipped away quietly, heading through the dining room straight for the kitchen where she intended to conjure up the strongest martini on the planet. Her presence at this mockery of a family gathering was ludicrous, and she didn’t understand why she’d been commanded here in the first place.

A hand landed on her shoulder, forcing her around none too gently. “Don’t you *dare* walk away,” Paola whispered with all the venom of a pit viper. “Family representation means everything in this business, and you *will* respect that.”

“You’ve *got* to be kidding.” Bella’s eyes flared at her aunt’s gall. “You want me to pretend we have some kind of family solidarity going on here when nothing could be further from the truth? If you want my solidarity, sell me your share of the Bistro, then I’ll happily attend whatever so-called *family* functions you want me to.”

Paola’s lips thinned. “Make no mistake. I’m done talking with you about that.” She leaned in so close Bella could count her aunt’s nose hairs. “Don’t

ever embarrass me like that again. And wear a different dress next time. This one's too tight on you." Paola spun and returned to her guests.

With clenched hands, Bella pushed open the door to the kitchen, ignoring the hired staff working the party, and fixed herself a vodka martini, shaken, not stirred—James Bond's favorite cocktail.

Balancing the drink in her hand, she reluctantly returned to the living room. Rather than join the main group, she pretended to be interested in the platter of nuts and olives on a side table. As she leaned over, the antique necklace Jimmy had given her swung away from her chest.

She clasped the necklace, rubbing her fingers over the purple gemstone. Almost instantly, the anger she'd experienced moments ago dissipated, and she smiled. It was probably too soon for Jimmy to be in love with her, but the beautiful piece of jewelry had come from a place of caring. Of that much, she was certain.

She glanced to where her aunt stood in the midst of all her guests. Not even her aunt had ever given her such a beautiful gift, and she was Bella's family.

Family my ass. The more she thought about it, as the years had passed, her aunt had begun to treat her less and less like family and more of a hired hand. Sometimes—like tonight—it even seemed like Paola just plain resented her.

Inwardly, she sighed. Playing by the rules would never get her back the Bistro, and she'd been a fool to think that had ever been possible. Which left her no choice. If she was going to act like a spy, she might as well drink like one.

She swallowed a long slug of the James Bond martini, praying the alcohol would hit her bloodstream quickly enough to help get her through the rest of the night.

"Drowning your sorrows?" a voice said. Marco watched her with a sympathetic expression on his face. He clinked his Champagne flute with her glass.

"Maybe," she admitted and took another sip.

"Like my suit?" He puffed up his chest.

"It looks good on you." It did, actually. Marco was a handsome man. He still didn't make her blood race or her heart beat faster.

Over Marco's shoulder, Jimmy caught her eye and winked. As if to prove the point, her heart flipped like a pancake on a hot griddle. God help her, because there was no doubting it now. She really was falling for him.

Marco's eyes narrowed. "Don't waste your time on him. He won't be

around much longer.”

“What do you mean?” Jimmy hadn’t said he was leaving, although he hadn’t exactly said he’d be sticking around, either. She’d just assumed he would.

Marco cocked his head, his expression turning smug. “He may not be who he says he is.”

Bella shook her head. “I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been doing a little digging. I don’t have all the answers yet, but I will. Soon. *Very* soon.” His smirk deepened. “In the meantime, you should stay away from him. He’ll only hurt you.” He downed what remained of his Champagne, then set the empty glass on the table and walked away.

Bella stared at Jimmy’s back, wondering what Marco could possibly know about Jimmy that she didn’t. Then again, how well did *she* know Jimmy? In some ways, more than she’d known any man. In others, she barely knew him at all. But why would Marco say he’d hurt her?

Probably because he was jealous. That had to be it. Marco still had a thing for her, and Jimmy was rising quickly in her cousin and aunt’s estimation. The fact he’d been invited to this party in the first place was evidence of just *how* quickly.

And yet Marco’s last words triggered a deep-seated warning, one that had been her personal mantra for quite some time now.

If you let someone in, they’ll only hurt you.

• • •

Jamie hadn’t been scanned for bugs this time. As expected, neither had Bella.

The receiver was outside in his Tahoe, less than fifty yards away. When he’d stashed it under the front seat, he still hadn’t been sure he’d actually go through with it and give Bella the necklace. Now that he had, he felt like the lowliest piece of shit on the planet. Lower than rat shit. Lower than cockroach shit, which was about as low as it got. Seeing how much she loved the pendant only made him feel worse.

In the last few minutes, the phone in his pocket had vibrated with two incoming calls. As much as he wanted to take the calls, he couldn’t. Nor could he risk taking photos of the four men whose real identities he still didn’t know. Their identities were intricately tied to Paola’s big plans, he was sure of it. He needed to know who they were, and he needed to know ASAP.

The precinct supervisor, Lt. Achebe, had assured him he’d have an ID on

the man Jamie picked up at Stewart Airport—Signor Rossi—by this evening. He had a hunch that was what at least one of the calls was about. With less than a week before Paola’s event at the Bistro, urgency dictated he find a way to check his phone, and with his voice mailbox deactivated, he also needed a quiet place to return the calls.

Bella stared at him curiously from across the room. He’d caught her talking with Marco, and anything involving Ianetti never failed to leave Jamie with the feeling he was about to get stabbed in the back. Marco watched him closely, one corner of his mouth lifted but not in a smile. It was more of an I’m-about-to-fuck-you look.

“Excuse me,” he said to Paola. “I need to take Jax outside before we sit down for dinner.” He deposited his empty flute on a passing waiter’s tray, then signaled for Jax to follow. Leaving the house, even for a few minutes, was a risk, but he had no choice. Confirming Rossi’s true identity was too important to figuring out what the hell was going on.

As he crossed the room, Bella continued eyeing him oddly. Once outside, he went into the expansive backyard and headed away from the house until he stood by the seawall where lapping waves would help cover his conversation. Jax lifted his leg on one of the shrubs abutting the seawall.

He looked around the yard, verifying they were alone, then tugged out his phone. Sure enough, Lt. Achebe had called. He hit redial.

“Diallo,” Jamie said when the other man picked up. “What’ve you got?” Every second counted, and he had to get back inside ASAP.

“Stand by,” the lieutenant said. “I’m sending you two images. The first one is from a passport, and the other is an enlarged photo taken from one of the video cameras today. Your guy’s name is Tommaso Sala. We tracked him back to the gate. He arrived on American Airlines from Reykjavik. It was a connecting flight to Iceland from Rome.”

Rome. No surprise there. Jamie’s phone dinged with the incoming photo. The face staring back at him had dark brown hair, green eyes, and *looked* like Signor Rossi.

Jamie opened up the passport document and read Tommaso Sala’s full physical description. Sala weighed one-seventy, the same weight Jamie had originally estimated Rossi to be, and Sala was—

Six feet tall.

No way the man standing not a hundred feet away sipping Champagne was a six-footer. Rossi was five-nine, max. At least without his three-inch lift

shoes.

Using his thumb and forefinger, Jamie enlarged the passport photo, peering more closely at it. He swiped to the other photo, the one taken from the Stewart Airport video, also peering intently at this one. He had to swipe back and forth between the two photos several times. The facial features in the photos were similar, but one thing was for certain.

The man Jamie and Tony had picked up at the airport wasn't Tommaso Sala. Most likely, the other three men in Paola's house weren't Signors Bruno, Gallo, and De Luca, either.

"D, I need a favor, and I need it fast."

"Name it."

"This will take some digging, but it's important." And Jamie would also owe the lieutenant an expensive steak dinner. The steak dinners he owed were stacking up fast. "I need you to check Ogdensburg, Plattsburgh, and Massena airports for three other men who arrived on connecting flights from Italy today." He rattled off Marco's, Sammy's, Nicky's, and Paulie's full names. "Run these guys for registered vehicles, then look for them picking up a male passenger earlier this morning. Track those passengers back to the gates like you did for Tommaso Sala, then text me copies of their passport info and photos."

"You're right. This *will* take time to coordinate at the other airports. Could be a day or two."

"Put a rush on it, will ya?"

"I'll do my best."

"You always do." Jamie ended the call, deleting it from his call history, then punched in the number for Special Agent Jenkins.

While the phone rang, Jax paced along the seawall, sniffing the sea air. Jamie glanced up at the balcony overlooking the backyard a hundred feet away. A lone figure stood by the glass doors. Marco. The guy was a burr Jamie couldn't peel off.

When the agent answered, Jamie didn't waste any time. He quickly explained the events at Stewart Airport and the pickups at the three other locations. He didn't tell Jenkins he'd given the necklace to Bella. There was no point unless the bug recorded anything useful. He'd check the device in his Tahoe right after the party.

"And you're telling me all this *now*?" Jenkins bellowed. "We could have had agents stationed at all these airports documenting everything."

Jamie could practically see and hear the fire spewing from the man's mouth and the steam shooting from his ears. As he'd done once before, he said calmly, "I'm telling you *now*." The last thing he needed were teams of green agents with accounting degrees who didn't know the first thing about surveilling cutthroat mobsters. Surveillance wasn't as easy as it looked on TV. If any of the teams had been spotted, *he'd* be the one paying the price. With his life.

"Try not to cry," Jamie went on, glancing up at the balcony. Marco wasn't there. "I've got my people working on tracing these men back to the planes they came in on. As soon as they've got IDs, I'll pass them along. The guy who came into Stewart is Tommaso Sala, but I guarantee that's not his real name. Stand by. Sending you his info now." Jamie forwarded the photos to Jenkins, then deleted the texts from his phone.

"Got it," Jenkins growled, his annoyance still evident. "I'll order a complete background check on Tommaso Sala and run this video camera photo through facial recognition."

"You might want to have your people in Rome check in on the *real* Tommaso Sala," Jamie suggested. "If someone else is using his passport, there's a good chance he's dead."

"Good idea."

"There's one more thing." Jamie looked up at the house again and lowered his voice. "It's only a theory, but I think Paola's big event next week may have something to do with the Palumbos."

"Oh yeah?" The sound of Jenkins's antennas twitching screamed through the phone.

A low rumble came from the seawall as Jax lowered his head and growled. Hairs on the back of Jamie's neck blasted upright. Soft swishing came to his ears. Someone was walking over the grass.

"Gotta go, Ma," he said loud enough for anyone within ten feet to hear. "I love you, too." Running the rest of his theory by Jenkins would have to wait. He ended the call and stuffed the phone into his pocket. He turned and came face to face with Marco. The smirk Jamie was seeing more and more lately was in full bloom.

Great balls of shit.

Inside his pocket, he fisted his hand. If Ianetti had heard anything, he was fully prepared to do battle and toss the guy in the river. "What do you want, Ianetti?"

Marco stepped closer. “Besides you dead?”

Jax stalked from the bushes, his head low, growling. Wisely, Marco retreated, eyeing Jax as he backed away.

“That wasn’t your mother on the phone.” Marco’s lips twisted into a sneer. “So who the fuck were you talking to?”

“My gynecologist.” *Dickhead.*

“Yeah, right.” Marco spat on the grass. “Dinner’s ready. Get your ass inside.” Without another word, he turned and headed back to the house.

Jamie really wished Marco would have taken a swing at him so he could be done with the man once and for all.

Luck wasn’t on his side. Neither was time.

He wondered just how much—if *anything*—Marco had actually heard. Either way, Ianetti was gunning for him, harder with each passing day, and he had no choice but to wait for the man’s first strike.

Never in his undercover life had he ever had the strongest feeling something bad was about to go down.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jamie searched the street in both directions, then followed Bella and Jax to her front door. It was eleven o'clock and, aside from the occasional rustle of leaves in the tall oak trees surrounding the property, the neighborhood was quiet.

That didn't stop him from looking over his shoulder. He half expected Marco to jump from the bushes and bury something sharp in his back. If it weren't for Jax's warning, Ianetti might very well have caught him talking to Jenkins about the Palumbos.

It was every undercover's paranoia that his or her cover had been blown, and he couldn't shake off that feeling no matter how hard he tried. Yet Ianetti hadn't said a word. If the man knew something, he would have outed Jamie in less time than it took to squeeze a trigger. The rest of the evening had passed quietly and without any discussion of business.

Bella unlocked the door and went inside. Jax strolled in as if he belonged there and went right up to Gnocchi's crate. The force of the puppy's tail whipping back and forth actually rocked the crate.

"I'd better get him outside before he pees." Bella unlatched the crate and caught Gnocchi as he all but jumped into her arms.

The next ten minutes passed in relative silence as they let Gnocchi and Jax frolic and do their business in the backyard.

When they were back in the house, he closed the door behind them. He was itching to check the receiver in the Tahoe and find out if the necklace had recorded anything useful. But something had been bugging Bella at the party, and he wanted to know what.

"You okay?" he asked. She dropped her shawl over the back of the sofa, revealing smooth bare shoulders he wished he had time to kiss and stroke all night. "Paola?"

“Yes,” she answered. “Nothing new there.”

“Then what is?” He didn’t like seeing frown lines on her forehead. If she needed to talk—about anything—he’d be her sounding board any time of the day or night.

Rather than answer him, she went into the kitchen and filled a bowl with water. Jamie followed then leaned against the counter, watching the play of expressions on her face. She finished filling the bowl and set it on the floor for the dogs, who immediately set about lapping loudly.

The lines on Bella’s forehead deepened as she watched him. “Who are you?”

Oh, shit. “What do you mean?”

“Marco said you’re not who you say you are.”

Time to derail that train of thought and fast. “Marco’s problem is he sees me moving in on you, and he doesn’t like it.” That *was* part of the man’s problem. Not all of it.

Still frowning, she asked, “Are you sure that’s all it is?”

No. “Positive.”

“Are you?” Her lips quirked. “Moving in on me?”

“I shouldn’t.” What he should do was leave. Now. Execute a crisp about-face, walk straight out the door, and go check that receiver.

“Why not?” she asked softly.

The answer hit him. Bluntly. He would always be tainted by danger and darkness, never able to erase the stain of who and what he was. She was a shining light in his filthy world, and she deserved better.

Bella was a woman with guts, backbone. Someone who watched out for her employees as if they were family. Someone who brought meals to food pantries in the middle of the night, and who rescued stray puppies. In short, she was a bastion of morality he could never live up to.

“Bella,” he began, struggling to find a way to say what he had to without giving anything away. “Marco was right. I’m *not* who you think I am.”

Her brows drew together. “Then tell me. Who *are* you?”

“I’m not a good person, and you deserve better.” The truth sucked.

She shook her head. “But you *are* a good person. Think about all the nice things you’ve done for me.”

“Like what?” he asked, unable to keep from glancing at the necklace he’d given her. Seemed like everything he’d done lately had an ulterior motive designed to benefit him or the FBI.

“You bought me a crate for Gnocchi and all kinds of puppy supplies. You pulled ticks off him, for Pete’s sake, then helped me give him a bath. You fixed my air conditioner. You’ve been filling in at the Bistro and haven’t taken a dime.”

He shrugged. “That’s because I’m staying here rent-free.”

“On Tony’s orders,” she countered. “That’s my point. You didn’t owe me anything, but you stepped up at the Bistro anyway. You’re not like Tony and his boys. You’re good and honest. You’re different.”

“Not really.” Okay, he’d done some good things for her, but in reality, he’d done them to further the case, for the intel she could give him. Right?

Then again, he didn’t actually have to buy her the dog crate, or help her with Gnocchi, or fix her AC to squeeze information from her. It had made him feel good to treat her well, and wasn’t that what good people did?

His brain twisted with so much confusion he couldn’t make sense of anything. The only thing clearer than ice was that, deep down, he was worse than all of them—Tony, Paola, Marco. At least they were up-front about who and what they were. Jamie was lying his ass off to the one person in this whole mess who actually cared about him.

“Yes, really.” Bella rested her hands at his waist. Her expression softened, her eyes filling with emotion as she gazed up at him. “Please don’t shut me out. I need you. I *want* you in my life.”

Looking down into her eyes, Jamie felt as if he were seeing directly into her soul. Beneath the prickly defenses she put up for the world to see, hidden behind all that feisty snark he’d seen the first day they’d met, was a gentle, honest woman. In that moment, Jamie was lost. The resolve he’d thought was stronger than a steel door disintegrated like a sandcastle in a rising tide.

He clasped her wrists, bringing her hands behind his neck so he could pull her against him. Not exactly walking out the door the way his brain dictated, but he couldn’t stop himself. Selfish bastard that he was. She was so good, and he wanted that. Wanted to feel it for himself. She was the one thing in his world in a very long time that sparked the possibility there was still something worthwhile left buried deep inside him.

Jamie pulled her tighter against him, wanting to breathe her goodness into his lungs so that maybe, just *maybe*, he could be worthy of her.

When she stood on her tiptoes and nuzzled his chin, the hair on his head stood at attention. As she dropped light kisses on his lips, the air around him started to vibrate and buzz. Somewhere in his consciousness, he realized it

was all in his own head.

“Kiss me,” she whispered, and he did.

He lowered his mouth to hers. The moment their lips touched, hers parted, and he claimed her, stroking his tongue with hers and holding her even tighter. He couldn't say how long the kiss lasted before a clap of thunder blasted in his ears.

White light surrounded them. The air in his lungs froze, every ounce of blood in his veins lighting up with an energy he couldn't explain, and all while the rest of the world continued moving in slow motion around him.

“Jimmy?” Bella's hand caressed his cheek. “What's wrong?”

Aside from the sensation of electricity coursing through his system, nothing. Yet it wasn't pain he felt, it was blissful awareness. Like...

Being struck by lightning.

Only there was no storm outside. Through the kitchen window, the moon hung brightly in the dark sky over the treetops.

Jamie swallowed as the full meaning of what was happening became apparent.

What he'd felt when he and Bella had been making love was only the precursor to what he'd just experienced. Then, he'd felt only a vague tingling sensation. Now the very air crackled with energy.

Colpo di fulmine. The lightning bolt of love.

Damned though he'd be for it, the very worst of all things possible had happened.

He was in love with Bella, the niece of Paola Mancuso.

The Godmother.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Jimmy?” Bella asked. His jaw tightened. Was that pain she saw in his eyes? Confusion? He looked completely out of sorts, which wasn’t like him, and it was starting to frighten her. “Say something. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.” He nodded but still didn’t look fine.

She searched his face, hoping and praying the changing emotions she saw weren’t because of what she’d said.

“Bella, you are—” He broke off, then, with infinite tenderness, stroked the backs of his knuckles down her cheeks. “Precious.”

“Um.” Her stomach fluttered. Not because of the word, but how he’d said it. Like he truly meant it.

He dropped his hand, and the look of confusion she’d glimpsed moments ago returned. Whatever this was between them, she didn’t want to lose it. For so many years now, she’d been holding back her emotions and feelings. He hadn’t said the L word, but his eyes told her what she needed to know, what echoed in her heart.

It was finally time to let someone in.

“Come with me.” She clasped his hand, tugging him behind her, passing Jax and Gnocchi who’d settled on the living room rug, and continuing straight into her bedroom. She closed the door but didn’t bother flipping on the lights. There was enough moonlight streaming in the window to accomplish what she needed.

Even in heels, she had to crane her neck to look into his eyes. The confusion and pain that had been there were now replaced by something else. Passion. Desire. The pulse at his neck thumped faster as he watched her slide his suit jacket from his shoulders, then slip off his tie. While she popped open the buttons of his shirt, his breathing quickened. When she undid his belt, he gulped audibly. By the time he stood before her completely naked, every

muscle in his magnificent body quivered.

“Now.” She grinned, then placed her hand in the center of his chest, urging him backward onto the bed. “Sit back and enjoy the show.”

Gone were her reservations. About letting him see her naked. About giving herself to him. Freely. Openly.

Fully.

She kicked off her heels. In a slow striptease she hoped would drive Jimmy insane with need, she unhooked her dress, letting it slither down her body. The black strapless bra came next, and she tossed it on the armchair. Jimmy’s heated gaze dipped to her breasts, and he licked his lips, as if staring at an ice cream cone he wanted to devour.

Without losing eye contact, she hooked her fingers on the skimpy black thong she rarely had occasion to wear. Leaning over, her breasts hung down as she shimmied out of the thong.

Jimmy’s biceps tightened as he curled his fingers into the bedsheets. “Take the necklace off.”

She clasped the pendant hanging between her breasts, rubbing her thumb back and forth over the large amethyst. “Don’t you think it’s sexy?”

“I do.” He nodded. “Take it off anyway.”

“But I like the way it feels against my bare skin.”

She could swear his expression darkened a fraction. When he spoke, his voice was a growl. Fierce. Possessive. Sexy. “If you don’t get over here, I’ll take you right there on the floor.”

Bella laughed softly as heat curled low in her belly. She cupped her breasts, pinching her nipples and sighing.

“You should know something.” He sucked in a tight breath.

“What’s that?” she whispered huskily, sounding sexy even to herself.

“I never make threats I don’t make good on.”

He launched from the bed so quickly, she squealed. In one fluid motion, he picked her off her feet and took them both to the floor.

She opened her mouth to laugh, but the sound never made it past her lips. Jimmy’s mouth crashed down on hers as he kissed her deeply. He settled between her legs, running his hand up and down the side of her thigh and ribcage, stopping to caress her breast.

He trailed his lips down her chin and her neck to her breast, where he took her nipple in his mouth and sucked. She held his head there, feeling the tension in his big body and sensing an unexpected desperation to his actions.

Jimmy rose on his elbows. Again, that fierce desperation showed in the firm set of his jaw and the odd look in his eyes she'd seen earlier when they'd been in the kitchen. As he'd done to her then, she stroked the backs of her knuckles down *his* cheek. He closed his eyes and groaned.

The heat curling in her belly intensified to a hot wave of fire, and she parted her legs more, a wanton invitation. When he opened his eyes but didn't move, she draped her leg over the back of his thigh, dragging it to his muscled ass. "Jimmy, please."

With an even louder groan, he entered her, thrusting deep and holding himself above her on his elbows. She arched against him, reveling in the intense, supremely intimate connection. What began as a slow, steady glide in and out of her core quickened to forceful thrusts.

Hooking both her legs around the backs of his, she angled her hips to take him in deeper. If she could physically touch his heart, his soul, she gladly would. There wasn't a single part of the man that didn't make her want more.

His breath was warm on her face as he leaned down and kissed her, groaning into her mouth as his tongue sought hers. In between the cascading sparks flashing behind her eyes and the waves of sensation building in her core, one word chanted as clearly as if she'd said it out loud. *Love*.

No matter how hard she'd been fighting it, she'd fallen deeply, profoundly, undeniably in love with him.

As her body flew apart, she dug her nails into the steely strength of his biceps and cried out his name.

When she went limp, he thrust again, pressing his forehead to hers. "Bella," he whispered between heavy breaths. "God, Bella."

She sighed because, yeah. That had *definitely* been a religious experience.

He gazed down at her. A corner of his mouth lifted. "I told you I don't make idle threats."

She smiled up at him. "So you said."

Dipping his head, he kissed her again. Gently. Sweetly, this time, as if he were tasting her very essence. "I'll be right back. Then maybe we can move this party over there." He hitched his chin to the bed.

"I think that's a good idea." Before she got more rug burn on her ass.

Jimmy eased out of her, his gaze flicking momentarily to the pendant lying between her breasts, then stood and held out his hand. While she knew it was only to help her to her feet, she stared a moment before placing her hand in his. The symbolism wasn't lost on her. She was giving him more than just her

hand. She was giving him her heart. Her trust.

He tugged her to her feet, then went into the bathroom and closed the door.

While she'd hoped he'd say the words she wanted to hear—that he loved her—she was content to wait. After all, she hadn't said them, either, only *thought* them.

A knock sounded on the front door. Bella looked at the clock on her bedside table. "Who in the world?" It was eleven thirty.

She put on her robe, tying it around her waist as she went to the door. Jax and Gnocchi were already there, Gnocchi with his tail wagging and Jax with his head hung low.

Bella looked through the peephole. Marco stood on her porch. She backed away from the door. He'd only been in her house twice before, always with Tony and never pushing midnight. Something was wrong. She picked up Gnocchi, then opened the door.

Without waiting for an invitation, he brushed past her, garnering a low growl from Jax.

"Is he here?" Marco snarled, his gaze sharpening as he searched the living room.

She closed the door. Judging by his demeanor, she wasn't entirely sure at this point she'd done the right thing by letting him in. "Is *who* here?"

"Santoro." He peered down the hall toward her bedroom.

"That's not your business, and unless there's something wrong, I'd like you to leave." She reached for the knob, about to insist on it.

"There's something wrong all right." He leaned in, giving her a whiff of his alcohol-laden breath. "I told you Jimmy Santoro isn't who he says he is."

Jax hugged Bella's side, uttering another warning growl, louder this time.

"Fine." She hugged Gnocchi tighter to her chest. "Tell me who he is, then leave."

The look on Marco's face turned to one of joy. Evil, malevolent, twisted joy. "I don't know his *real* name, but it's not Jimmy Santoro. What I can tell you is that he's a cop."

"That's ridiculous," she snapped. As Jimmy had warned her, Marco had to be out of his mind with jealousy. "He was in prison with Tony. He saved Tony's life."

"Don't take *my* word for it." He snorted, then looked over her shoulder. "Ask *him*."

Jimmy had put on his slacks but nothing else. Despite his gentleness with

her, she'd always assumed there was a dark, dangerous side to him. Now she saw it in all its deadly glory. Every muscle in his upper body was taut. His eyes had narrowed to slits, and his jaw clenched repeatedly.

"Jimmy? What in the world is he talking about? You're not a cop. You can't be." Still, he didn't look at her, didn't say a word as he kept his focus locked on to Marco. The deadliness of his expression only deepened.

Her stomach somersaulted with nausea. The ramifications were too awful to contemplate, and her head spun. *Dear God*. Was Marco telling the truth? Was Jimmy a cop? That would mean—

Being careful to skirt around Jax, whose back hairs stood on end, Marco edged closer to Jimmy. "Since *he* won't tell you, I will. A friend of mine in Sing Sing checked you out. Another inmate said he was paid by someone to pick a fight with Tony. Your boyfriend here is either a paid snitch, or he's one of *them*. A fucking fed. So which is it?"

When Marco pulled a gun from the small of his back, Jimmy moved so quickly Bella barely caught it right before she blinked.

Jimmy lunged at Marco, knocking him off his feet and sending the gun skittering into a corner. Marco landed on his back just before Jimmy plowed his fist into Marco's face.

"Stop it, both of you!" Bella screamed, but she might as well have been talking to a frying pan.

Gnocchi squirmed in her arms, trying to get free. Jax barked, circling the two men as they grappled on the floor, then darted into the fray to try and clamp his mouth on Marco's leg or arm.

Marco managed a punch to Jamie's stomach, then pushed him aside. He shot to his feet and started kicking Jimmy in the ribs.

Bella's heart raced. She didn't know how to stop the fight. All she could do was watch, horrified.

They'll kill each other.

Jimmy grunted from the blows to his side. He grabbed Marco's ankle and yanked. Marco fell backward. His head whacked against the floor with a sickening *thud*.

Jax latched on to Marco's forearm, growling and arching his back as his teeth sank deeper.

"Fuck!" Marco tried pulling his arm away, but it was futile. Jax didn't let go.

Gnocchi continued struggling in Bella's arms, and it was all she could do

to hold on to him.

Jimmy slammed his fist into Marco's jaw. Blood flew from his nose and trickled from a cut on his upper lip. He didn't move again.

Breathing hard, Jimmy got to his feet. "Release," he said between breaths.

Jax unclamped his mouth from Marco's arm but remained standing over his body as if he were...guarding a prisoner.

She'd seen those K-9 shows on TV. Bella wasn't an expert, but to her, Jax's behavior went beyond that of a normal family guard dog, even a well-trained one.

Jimmy flipped Marco onto his stomach, yanking one of his arms up high as he searched Marco's pockets with a fluid precision that could only be born of one thing. Training.

"It's true, isn't it?" She locked gazes with the man she had, only minutes ago, admitted to herself that she loved with every part of her body and soul. "Answer me, dammit!"

Jimmy stood and took a step toward her, holding out his hand. "Bella, please let me—"

"Don't!" Still holding Gnocchi, tighter now as an emotional shield, she backed away. "Don't come near me. Just answer my question. Is it true?"

His chest, glistening with sweat, rose and fell rapidly. Before answering, he swallowed. "Yes."

Her mind went completely numb. Needing space from him—a man she now realized she knew nothing about—Bella backed farther away, not stopping until she bumped into the arm of the sofa. This was her worst nightmare times a thousand. Times a *million*.

She'd loved him. Trusted him. She'd let down her guard and let him in, past the emotional walls she'd erected for one solitary purpose.

To protect herself against those who would use her.

The pain inside her chest was her heart shriveling, disintegrating into a pile of desiccated powder.

She'd thought nothing could be worse than the hurt Paola had inflicted. Now she knew differently.

Jimmy had hurt her more than anyone had in her entire life.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Remorse and guilt hammered Jamie harder than a battering ram.

The anguish on Bella's face and the agony in her eyes sliced his guts wide open.

He'd done that, inflicted the kind of emotional damage he'd never wanted to inflict on anyone. Especially Bella. He knew she'd been taken advantage of—brutally—by her own family, and what it must have taken for her to trust him. POS that he was, he'd taken that trust and trashed it. Pummeled it six feet into the ground, which only proved what he never should have forgotten. That he was anything *but* a good person and could never hope to become one. Not one of his friends—Kade, Markus...*any* of them—would have contemplated doing the things he'd done.

Telling her the truth, explaining everything and making her understand in his own time and in his own way would never happen now. It was too late, and there was nothing he could say.

“Bella,” he choked out. “I’m sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am, but I had no choice. I never meant to hurt you.” Words that sounded lame, but what else could he say? They were the absolute truth.

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Who *are* you? *What* are you?”

An asshole. “My name is Jamie—James Pataglio. I’m a sergeant with the Port Authority Police Department working for the FBI.” An agency that had failed him by using a snitch with a big mouth.

“You’ve been undercover this whole time.” She began shaking her head slowly, as if she still couldn’t believe it. “You came here to get information on my aunt. On *all* of us. Including *me*.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. Denying anything at this point would serve no purpose. “Yes. But I know you’re an unwilling participant in Paola’s operation. I told that to the FBI, and I’ll do everything in my power to keep

you out of this.”

“Keep me *out* of this?” She set Gnocchi on the floor, then held out her arms. “What about the Bistro? Paola’s filthy money is all over it. The government will take it from me, won’t they?”

He couldn’t speak the words. He didn’t have to.

“*Won’t* they?” she cried, her face contorted with anguish and disbelief.

The puppy had gone to Jax, nuzzling the dog’s leg for comfort.

“And Jax?” She pointed. “Is that even *his* real name?”

He looked at his dog, still dutifully guarding Ianetti. The man was breathing but out cold. “Jax is my partner. He’s a Port Authority K-9.”

“No,” she whispered. “This was all an act. Everything. Everything you ever said. Everything you ever did. Was the fight in Sing Sing really staged?”

Jamie nodded. “Yes.”

“And you coming here, to the Bistro, staying in my apartment and working the bar?” Her voice had risen. “Helping me with Gnocchi and going with me to the food pantry? Making *love* to me? Was *that* part of your undercover act, too? Did the FBI order you to do all that for the job?” She clapped a hand over her mouth. Tears spilled down her cheeks and over her fingers.

“No,” he bit out. He hadn’t thought his heart could hurt any worse. It did. “That I did for *me*.” Telling her anything else—that he was in love with her and would die for her—would be stupid. She’d never believe him anyway.

Her hand dropped to the pendant. “I don’t believe you.” She yanked hard on the chain, breaking it, then threw the necklace against the wall.

The purple stone popped out, falling to the floor beside the chain and the rest of the pendant. A small black plastic disc about the size of a dime slid across the floor, closer to Bella’s feet. *The transmitter*.

Ah, hell.

Her brows drew together as she looked closer at the tiny device. “What is that?” She pointed to the transmitter. “Is that a *bug*? My God! You didn’t give that to me because you cared.” Her eyes widened as the full depth of the ugly truth hit her. “You *used* me. My own *family*’s been using me for years, but at least they don’t lie about it. But you—you... Bastard.” Fisting her hands at her sides, her whole body shook.

“Yeah.” *That I am*. If she ran over and slugged him, he’d take it. Willingly. His soul was every bit as inky black as he’d always known it was. Blacker now.

Jax growled deep in his throat, and Jamie looked at his prisoner, who’d

begun stirring. As much as he wanted more time to explain things, there were more urgent operational matters to deal with. Letting Ianetti go wasn't an option.

Jamie retrieved Marco's gun from the floor, then stuffed it in his waistband. He whipped the phone from his pocket and punched in Special Agent Jenkins's number. "Jenkins," he said when the man answered sleepily. "Got an emergency. I need a team at Bella Bianco's house *now* to come take out the garbage before it starts to stink."

Jenkins lived just over the Tappan Zee Bridge in Tarrytown, not ten minutes from Bella's house. As he explained the details of what had gone down, her trembling lips compressed tightly, and her chest rose and fell faster. He deserved every ounce of her wrath.

When he hung up, Marco stirred again, this time moaning and trying to push from the floor. Jamie leaned down and landed another solid blow to the man's face. Bella gasped. Ianetti dropped to the floor and didn't move again.

"What are you going to do with him?" she cried. "You can't just keep hitting him."

Much as he wanted to. "People are coming to take him away."

"*What* people? And away to *where*? You can't just kidnap him."

Actually, exigent circumstances dictated he could. "The FBI will put him on ice until I'm done here. Jax, guard," he said to his dog, then went into the bedroom and quickly finished dressing.

When he returned to the living room, Ianetti still lay unmoving. Bella had picked Gnocchi up again, holding him tightly to her breasts like a shield. From *him*.

Jamie bent to retrieve the transmitter and put it in his pocket. Gently, he clasped her chin. "What I felt for you—what I *do* feel for you—is real." More real than anything he'd felt for another human being in his entire life.

She jerked from his grasp. "You're such a good actor. I can't know that for sure, can I? The only thing I can be certain of is that you're not what I thought you were."

Yeah, he'd figured that would be her response, and he understood what she *wasn't* saying. He'd told her he wasn't a good person. Now that she finally believed it, he wanted her not to. Back to his operational dilemma. "I need to know... Are you going to say anything to Paola or Tony?"

Rolling her lips inward, she blinked rapidly. He guessed she was teetering on that line between shock and anger. "I don't know. The only thing I know

is that I want you out of here. Out of my *life*.”

Swallowing his flayed-out guts and what was left of his barely beating heart, Jamie hefted Ianetti over his shoulder and put his hand on the front doorknob. He hesitated before opening it, willing himself to have the strength not to turn back, not to look at Bella one last time. But he was weak, so he did.

When a fresh flood of tears streamed down her cheeks, his heart squeezed so tightly he didn't know how it could still be beating. His body might be moving, functioning, his tactical brain already running through the implications of what had happened tonight. Inside, he was dying an emotional death he didn't think he would ever recover from.

He opened the door, then closed it behind him and Jax before making his way in the dark to his apartment where he unceremoniously dumped Ianetti on the floor. Not having a set of cuffs, he searched the kitchen drawers and cabinets until he found something that would work. A length of strong twine and a roll of duct tape. Working quickly, he bound Ianetti's wrists and ankles, then slapped a strip of tape over his mouth. Part of him wanted Marco to regain consciousness just so he could smash his fist in the man's jaw again.

“Jax, guard,” he said to his dog, then jogged outside to his Tahoe and retrieved the transmitter he'd stashed under the front seat.

Back in the apartment, he cued up the audio, fast-forwarding to the time when he and Bella went inside Paola's house, then listening to Marco tell Bella about his suspicions.

“Dammit.” Jamie fisted his hand.

He was completely to blame for what had just happened. The first thing he should have done after they'd left the party was listen to this audio. Instead, he'd been making love with Bella. He'd gotten sloppy, distracted, because he was so in love he couldn't think straight. A dangerous mindset to be in.

Again he fast-forwarded, already knowing not much of any significance had been said during dinner. Aside from potential voice recognition of the men from Italy, the audio was worthless. Evidence he'd still have to turn over, but worthless.

The last part of the recording was him and Bella. Making love.

Knowing every word they said, every moan and sigh would be recorded for posterity on a government device, he'd tried convincing her to take off the necklace.

Jamie shut off the audio, staring at the receiver a moment before dropping

it to the floor, then smashing the heel of his shoe down hard on the device. With a resounding *crack*, the case shattered. Pieces of plastic flew across the floor.

He pulled out the tiny transmitter from his pocket and put that, too, on the floor, also crushing it beneath the heel of his shoe.

Jamie stared at the remnants of what had probably cost the FBI a solid grand.

He'd just destroyed evidence in a federal investigation. He'd done it for Bella. He wouldn't cause her additional pain or embarrassment by handing over that audio.

Minutes later, headlights turned into the driveway. Jamie opened the door. Jenkins and another agent he didn't recognize got out of a dark sedan.

"Jax, stay," he said to his dog, who lay down, keeping his legs tucked beneath him at the ready and watching Jamie for another command. "Your snitch in Sing Sing sang like a bird," he said as the two agents came inside.

"Sorry about that." Jenkins did look sincerely apologetic. "Cuff him anyway," he said to the other agent, who whipped a set of handcuffs from his belt and snapped them around Ianetti's bound wrists. Jenkins's brows drew together as he pointed to the pieces of black plastic scattered across the floor. "What's all this?"

"Your transmitter and receiver." Jamie crossed his arms, not giving a crap when Jenkins's eyes narrowed more.

"What the hell happened to them? Those were worth a lot of money."

"Sorry." Jamie shrugged. "I accidentally stepped on them in the dark."

Jax cracked his jaw, panting and looking as if he were laughing.

"I'll *bet* you did." Jenkins pursed his lips, glaring at Jamie for a moment before nodding to the ceiling. "Think she'll talk? If there's any chance of that happening, I'm pulling you out."

Jamie stared the man down. "Not your decision to make."

"You want to bet?" Jenkins tried getting in Jamie's face but wasn't tall enough. "This is an *FBI* investigation. If I say you're out, you're out. I won't have a dead undercover cop on my record."

Not that Jamie doubted it. To Jenkins, he was a statistic. Nothing more than a means to an end. In other words, the FBI couldn't be counted on to have his back.

"You can't force me," he growled, not caring about the chain of command. "I'm the undercover. Whether you like it or not, *I* am calling the shots, and

we had a deal. I get you the probable cause you need, and you get my father paroled. His life depends on that, and I won't let you or anyone else in the FBI take that chance from him." Or from Jamie.

Just once more, he wanted to hug his father, get to know him again, then go fishing like they'd done when he was a kid.

Wisely backing away, Jenkins cleared his throat. "Why would she keep her mouth shut? How do you know she's not on the phone right now telling Paola or Tony you're a cop?"

He didn't. Not for certain, but he wasn't ready to give up. His dad's life was worth the risk. "Give me twenty-four hours to find out."

Bella cared about him. How much, he didn't know. She'd need time to process tonight's revelations. *Tonight's confessions.*

Jenkins made a sound of exasperation. "Fine, but if I don't hear from you in that timeframe, I'll send in a squad of agents to pull you out whether you like it or not."

Jamie gave a curt nod of agreement. "Where are you taking Ianetti?"

"To a safehouse under lock and key until this is over." Jenkins bent to grab Ianetti's legs while the other agent grabbed his arms.

Jamie followed them to the sedan, opening the rear door so they could dump Marco onto the back seat and cuff him to the chain bolted to the floorboard.

"Take this." He tugged Marco's gun from his waistband and handed it to Jenkins. "It's unloaded. I took it from Ianetti."

Jenkins took the gun, then clicked on a flashlight, examining the weapon. "Serial number's filed off. I'll have our lab fire it and see if anything pops in the ATF database."

After the agents had driven off, Jamie looked up at the top floor of the house. Bella had turned out the living room lights. The only one on was in the bedroom. He wondered what she was doing. What she was thinking and feeling. The only answers he came up with weren't good.

Anything she felt for him would undoubtedly be null and void, but she wasn't a cruel person. She had to know if she dined him out, he was a dead man.

Did he regret what he'd done to her? *Yes.* In spades. If given the choice, would he do it all again? *Yes.* Because his father's life depended on it. The only thing he'd do differently was not fall in love.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

For a Thursday afternoon, the Bistro was busier than usual. Bella didn't worry. Between Sierra, Lori, and Rebecca waiting on tables, and with her regular bartender back, they had it covered.

Pots and pans banged in the kitchen, and dishes clinked in the dining room. The scents of roasting meat and marinara wafted into Bella's office. She loved all the sounds and smells of the Bistro. To her, it was comfort. To her, it was *home*.

Somewhere in her life she'd come to realize she was born to the restaurant world. Preparing menus and selecting fine wines. Creating a warm, inviting atmosphere where people could relax and enjoy good food.

She stared blindly at the Bistro's bank account balances on her computer screen. In the last twenty-four hours, someone had withdrawn the mysterious two hundred grand she'd discovered in the primary account. There was no doubting what had happened to it.

Paola.

Hesitant relief swept through her. Whatever the source of that cash, it had to have been illegal, and she was glad to be rid of it. Although the stain it left behind would be one the government would surely find.

The government. Jimmy—no, *Jamie*, she corrected herself—was the government. He was working for the FBI. Her stomach twisted and rolled as she thought back to their conversation last night. Not a conversation, really. If anything, an argument.

Now that he wasn't working the bar, would she ever see him again? Or would the Bistro just get raided one day by him and an army of FBI agents? Most importantly, did she even *want* to see him again?

Her head told her no, but her stupid, naive heart looked for his SUV in the driveway when she'd left this morning. It hadn't been there, and she hadn't

heard him leave.

Where was he? What was he doing now?

She shouldn't care, but she did.

Despite his life-altering admissions, she still loved him. Loved *and* hated him. Why was it those two powerful and contradictory emotions could be twisted together in a bloody, hurtful, and confusing mess?

Bella lowered her head into her hands. No matter his deception...*no matter his lies*, she could never tell Paola or Tony he was a cop. If she did, they'd kill him. She didn't doubt he could handle himself, but one could only look over their shoulder for so long. Even he couldn't outrun a bullet.

She'd once considered he might be using her to get closer to Paola, to rise in the Mancuso Crime Family ranks. Turned out he *had* been using her, but for entirely different reasons she hadn't seen coming. After everything she'd gone through with Paola, somehow she'd missed the signs. If there'd actually been any. Perhaps not.

Jimmy-Jamie was good at what he did. It sucked, but in the long run it was for the best. It couldn't have worked out between them if he was a mobster, and no way could it have worked out now, even knowing he was one of the good guys.

She made a *pfft* sound in the back of her throat. *A good guy*. When he'd said he wasn't a good person, she'd countered with all the reasons she believed he was.

He *was* good. Good at his job. And he was bad. Bad for *her*.

She lifted her head, second-guessing her decision to move Gnocchi and all his things to her house. She could sorely use a little of his snuggly puppy magic right about now.

"Salad?" Lou stood in the open doorway, holding her usual lunch, a plate loaded with fresh greens, tomatoes, peppers, and whatever other rabbit food he had in the kitchen. "All healthy ingredients and a splash of Italian vinaigrette."

The smell of salad dressing wafted to her nose, and her belly lurched. "No thanks, Lou. Maybe later. Would you mind putting it in the fridge?" If she ate anything right now, she'd throw it up.

"Sure, no problem." Lou eyed her with concern. "You don't look so good. You feeling okay?"

"Just tired. I didn't sleep well last night." Because she'd been up half the night crying and the other half worrying over the decisions yet to be made.

She looked like crap, and she knew it.

Lou pursed his lips. "I'll put it on the top shelf of the walk-in."

"Thanks." She smiled. The second he was gone, her smile faded. The first big decision to make weighed the most heavily on her conscience.

What to do about the puppy cams.

Now she understood why Jamie hadn't told Paola or Tony she'd put them in the banquet room. By installing them, she'd inadvertently helped him and the FBI with their investigation. On Monday, three days from now, Paola would hold her big event. Specifically, she had no idea what it was about. It was important to Paola, that much she understood, and she wondered if the money her aunt had withdrawn from the bank had anything to do with it.

The footage recorded on those cameras could bring down Paola's operation and get her aunt, Tony, and the others arrested. Sergeant Jamie Pataglio might be on Bella's side, but would the FBI agree with him about her innocence? Her name was on the deed, too, and on the bank accounts, and she knew full well what her aunt was doing. Disapproving of it wouldn't make a difference to the FBI. No matter what decision she made, she'd still look guilty. In the eyes of the law, she'd *be* guilty.

She laughed bitterly, again lowering her head into her hand. *Ah, the ugly irony.* If Paola went to prison, Bella could get out from under her aunt's influence, but she'd probably lose the Bistro anyway. In fact, she'd lose everything. Her family, which she'd never really had, and Jamie, whom she'd never really had, either.

If there was any chance of saving herself and her restaurant, she needed leverage. If she removed the cameras, the government might not get the evidence they needed to take down Paola and her operation. If the government didn't have that evidence, Bella would still have her share of the Bistro, but at what cost? She'd still be stuck under her aunt's ruthless influence, which was the same as not having the Bistro at all.

Leaving the cameras in place still subjected the Bistro to seizure. Perhaps she could bargain with the government about the evidence that would be on those cameras. Originally, she'd thought to blackmail her aunt with it, but what if she could use it to get something from the government? Like her freedom. Like the Bistro. Then again, the government would inevitably just *take* the sim cards when this was all over.

Not if she got to them first.

Sergeant Jamie Pataglio could no longer be trusted. Her only chance at

eking out something useful was to leave the cameras in place, then grab the sim cards later and stash them someplace safe.

If for some reason she changed her mind, she still had three days before Paola's event. Plenty of time. But she had to have total control over those cameras. Right now, she didn't.

Bella grabbed her cell phone from the desk and cued up the puppy cam app. A minute later, she'd changed her login ID and password. "Take *that*, Uncle Sam." Jamie no longer had access to the live feed. She'd grab the sim cards right after the event. Before *he* did.

"Hey, Bella." Sierra held up a copy of the local newspaper. "Did you hear? Misty Morris was killed last night."

"*What?*" Bella held out her hand for the paper. Only a few days ago, she'd spoken to Misty at the bank. *Nyack Woman Murdered* was the headline on the front page. She scanned the article, shocked at what she read. Misty had been beaten, then strangled in her own home.

"The police have no leads," Sierra said sadly. "She worked at the same bank you go to. Did you know her well?"

"No, not really." She shook her head, feeling just awful. "Tony did. He and Misty dated for about a year." *Oh, no.* Bella clapped a hand to her mouth. Could Tony have had something to do with Misty's murder? Could *he* have murdered her?

Tony had a mean streak he kept well hidden behind his jovial demeanor, but would he really kill his ex-girlfriend? And why? She let her hand drop. "This is awful and so sad. Would you mind finding out where her family lives? I'd like to send over some food." It wasn't much, but it was the only thing she could think to do.

"Of course. That would be nice. I'm sure they'd appreciate it." Sierra plunked down in the chair opposite the desk. "Sorry to bring you the bad news. I wanted to check on you. Lou said you might not be feeling well."

"I'm fine. Just a little under the weather today." And feeling worse now. Outside, the sun was shining brightly, but Misty's death cast a pall on everything, and things had been pretty dark *before* she'd gotten the news.

Sierra narrowed her eyes. "Are you thinking about Misty or someone else?"

"Who else *would* I be thinking of?"

Sierra rolled her eyes. "Jimmy, of course."

Which would be the best thing for both of them. "It's not like that between

us.” Anymore, that was.

“Oh, please.” Sierra made a dismissive gesture. “I know there’s something going on between you two. You said you’d never have anything to do with one of Tony’s boys, but I see the way you watch him and the way *he* watches *you*.”

“That’s not why he watches me.” He’d only been watching her through the eyes of a cop.

“What other reason could there be for a man to look at a woman like he wants to gobble her up?” Sierra batted her eyes. “And I mean gobble in a good way.”

Not the way you think. Jamie Pataglio only cared about her as a source, a way to get information on Paola.

“You look dubious.” Sierra pointed a finger. “Don’t be. I’m telling you I can see it in his eyes. He cares about you, and you care about him. Marco’s looked at you that way for years. Not once did you ever look at him the same way.”

Speaking of Marco, where was he? What would happen to him?

Bella sighed as she acknowledged Sierra’s observations. It was true she’d never thought about Marco in the romantic sense. That didn’t mean she wanted any harm to come to him. “There can never be anything between me and Ja—” Bella caught herself. “Me and Jimmy. I should have stuck to my personal code about not dating any of Tony’s boys.”

Sierra smiled knowingly. “Do you remember when Jimmy first walked in here? You practically fell on your face twice that day. You kept walking into that ficus tree.”

She did remember that day. Vividly. “I know you mean well, but whatever attraction I felt for him is over.”

Saying the words, and wishing they were true, sent a wave of emptiness washing over her. Because it was a lie, and that made things so much worse.

Her phone rang, and she groaned, holding it up so Sierra could see it. Paola was calling.

“Later.” Sierra practically jumped to her feet as the phone continued ringing. Before leaving Bella’s office she turned. “Food for thought is all I’m saying.”

Not a chance. Jimmy Santoro was off Bella’s menu. Permanently. She cleared her throat, then took the call. “Paola. What can I do for you?”

“For starters, you can answer your phone faster. I’m moving up the event

on Monday to tomorrow night. You'll have to shut down the Bistro."

"*What?*" She stood so abruptly the chair she'd been sitting on rolled back against the wall behind her. "I can't close down the Bistro on a Friday night. It's one of the two busiest nights of the week for us. You can't do this."

"I can, and I just did," came her aunt's clipped response. "Make it happen." Paola hung up.

Bella's mouth fell open as she stared at the phone. Shutting down the Bistro on a Friday meant losing out on a huge chunk of weekly income, and they weren't even close to being prepared for the event. She and Lou had planned on shopping for all the high-end ingredients on Saturday, then Lou would prep everything on Sunday. Now they had less than twenty-four hours. This was insane.

All the energy in her body bled away. She sank heavily onto the chair. Just when she thought things couldn't get worse, they had. Her head felt as if it were spinning like a top. Everything was completely out of her control, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Or was there?

Living like this—in constant fear—was no way to live at all. There was only one possible way to break free. Either she used those cameras, or she walked away from the Bistro and never looked back.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jamie pulled into the parking lot at Hook Mountain State Park and hung up the phone. His sister, Ariana, had just relayed the news. His father's condition was going downhill even faster. Jamie's heart felt like a ball of lead. He hadn't thought he could sink any lower than after Bella had kicked him out of her life.

He'd been wrong.

Jax rested his head on Jamie's shoulder, sending warm breath across his cheek. Not even stroking his dog's ears had the usual calming effect.

Brick by brick, the emotional wall of crap had been building for months. He'd just been in denial. His dad's diagnosis had laid the foundation. Going to prison for half a year, worrying about his father and whether he'd get Jax back had added more layers. Looking over his shoulder every second, never knowing if he'd get whacked by Tony or Marco hadn't helped. How things had ended with Bella was the capstone on his ten-story wall of shit.

He was a powder keg set to explode, and he needed to vent.

After leashing up Jax, they headed down the path that wound along the edge of the Hudson River. The midday heat and humidity were so thick even the air seemed to be sweating. The only respite came from the breeze blowing off the river, reminding him of his time in Sing Sing. White caps pounded the rocks bordering the path. Seagulls glided on air currents, and a great blue heron flew by, croaking with an almost prehistoric sound.

Being the middle of summer, the park was fairly busy. They passed walkers, bikers, and joggers. Jax happily touched noses with a few other dogs. The beauty of the area was a stark contrast to his mood and the evil brewing not half a mile down the road.

For the last two hours, he and Jax had surveilled Paola's mansion from a tennis court parking lot a hundred yards away and across the street, prepared

to take down license plates. During that time, not a single vehicle had come or gone. *The calm before the storm.*

He and Jax continued north for another half a mile before Jamie realized he'd been flexing and unflexing his fingers for the last five minutes. Leading Jax to a small wooded area on the side of the path, he found an empty picnic table, then cued up another call.

"Kade, it's Jamie," he said when his friend answered. "I fucked up." In so many ways he didn't know how to begin.

"What happened?" came Kade's worried voice. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." Physically, that was.

"Bull. I can hear it in your voice." His friend knew him well. "Does this have anything to do with where you've been hiding for six months?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "I've been working a case with the FBI, but I can't get into the details." Saying that much was more than he'd told anyone.

"Ah," Kade said. "You're undercover. So what did you fuck up?"

A young couple with a stroller walked past. He waited for them to be out of earshot before replying. "I hurt someone. Badly." His throat tightened as he recalled the stricken look on Bella's face when he'd admitted he was an undercover cop. "She trusted me, and I trashed that trust. Bigtime."

A knowing grunt came through the phone. "You slept with her."

"Yeah," he admitted.

"I take it you like her."

Jax sat beside Jamie, looking up at him accusatorily, as if he knew exactly what, or rather *who*, was being discussed. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's a little worse than that."

"You finally stepped in it." Kade chuckled. "You fell in love, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Does she know what you are?"

"That I'm a cop? She knows."

"Other than her, are you burned?"

"Not yet." At least, he didn't think so.

Another grunt, then, "What I'm about to say comes from personal experience. There's only one solution. Talk to her and fix it."

In a perfect world, yeah, he would do that. Sadly, his world was anything *but* perfect. "Don't think that's possible."

"What's the problem?"

Aside from the fact Bella was the only woman for him, and she hated him?

Not a thing. “Me. I don’t deserve her.”

“That’s crap. You’re one of the best guys I know. You can’t pick and choose who you fall in love with or when. Trust me. I learned this the hard way.”

That much he did know. Kade had been through the ringer, maybe worse. His friend tortured himself for years by staying away from the woman he loved.

“Speaking of best guys, Dayne and Kat are throwing Laia and me an engagement party Saturday night at the castle. I already sent you the deets on your regular phone. The rest of the guys and their families are all driving in tomorrow night. Any chance you can make it?”

I wish. It sure would be great to see his friends again. He’d already missed one wedding, when another of his best friends, Markus York, had gotten married. Luckily, he’d been around for Dayne Andrews’s wedding to Katrina Vandenburg, a billionaireess who lived—literally—in a castle not ten minutes from Nyack. He hadn’t seen Eric Miller in months, and it had been over a year since he’d seen Matt Connors or Nick Houston.

“Not sure. I’ll try.” His phone vibrated with an incoming text. “Hang on.” Jamie looked at the message. Diallo Achebe at Stewart Airport had texted him with more photos. “Kade,” he said after putting the phone back to his ear. “Gotta go, man. But thanks for listening.” He ended the call and began scrolling through the images. His personal baggage would have to wait.

There were six images in all. Three passport photos and three taken by Port Authority surveillance cameras in Ogdensburg, Plattsburgh, and Massena airports in upstate New York.

Jamie enlarged the surveillance photos first, confirming what he expected. These were images of the other three men who’d been at Paola’s dinner party last night. Signors Bruno, Gallo, and De Luca.

Next, he examined the passport pages, swiping back and forth to compare them to the surveillance photos. The similarities between the passport and surveillance photos were uncanny. Whoever had chosen the men to be impersonated had done their homework, and it was understandable how Immigration and Customs inspectors hadn’t picked up on the fact the men who’d presented these passports weren’t the actual passport holders.

Now to get actual IDs on these people.

Jamie forwarded the photos to Jenkins, then, after glancing around to verify no one was within earshot, called him.

“Got your text,” Jenkins said. “We’ll run these guys through facial recog. And your hunch was right. The real Tommaso Sala is dead. An FBI team found him strangled in his apartment. Looks like he’s been dead for a few days. He was a college professor, single and living alone, and school’s out for summer, so no one reported him missing.”

Jamie shoved a hand through his hair. For Tommaso Sala, school was out permanently. He’d been expecting this news, but hearing it confirmed just how deadly this case was becoming.

“There’s more,” Jenkins continued. “We just got a hit on facial recog for the guy using Sala’s passport. His real name is Giuseppe Bonaventura.”

Jamie narrowed his eyes. That name was vaguely familiar.

“Bonaventura is head of the Celle clan, one of the most powerful clans in the ’Ndrangheta, the Calabrian Mafia.”

“Jesus,” Jamie muttered.

“Exactly. Fifty other ’Ndrangheta members were arrested a year ago on money laundering, weapons and drug trafficking charges, including Bonaventura, who also had murder charges tacked on. He’s looking at life in prison. They’re all awaiting a maxi-trial that’s expected to take years before it even starts. A judge remanded Bonaventura and the other high-level guys that were arrested to home confinement wearing ankle bracelets.”

Ankle bracelets? “If Bonaventura was wearing an ankle bracelet, he wouldn’t have been able to step outside his house without alerting the Italian authorities, let alone make it through airport screening in Rome. So how did he make it to the U.S.?”

“He wasn’t *wearing* his ankle bracelet.” Jenkins paused—for effect, no doubt. “After the team found Sala’s body, I contacted the Italian National Police and requested they do a routine check at Bonaventura’s house on some pretext. At first, his wife said he was in the house, but he wasn’t. His ankle bracelet *was*.”

“How did he get it off?” Those bracelets were designed to be tamper resistant. If the battery failed, or if the fiber optics inside were broken or bent, an alarm was triggered. “Somehow they must have hacked it,” Jamie said, stating the obvious, “making it look as if the bracelet had never been removed and Bonaventura was still sitting at home.” Then something else occurred to him. “What about the wife? What’s to keep her from squealing to her husband that the police know he’s gone?”

“They took her in for making a false statement,” Jenkins said. “Don’t know

how long they can hold her without letting her make a phone call.”

“Great.” Jamie dragged a hand down his face. “I think it’s safe to assume that as soon as you send agents to find the other three men whose passports were used, you’ll find three more bodies.”

“Probably,” Jenkins agreed.

Jamie’s phone vibrated with another call. *Tony*. “Gotta go.”

“Wait!” Jenkins shouted. “There’s something else you need to know. That informant I told you about, the one on the fringes of the Mancuso operation... She’s dead. Strangled.”

Just like the real Tommaso Sala.

“Whatever you do,” Jenkins warned, “make sure you get into that banquet room the night of the event. I’m working on the ops plan. We’ll be there Monday to take this thing down.”

“I’m counting on that.” He ended the call with Jenkins and took Tony’s. “What’s up, T?”

“Get your ass to the Bistro at four o’clock, and don’t be late,” Tony ordered. Every muscle in Jamie’s body tightened. Did they somehow know Ianetti was in FBI custody? “You know that thing planned for Monday night? It just got moved up. It’s tomorrow.”

When Tony hung up, Jamie stared at the phone. He didn’t know whether to be relieved Tony didn’t seem to know about Marco or worry his nuts off that the case timeline had just been fast-tracked by three days, and the FBI wouldn’t be prepared.

The sun shone brightly in the clear, blue sky, but the doom clinging in the air was so real Jamie could taste it.

Whatever went down tomorrow night might be the last thing he ever did on this earth. In the event it was, he had to see his dad in person. One last time.

For the first time in his undercover career, he was going to trash his ironclad rule and break cover. It was a risk, but he had to do it.

He shoved his cell phone into his pocket, then he and Jax took off running.

...

Jamie gunned the Tahoe into the Otisville Correctional Facility visitor’s parking lot. He left the SUV running with the AC on for Jax, then jogged to the reception building.

It was nearly one thirty. He barely had enough time to see his dad, then make it back to the Bistro for Tony’s meeting.

Inside the lobby, a few people waited in plastic chairs lining the wall. Jamie went to the front desk where he signed the logbook and was handed a visitor's pass. Knowing the drill, he locked up his cell phone, keys, ballcap, and sunglasses in a lockbox. After going through security screening, his contact—a captain assigned by the warden himself to escort Jamie to the hospital—was already waiting for him.

“Jimmy Santoro?” the captain asked.

“Yes, sir,” Jamie answered.

“Follow me.” The captain led him through a maze of locked gates and hallways.

Visits for hospitalized inmates were limited to immediate family members, but Jamie's real ID was locked in a safe in the shack in Manasquan. Having been a corrections officer at this facility before joining the Port Authority, Captain Washington had pulled some major strings and managed a special “exigent circumstances” visit by Jamie using his undercover ID. That wasn't the only call Jamie had made during the hour-and-fifteen-minute drive to Otisville.

He'd also spoken with Jenkins about the takedown being moved up by three days. Jenkins's response had been short and sweet. He'd send it up the chain.

Minutes later, Jamie's escort stopped in front of a door marked Health Services. “I'll wait out here for you.”

Jamie nodded a curt thanks, then pushed open the door. Immediately, he was hit with the smell of antiseptic and bleach. The small reception area had white walls and gray vinyl flooring. A nurse looked up from a desk.

“I'm Jimmy Santoro. I'm here to see Michael Pataglio.”

The nurse smiled briefly. “We've been expecting you.” She rose from behind the desk, then showed him into a side room with several curtained-off areas and stainless-steel beds. All but one of the beds was empty.

“I don't know any Jimmy Santoro,” the man in the farthest bed said to another nurse.

Dad.

Jamie swallowed the lump in his throat. He hadn't seen his father in over six months. The shock of seeing how much he'd deteriorated since then nearly took him to his knees.

His dad was frail, gaunt, and appeared to have lost significantly more weight. His pallor was gray, and the thick hair all Pataglio men were blessed

with had thinned considerably.

The nurse courteously stepped aside, leaving them alone.

“Dad,” he managed to choke out. “It’s me. Jamie.”

His father squinted, the creases in his brow deepening a moment before recognition lit his face, and a hesitant smile turned up his lips. “Jamie, is that really you?”

“Yeah, Dad.” Being careful not to dislodge any of the tubes attached to his father’s IV, he sat on the bed and clasped his father’s trembling hand. That lump in his throat was now the size of a grapefruit, and he had to swallow repeatedly to keep from crying like a baby. His dad was in worse shape than he’d thought, and that had been pretty bad to begin with. “It’s me,” he whispered. “I don’t have much time, but I had to see you.” *Before it’s too late.*

Jamie pressed his lips together. His chest heaved from the effort not to lose it. It was a wasted effort. Tears spilled from his eyes, flowing unchecked down his cheeks.

“Oh, Jamie.” His father smiled wanly, then held out his arms.

Gently, Jamie leaned over, allowing his dad to hold him while he cried. More like bawled, and for how long, he lost track. It reminded him of when he was eight years old, and his pet turtle had died. His dad had held him, rocking him back and forth while he’d cried his eyes out.

When Jamie pulled away, he wiped the tears from his face. His dad’s eyes shimmered, and his temples were wet where a few tears had leaked out. Again, his father gave him a wan, knowing smile. One of acceptance. His father accepted his fate. Jamie didn’t.

He took a deep, shaky breath. “Dad, I can’t promise you anything for sure, but please hang in there. I’m trying to get you out of here.”

“To Butner?” His father’s gray brows rose. “Your mother said that wasn’t possible.”

“No.” Jamie shook his head. “Out of *prison.*”

Gray brows scrunched. “But how?”

Jamie reclasped his dad’s hand. The fingers were bony, the skin thin and bruised from all the IV needles. “I can’t say any more. I just need you to trust me. Don’t give up. I’m working on something.”

“Oh, Jamie.” His father shook his head, frowning and adding more lines to an already creased forehead. “What have you done?”

“I can’t tell you. I just...had to see you.” He gazed down into the eyes of

the man who'd raised him for half his life. The same man who'd disappointed him by not being there for the other half.

His father patted Jamie's hand. "You said you didn't have much time, so let's not waste it. Tell me what's been going on with you."

Jamie's heart grew heavier than he thought possible. He wished he could tell his father everything. Someday, perhaps. "I met someone."

"Ahh." His father cracked a genuine smile. "Tell me about her."

Somehow, Jamie found the courage to smile back. "You'd like her. She's Italian. Blond, beautiful, kind. And she can cook. Mom would like her, too."

If only he hadn't blown it.

Something must have shown on his face, because his dad said, "But?"

It always amazed him how he could scam the hardest of criminals, completely convincing them he was someone he wasn't, but his dad could still read him like an open book. "I did something stupid."

"More stupid than what *I* did?" His dad chuckled, adding, "I seriously doubt that."

The ironic humor of the moment elicited another smile from Jamie, albeit a reluctant one. "It's complicated." Much as he wanted to unload, there wasn't time.

As if reading Jamie's mind, his father said, "You're in love, so make the time. Make her see the wonderful, amazing man that you are."

If only that were possible. If only it were true.

Jamie blinked as more tears spilled from his eyes. "I'm sorry I haven't been to see you in a while, but we'll change that. Soon. We'll go fishing, and..." He choked up, swallowing down the barely contained sobs about to rush from his throat.

With surprising strength, his dad squeezed Jamie's hand. "I love you, son."

"I love you, too, Dad," Jamie whispered, leaning down again into his father's embrace, wishing things could have been different and praying for a miracle. "I always have, and I always will." *No matter what happens tomorrow night.*

Chapter Thirty

On the way to the Bistro, Jamie had dropped Jax off at the apartment. He parked in the alley behind the restaurant and cut the engine. Before going inside, he tapped on the puppy cam app. He hadn't checked it since yesterday. *Before* admitting to Bella he was an undercover cop.

As he waited for the app to open up, he had a bad feeling. Sure enough, the app didn't automatically open as it would if he were still logged in. He entered Bella's login ID and password.

Invalid login. Either the username or password you entered is incorrect.

"Dammit." Jamie pounded his fist on the wheel. Not that he was surprised, but he'd been hoping just the same.

If Bella removed the sim cards before he or the FBI could grab them, he'd have squat on Paola and the Palumbos. Giuseppe Bonaventura would eventually be re-arrested, but the man would never throw Paola under the bus. *Omertà*. The Mafia vow of silence punishable by death would keep everyone's tongues quiet.

As soon as he went inside, the smell of garlicky marinara hit him. He waved to Lou in the kitchen, then caught sight of Bella talking to Sierra in the dining room. They both turned. Sierra smiled and waved.

Bella wore a black skirt and a pink sleeveless blouse. As always, she looked beautiful, and his heart ached at not being able to go to her and sweep her into his arms. From the clenching of her jaw and the irritation on her face, all that would get him was a black eye.

The need to explain more to her was a repeating mantra in his brain, but the stakes were more important than his love life. Convincing her not to remove those sim cards was what mattered most.

"Yo, Fist!" In an irritated gesture, Tony waved him into the banquet room. Jamie had known he'd catch a ration of shit if he was late. Seeing his dad

again made it well worth it. “Get in here. We’ve been waitin’ on you.” Paulie, Nicky, and Sammy were already there, seated around one of the tables with Tony. “Close the door.”

Jamie did, then sat next to Tony.

“Here’s the deal,” Tony began. “Tomorrow night at seven, a lot of important people will be here.”

“Who’s coming?” Paulie asked.

Tony held up his hand. “Don’t worry about that. You’ll find out tomorrow.”

Jesus. Tony keeping his guys in the dark this much told him what he already suspected. Whoever was coming tomorrow had to be high-level.

“Fist.” Tony looked at him. “I want you and Paulie working security at the front door. Nicky and Sammy, you guys got the back door. The Bistro will be closed to regular customers, so if they ain’t on the guest list, they ain’t gettin’ in. Got it?”

The other men nodded.

“You sure you don’t want me working security inside?” In the event Bella got to the sim cards before he did, he needed to be here to witness whatever went down. Not nearly as good as a recorded video. It was more of a backup plan.

“No.” Tony shook his head. “The guys coming tomorrow have their own security.”

So much for the backup plan. And the security Tony referred to was most likely armed mob enforcers.

The door opened. Bella came in carrying a tray with glasses and two bottles of wine. Briefly, her gaze locked with Jamie’s, then her expression blanked. She set down the tray and began pouring the wine.

“Thanks, Bella,” Tony said as she handed him the first glass, then moved on to Paulie. “Anyone seen Marco? I’ve been callin’ him for hours.”

Bella’s hand stilled on the second bottle of wine, but she said nothing.

“Not me, boss,” Paulie answered, and everyone else, including Jamie, shook their heads.

Bella filled another glass for Sammy, her hand shaking as she set it on the table.

Tony hitched his head to Nicky. “Go to Marco’s place after we’re done here. Make sure he calls me. And Sammy, you got that thing with you? I know we’re safe here, but sweep the room anyway. Do it again tomorrow

before everyone gets here.”

“You got it.” Sammy stood and pulled something from his pocket.

Beneath the table, Jamie fisted a hand on his thigh. “That thing” was about the size of a cell phone but slightly thicker. A bug detection device, different from the one Marco had used on him at Paola’s house.

Sammy tugged out the antenna and walked around the room. Jamie had no way of knowing if that particular device was capable of picking up on wired signals from Bella’s cameras. Most were designed to find wireless cameras and microphones. He also didn’t know about the quality of the device.

As Sammy continued around the room, aiming the antenna up to the ceiling, Bella poured the last glass of wine. For Jamie. She glanced at Sammy. Her hand trembled more, and a few drops of wine landed on the table.

Using fake potted plants, she’d concealed the cameras well. Unless the device in Sammy’s hand was powerful enough, or if the laser beam it emitted didn’t hit the cameras’ lenses, no signal would bounce back to the detector.

Bella’s throat worked as she gathered up the tray and headed for the door. Once more, she glanced worriedly to where Sammy circled the far side of the room, raising and lowering the device around the other tables and chairs. Before closing the door, she locked gazes with Jamie one last time.

Somehow, when this meeting was over, he had to find a way to talk to her. Alone.

Finally, Sammy returned to the table. The device hadn’t beeped or lit up once. “Room’s clean,” he said to Tony.

“Good. Everyone, dress up like we did for Ma’s dinner last night. Your best suit and tie.” Tony wagged his finger at the other men. “No warm-up suits. And Sammy, no sneakers. Capiche?” The other man nodded sheepishly. “That’s it for now. I want everyone here no later than six.”

“Are we packing?” Jamie asked. *He* would be. Knowing how many other guns would be there was tactically essential.

“Nah.” Tony made a face. “Marco will be. If the cocksucker ever shows up.”

“He’s probably just tied up with something.” Handcuffs.

Jamie followed Tony and the others from the room, then waited for them to leave before searching out Bella.

She wasn’t in the dining room or the kitchen. He found her in the walk-in, a clipboard in her hands as she surveyed the produce. “Bella.” For privacy, he

closed the heavy door most of the way, blanketing them in the silent, cold air. “We need to talk.”

“I’d say we’ve talked enough. *Jamie.*” She leaned in, whispering, “Or should I call you Sergeant Pataglio?”

Ignoring the dig, he took her by the arm, forcing her to the back of the walk-in. “I know you want those sim cards to blackmail your aunt, but it won’t work. Even if Paola doesn’t snap your neck for bugging her meeting, which is the likeliest scenario, the Bistro is tainted. All its assets are comingled with dirty money.” It killed him to say it, but he wouldn’t lie to her about anything else. “The government will seize this place no matter whose name is on the deed.”

She swallowed hard, then thrust out her chin. “Maybe. Maybe not. Those sim cards are *my* property. *Not* yours.”

“I *need* those cards.” Ironically, those sim cards were his bargaining chip *and* hers. The FBI would seize those sim cards whether she liked it or not. “It’s a matter of life and death.”

“Whose?” She shrugged from his grasp. “Yours? I won’t tell anyone who you are.”

That much he’d figured out, or he’d be dead already. “Thank you, but that’s not enough. Leave those cards in the cameras. We’ll get them later with a search warrant.”

Bella clenched her jaw. “Not if I get there first. They’re all I have to bargain with. Stay out of my way. Stay out of my life.” She pushed past, leaving him alone in the walk-in.

If she took those cards before he or the FBI could grab them, it could take months for the legal system to do its thing and demand she turn them over. She’d get an attorney, more delays. His dad could be dead by then.

Pressing his hands against the cold wall, Jamie hung his head. He couldn’t choose between two people he loved. But his father’s situation really was life or death. He’d already lost Bella. He couldn’t lose his dad, too. Not without giving him a fighting chance. Somehow, he’d find a way inside the event tomorrow night.

Or die trying.

Chapter Thirty-One

By eight o'clock Friday night, Bella was ready to scream.

For the last hour, she, Lori, Rebecca, and Sierra had been scurrying around like indentured servants, delivering plates of olives, nuts, and cheeses. Already, they'd emptied out most of the bar's top-shelf liquor. Now they were onto the antipasti.

She picked up the latest platters of bruschetta, inhaling the strong scent of garlic and herbs, and curling her fingers so tightly around the rims she worried the plates would break.

Inside the banquet room, Puccini's "La Boheme" piped from the overhead speakers. Deep voices kept up steady conversation, punctuated by occasional laughter. Between all the expensive wine and food and paying her staff for the overtime, the price tag on Paola's shindig would tap what remained of the Bistro's accounts.

Every table was taken up by the seemingly never-ending stream of expensively dressed men who'd arrived in limousines and town cars that had blocked Main Street for the last hour. At least two dozen guests, by her count. The only woman there was Paola, seated at the head table. Rossi, Bruno, Gallo, and De Luca—the same men whom her aunt had honored at her house two nights ago—sat to her left. Another man sat to Paola's right. Even *she* knew that man's name.

Salvatore Palumbo. Head of the infamous Palumbo Crime Family.

For years, Salvatore Palumbo's face had been plastered on the front pages of every major newspaper and highlighted on all the TV news networks. Standing guard against the wall behind him was Palumbo's goon squad, three men with the stoniest, meanest faces she'd ever seen. They were like something out of a comic book. Big. Hulking. And with bulges beneath their suit jackets. *Guns*.

Bella's chest tightened. Some of the most dangerous mobsters in the country were right here, and she was serving them dinner.

The goon squad made Tony and his boys look like the junior varsity team. Tony sat at the table nearest to Paola's, talking with a man she didn't know. As Tony's lieutenant, Marco might have been at her cousin's right hand, but he was a no-show, probably still in FBI clutches. Jamie was also nowhere in sight, although she'd caught glimpses of him patrolling the sidewalk with Paulie.

The fact that Paola hadn't snapped Bella's neck, as Jamie had warned she would, meant they hadn't found the puppy cams. She'd have to sneak back into the Bistro after everyone left, then remove the sim cards and hide them in a safe place. Not in her house. Jamie would find them. He was a cop. Cops didn't miss anything.

The moment she set down the plates of bruschetta, a snapping sound caught her attention. She looked around the crowded room, following the sound to the head table. Paola held her arm in the air, snapping her fingers and glaring at Bella.

Bella ground her teeth, then wound her way to Paola's table. *I really am her slave.*

"More wine," Paola ordered when she was within earshot.

By *wine* she meant the Il Caggio. Nothing but the best for The Godmother.

On the way from the room, Bella noticed another man with gray hair and distinguished sideburns standing in the corner and guarding a large, hard-sided briefcase she hadn't noticed earlier.

At the bar, she uncorked two more bottles of legitimate Il Caggio for Paola and stuffed the corkscrew in her pocket. She placed the bottles on a tray, then brought them to her aunt's table. As she refilled glasses, she caught sight of Lori and Rebecca serving plates of salad, while Sierra refilled everyone's bread baskets. From her perspective, they all deserved a bonus for showing up at the crack of dawn to help her and Lou prep the food and set all the tables.

Paola cleared her throat, then hitched her head, indicating Bella should leave them. Doing her best not to smash the empty bottle over her aunt's skull, she left, heading straight for the back door, intending to go outside and get some fresh air. Through the open screen door, she glimpsed Nicky and Sammy standing guard outside. There'd be no privacy there. In fact, there was only one place where she might actually get some.

Moments later, she pushed open the door of the ladies' room, locking it behind her. She rested her hands on the vanity and sighed. Paola had just dismissed her as if she were no more important than a bug that had flown into her windshield. Not her niece, and not the forty-nine percent owner of the Bistro.

What had she been thinking?

Paola was dining with one of the most powerful and deadliest mobsters to walk the earth, and here she was—little Bella Bianco—planning on blackmailing the woman.

I must be out of my mind.

She pulled her phone from the pocket of her skirt and cued up the puppy cams. For several minutes, she watched the live images and listened to the chatter. After closing the app, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

Jamie was right. One way or the other, the Bistro would be taken from her. Ironically, Jamie *and* Paola held all the power and all the control. At least one of them would kill her dream and take her beloved bistro, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

The one thing she *could* control was how that would happen. Holding back the sob rising in her throat, she texted the information, then hit send.

The stall door squeaked open. In the mirror's reflection, a man rushed from the stall.

And clamped a hand over her mouth.

• • •

Jamie popped open the top button of his shirt, loosened his tie, then stuck two fingers behind the collar and pulled it away from his neck. Paulie had already taken off his tie and stuffed it in his pocket.

As a precaution, Jamie had wanted his partner there when the FBI showed up. Jax sat beside him, attracting attention from everyone who passed.

Nyack was busy with people coming and going from the other restaurants on Main Street and peeking in the windows of the many antique stores and boutiques that were closed down for the night.

Traffic through the intersection of Main and Broadway was a never-ending flow of BMWs, Audis, and Mercedes searching for parking spaces. All the spots in the vicinity of the Bistro were taken up by limousines and town cars.

Jamie recognized some of the men who'd gone inside, although most he didn't know by name. Except for three who made up the Palumbo

Administration, the top-level management.

Salvatore Palumbo—the boss. Donato Impellizzeri—the underboss. And Dominick Escalanto—Palumbo’s consigliere. A good mob boss never attended a big sit-down without his lawyer. The rest of the crew was most likely capos, lieutenants, and other made guys.

Three of the men flanking Palumbo and Impellizzeri as they’d gotten out of their limos could only be one thing. Enforcers, specializing in vicious acts of violence, and Jamie hadn’t missed the telltale bulges. These guys were all heavy—packing guns beneath their jackets. Luckily, no one had picked up on the one at Jamie’s ankle where he’d strapped on the old revolver his father had given him.

Paulie spit a sunflower seed shell onto the sidewalk. “Think there’ll be any food left over when everyone clears out?”

“Probably.” Food was the last thing on Jamie’s mind. If all went well tonight, proceedings could begin first thing Monday morning to get his dad paroled.

Before heading over to the Bistro, Jenkins had contacted Jamie. The raid teams were in place, ready to go on Jamie’s signal. Jenkins had also received updated information on Signors Bruno, Gallo, and De Luca, the other three impersonators Paola had smuggled into the U.S.

Like Signor Rossi, aka Giuseppe Bonaventura, these men were all high-ranking clan members of the ’Ndrangheta who’d been arrested and sentenced to home confinement. Also, like Bonaventura, their ankle bracelets had been hacked. The men whose passports they’d been carrying were all found dead in Rome, strangled, the same way Tommaso Sala had been murdered.

Unable to stand still, Jamie paced in front of the door. Jax swiveled his head to watch, opening his mouth and panting from the heat. Soon, he’d have to get his dog a fresh bowl of water.

Jamie’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it from his pocket, angling it away from Paulie’s prying eyes. *Jenkins*. The man knew better than to pester him. Taking the call in front of Paulie wasn’t an option. He shoved the phone back into his suit pocket.

A few seconds later, the phone vibrated again, this time with a text. Jamie ground his teeth. If it was Jenkins, something was wrong.

Jax’s panting grew heavier.

“Cover for me,” he said to Paulie. “I gotta get Jax some water.” Which was true, but it was also a solid pretext to head inside and find a private place to

call Jenkins back.

“No problem, Fist.” Paulie spit out another sunflower seed shell. “Bring me back a big juicy steak or a lobster tail, would ya?”

“You got it.” He hitched his head for Jax to follow, and they went inside. As he headed to the bar for a bowl, he took stock.

The dining room was empty. Through the kitchen window, Lou and Tom, the sous-chef, were busy cooking and plating. Lori and Rebecca carried trays laden with plates down the hall and into the banquet room. One of the enforcers Jamie had seen trailing Salvatore Palumbo stood guard by the banquet room door. Beyond that, he could just make out Nicky and Sammy outside the restaurant’s back door.

Laughter came from the banquet room, along with the drone of Italian opera. He nodded to the enforcer, then went behind the bar and filled a bowl with water for Jax. He set the bowl on the floor outside the bar, intentionally positioning it within the enforcer’s line of sight.

Behind the bar, he looked at the text message that had come in. As expected, it was from Jenkins. *Urgent u call NOW!*

This couldn’t be good. Jamie glanced around the dining room one more time. “Make it fast,” he said in a low voice after calling Jenkins.

“The raid is off,” Jenkins said. “I had to pull most of the teams away. There’s only a skeleton crew in the area to take down tags and get some long-distance photos.”

Jamie ground his teeth so hard they squeaked. “You *said* we were taking this thing down *tonight*.”

“The U.S. Attorney’s Office had other plans, and HQ agrees. This is bigger than any of us imagined, but if we take it down tonight, we’ll only get Paola on human smuggling, money laundering, and a few other charges. The U.S. Attorney wants Salvatore Palumbo, and he wants *everyone* on RICO charges.”

Jamie squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself not to hurl the phone against the wall.

RICO—Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act—was a federal law specifically enacted to combat organized crime. RICO charges netted stiff sentences—twenty years imprisonment and \$25,000 fines per count—but they’d have to document an ongoing criminal enterprise involving not only Paola Mancuso but Palumbo himself. That would take time. Years, even.

Footsteps sounded outside the kitchen.

“Hold on.” Leaving the call connected, he stuffed the phone back into his pocket and picked up Jax’s water bowl to refill it. As he leaned over, he glanced down the hall. The enforcer had gone into the kitchen but had returned to his position outside the banquet room.

After refilling the bowl and setting it down in the same place as before, he whispered, “Guard,” to Jax, then returned to the bar and tugged out the phone. If anyone came down the hall, Jax would alert. “Go on,” he gritted out, pissed at the implications of the last-minute change of plans.

“Now that we know who they really are,” Jenkins continued, “we can grab the four ’Ndrangheta guys anytime. The AUSA thinks once Paola is officially made head of the upstate Palumbo clan, Palumbo will meet with her regularly, along with other high-level mob guys. By leaving you under and those cameras in place longer, we can get more evidence against Palumbo.”

Jamie pressed two fingers to his forehead. Part of him understood the rationale. If they could rope Palumbo into this mess, and with the four dead bodies in Rome, they could all—including Palumbo—be charged not only with a human smuggling conspiracy, but a conspiracy to commit murder.

“How *much* longer?”

“Indefinitely.”

Jamie ground his teeth. “What about my father? You said you’d get him paroled in exchange for me getting probable cause for you to arrest Paola. I got that. Now *you* make good on your side of the deal.”

“Wait. Stand by.” Conversation Jamie couldn’t make out came through the phone, followed by swearing. “Jamie, you have to get out of there. *Now*. Marco Ianetti escaped custody. He knocked out both agents guarding him. One’s on his way to the hospital with a skull fracture.”

Just when he’d thought things couldn’t get worse, they had. “How long ago?”

“At least an hour or two. The night shift showed up and found the other agents out cold. He took one of their duty weapons. I’ll reassign the teams in your area to search for him, but you need to get out of there. You can bet money Ianetti is on his way to you.”

“Ya think?” Jamie held the phone from his ear, staring at it for a moment, then punched off the call.

He glanced at Jax, whose focus remained solidly on the enforcer down the hall.

What a cluster. Ianetti was on the loose and was armed. With no takedown for the foreseeable future, those sim cards could still disappear. Without those recordings, they had nothing, and he hadn't gotten around to explaining to Jenkins that Bella might remove them. He'd have to convince her not to.

When his phone vibrated again, he assumed it would be Jenkins. It wasn't. It was a text from Bella.

Giving him her new login ID and password for the puppy cams.

No time to question her change of heart. Quickly, he logged in and tapped open the first camera. As much as he wanted to, he didn't dare turn on the audio. Not without a court order in place. Paola and Salvatore Palumbo stood at one end of the room. On a table in front of them was a suitcase loaded with cash, a tribute to Palumbo. Paola leaned over and, in classic Hollywood *Godfather*-esque fashion, kissed Palumbo's hand.

She was formally paying homage to Salvatore Palumbo and dedicating herself to the Palumbo Crime Family.

Jax growled. Shuffling came from the hallway near the restrooms. Jamie stiffened and was about to shove his phone back into his pocket when the images on the camera app stopped him.

Marco Ianetti dragged Bella into the banquet room. One of his arms was around her neck. Ianetti aimed a gun at the nearest enforcer's head.

The blood in his veins seemed to stop pumping altogether. Then it zoomed, pounding in his ears like a battering ram. *If that fucker hurts her...*

So much for finding Ianetti *before* he got here. Once Marco outed that Bella knew Jamie was a cop and hadn't told anyone, Paola would kill her on the spot. Then she'd kill *him*.

Leaving was now out of the question. Getting assistance from the skeleton crew of agents in the vicinity was also a no-go. Not only didn't he have direct contact with them, but they were under orders *not* to raid the place, and they certainly wouldn't take orders from him. For backup, there was only one recourse, and it was doubtful they could arrive in time.

Jamie pulled out his phone, then sent the dire group text he'd hoped he would never have to send.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Marco jerked Bella's arm higher up her back. Pain shot to her shoulder as he pushed her into the banquet room, then shoved her to the floor. She landed on her hands and knees, the rough carpeting scraping her skin and drawing blood.

"Marco!" Tony shouted. "What the hell are you doing?"

Bella looked up to see three guns trained on her and Marco, whose face was covered in bruises from where Jamie had punched him. Everyone else in the room jumped to their feet.

Paola's expression was murderous as she glared alternately from her to Marco. "What is the meaning of this?"

Salvatore Palumbo's expression darkened as he watched with avid interest.

Marco sneered at Bella, waving the gun at her and the enforcer who'd been guarding the door. "Ask your niece. She's been fucking a cop right under our noses."

"*What?*" Paola snapped. "Put those guns away!" she ordered the goon squad, who looked ready to drill Marco through the forehead. "We can't have any shooting in here."

The enforcers looked to Salvatore Palumbo, not Paola. Only after Palumbo gave the men a quick nod did they return the guns to the holsters beneath their jackets.

"That means you, too," Paola ordered Marco.

Marco shoved his gun into his waistband.

Bella got to her feet, straightening her skirt and blouse. Aside from the opera still piping from the speakers, the room was deathly quiet. She looked past her aunt to the room full of mobsters. Salvatore Palumbo watched quietly, as did everyone else.

She swallowed audibly. This wasn't how she'd ever expected to die. In her

own restaurant in front of two dozen people who wouldn't lift a finger to help her.

"Is this true?" Paola parked her hands on her hips, impaling Bella with the sharpness of her question. "Who *is* this cop?"

Bella couldn't—*wouldn't*—say. Jamie had lied to her, hurt her terribly, but she refused to be the one to tell Paola who he was. Or that he was standing not forty feet away outside the Bistro's front door. No matter what he'd done to her, she didn't want to see him dead.

She raised her head high and took a deep breath.

"Go on, Bella," Marco bit out. "Tell them how Tony was set up in prison. Tell them how the feds paid an inmate to pick a fight with him so Jimmy Santoro could break it up and get in good with Tony. Jimmy Santoro is an undercover cop."

"That's bullshit." Tony charged over. "Jimmy's no cop. He got shanked saving my ass. I don't believe it."

"Believe it." Marco glared at Bella. "And she knew. She's been sleeping with him, and she was there when he admitted he was a cop. *I* was there. And you wanna know where I've been? The FBI grabbed me so I wouldn't dime out Santoro."

Paola stepped to within inches of Bella, so close she could smell her aunt's pricey perfume. "Bella, I'll only ask you once more. Did you hear Jimmy say he was a cop?"

Again, she swallowed, sending one last desperate look around the room for any vestiges of sympathy. There were none. Cold, uncaring eyes stared back at her. She was alone in this, but she'd never give her aunt the satisfaction of knowing how scared she was.

She met Paola's glare with an unflinching one of her own. If her life ended right here, in this room tonight...so be it. She'd hold up her head until the bitter end.

Paola reared back her arm and slapped Bella's face so hard she nearly lost her balance. Her cheek stung, and her head felt like she'd been punched.

"Bella, no." Tony shook his head, his expression filled with sadness. "Why? We're your family. How could you do this to us?"

Bella stared at her cousin, disbelief coursing through her veins like hot lava. "How could *I* do this to you? *Me?*" She pointed to her chest, then to Tony. "You're the ones who've been using me this whole time, stealing from my restaurant and using it for—for...this." She swept her arm around the

room to encompass everyone, including Salvatore Palumbo and his entourage. “You’re not my family. Not really. I’m only sorry I couldn’t pick my own family, because I *never* would have picked you. *Any* of you.”

“You little bitch.” Paola drew back her arm, intending to slap Bella again.

Bella shot out her hand and grabbed her aunt’s wrist. “I think we’re done here.”

Paola’s lips trembled, then pressed together so tightly every line in her aged skin made itself known. She jerked from Bella’s grasp, her expression so brutal, so full of malice, Bella had no doubt as to how this night would end.

Palumbo cleared his throat. “I think we *are* done here. It appears that you have some incredibly dirty laundry that needs to be handled, and if you *can’t* handle it...” He let the sentence dangle, unfinished, but all present understood the meaning, including Bella.

If Paola didn’t get rid of Bella and Jamie quickly and quietly, her aunt’s rising star in the Palumbo Crime Family would burn out and fall into the river, never to be seen or heard from again.

“No, wait!” Paola spun to face Palumbo. “I can take care of this right now. There’s no reason to leave.” She nodded to Tony, then Marco. “Get rid of her and Jimmy Santoro. Now!”

Bella’s mouth went dry. Marco grabbed her by one arm, Tony by the other. They started dragging her to the door.

This was it. If she was lucky, some boaters would find her body floating in the river tomorrow morning. If not, she’d be lying on the riverbed, her body being picked at by crabs until there was nothing left but skinless, fleshless bones.

• • •

With Jax at his side, Jamie raced from the dining room and ducked into the kitchen. Lou and Sierra were cutting slices of layer cake. Rebecca and Lori stacked dessert plates on the counter, while the rest of the staff pitched in piling cannoli on serving platters and washing wineglasses.

“Listen to me carefully,” Jamie said in a low voice. “This place is about to become a war zone. Don’t ask questions. Just get out of here. Now!”

Eight sets of eyes looked at him as if he was out of his mind, but he didn’t have time to wait and see if they’d heed his warning. He and Jax ran down the hall. The enforcer who’d been standing guard wasn’t there. The banquet

room door was open. Shouting came from inside.

On a tactical scale of one to ten, what Jamie was about to do probably didn't even rate a one. But Bella's life was at stake, and he was responsible for that. She was his responsibility. And the love of his life. His *colpo di fulmine*.

He burst into the banquet room.

Marco and Tony gripped Bella's upper arms. Her eyes were lit with fear, then shock, as she caught sight of him. The three men he'd pegged as enforcers whipped out their guns, aiming them at Jamie.

Jax lowered his head and growled.

Slowly, Jamie raised his arms in the air. "Easy boy, stay." He didn't want Jax leaping to his defense. Not yet, anyway.

"There's the traitor now." Marco spat at Jamie's feet. He released Bella's arm and tugged a gun from his waistband. A Glock 9 mm. One of the FBI agents' guns.

The back door slammed shut. A moment later, Nicky and Sammy rushed in, their chests heaving.

"Not here, idiot," Tony growled at Marco, then lasered his eyes on Jamie. "Is it true, Fist? I gotta hear it from you."

In a heartbeat, Jamie took in the room, tactically analyzing what he was up against.

Over two dozen men and at least four guns. By Mafia code, the only ones who were supposed to be armed were the enforcers. That didn't mean there weren't any rule breakers hiding in the crowd. The only other firearm was strapped to Jamie's ankle. It might as well have been outside in his Tahoe. If he went for it, there was no way he'd come out of this alive.

The text he'd sent to his friends contained only two things. The Bistro's address and the words *I need you*. By his count, that had been five minutes ago. Dayne and Katrina's castle where all the guys were staying was ten minutes away, less if they were hauling ass, running Code 3 with lights and sirens. The only way he and Bella might survive this was if he stalled for time.

"It's true, Tony. But let Bella go." He looked at her, and his heart squeezed with so much regret, so many unsaid words, he thought his chest would cave in. Her beautiful, fear-filled blue eyes glistened with unshed tears. "She has nothing to do with this. I lied to her and forced her to keep quiet. She had no choice." Not entirely true, but Tony and Paola didn't need to know that. "Let

her go. Take me instead, and I'll tell you everything the FBI is planning." For tonight, that meant absolutely nothing.

The cameras were still rolling, recording every word and every action. Even if he didn't make it out of this, the FBI could still get enough to arrest everyone. *For murdering a deputized federal agent.* The only question was whether it would be enough to get his father paroled, and whether the FBI would still make good on its promise. If Jamie was dead, there'd be no one to hold them to it.

"Search him," Paola ordered.

Before Tony had gotten to within three feet of Jamie, Jax lowered his head and growled. Marco pointed the muzzle of his gun at Jax.

"Jax, down!" Jamie ordered. If Marco pulled the trigger, all bets would be off. Jamie would launch at Marco and rip his throat out with his bare hands. Even if it was the last thing he ever did while his heart was still beating.

Still growling, Jax reluctantly lowered to the floor.

Tony grabbed Jamie's shirt and ripped it down the front. Buttons flew, pinging against the wall. Tony patted Jamie's chest through his T-shirt, then around to his back, lifting his suit jacket. He ran his hands down Jamie's legs and pulled out the gun from the ankle holster.

Damn. One less gun for the good guys.

Hushed exclamations came from around the room. The four men from Italy stood near Salvatore Palumbo, saying something in Italian. Palumbo's consigliere whispered in Palumbo's ear. Probably that they should leave so they weren't witnesses to a murder. *Jamie's* murder.

Tony shoved Jamie's gun behind his belt. "Fist, you fucker." He reared back and coldcocked Jamie in the jaw.

He staggered but didn't go down. Pain splintered the side of his face. Tony had a mean right hook. He balled his hands, knowing full well he could take Tony Mancuso any day. Today would be a bad day to prove it. He laughed bitterly. "Feel better now?"

Tony sneered. "I'll feel better when I plow a dozen bullets in your skull."

Palumbo cleared his throat. "We've seen enough, Paola. Thank you for the hospitality."

Jamie understood the message. Paola's "big splash" was a big bust. Allowing an undercover cop to infiltrate the family had just trashed her attempt to rise in the Palumbo ranks. Or, possibly, worse.

"Salvatore, wait!" Paola scurried after the man. "We can fix this. I assure

you.” She threw Jamie a savage look over her shoulder. “Tony, Marco...take both of them from my sight and get rid of them. *Permanently.*”

Jamie’s heart thudded dully. He’d sent his message too late. If Bella was lucky, they’d kill her outright. The penalty for a cop who deigned to infiltrate the Mafia was automatic execution. After being tortured.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Let me *go!*” Bella twisted in Marco’s grip as he resumed dragging her from the room.

Tony pulled the gun from his waistband and waved the muzzle at Jamie. “Move it, Fist.”

Heavy boots pounded in the hallway. Six enormous men wearing body armor vests that read *Police* and carrying long, deadly rifles burst through the door. A large white German shepherd flew in behind them. Two more dogs followed—one with a short brown-and-black coat, the other with long black fur. All the dogs wore vests with gold badges on the sides.

“Police! Get on the floor! Get on the floor!”

The two enforcers at the front of the room pivoted and raised their guns.

“Markus! Gun!” Jamie shouted, rushing one of the enforcers and taking him down.

The crack of a rifle rent the air. The other enforcer crumpled, a large red stain blossoming on his shirt.

Jax barked as he leaped to Jamie’s aid, clamping his mouth around the arm of the man Jamie had just tackled.

“Everyone, get down!” This from the man Jamie had referred to as Markus.

The two dogs raced around the room, barking and snapping their jaws. Most of the men in the room complied with the orders, getting to their knees, then lowering to the floor.

Except for Tony and Marco.

Marco held Bella in front of him like a human shield, his arm tightly around her waist.

Tony aimed his gun at Jamie’s back.

“Jamie!” Bella screamed.

Jamie dove from Tony’s line of fire just as her cousin pulled the trigger.

The bullet missed him, embedding in the wall. Another gunshot blasted. Bella jerked her head around. One of the armed officers held a raised shotgun, the muzzle of which was smoking. The gun fell from Tony's hand, landing on the floor with a *thump*. Slowly, Tony fell to his knees, then keeled over onto his side.

Bella knew her cousin was dead. The carpet, which was dark to begin with, turned darker as blood seeped from the gaping wound in Tony's back. His eyes were sightless, staring but no longer seeing.

Paola screamed, rushing over and kneeling beside Tony. Loud keening came from her aunt as she rocked back and forth, clasping her cousin's lifeless hand.

More shouts and commands came from the officers who'd charged in.

Bella twisted her neck to look into Marco's cruel eyes. "Can't you see it's over? Let. Me. Go."

"Not a chance," he hissed in her ear. "You're my ticket out of here." He edged closer to the door, dragging her with him.

Alarm bells went off in Bella's head. Going with Marco was a death sentence. If he made it out of here, he'd kill her.

There was only one weapon at her disposal. She dug into her skirt pocket and pulled out the corkscrew she'd stashed there earlier. "Screw you, Marco!" She plunged the twisted metal prong into his neck.

"Fuck!" He released her and yanked out the corkscrew. Blood spilled from a jagged gash just below his ear. Too bad. She'd missed the jugular.

"You little bitch." He raised his gun and aimed it at her face.

Two bodies flew at Marco. Jamie being one, Jax the other.

Jamie landed on Marco's chest and began pummeling blows to his face. Jax latched onto Marco's wrist, biting down hard and forcing him to release the gun. Blood shot from Marco's nose and his body went limp. "Release!" Jamie shouted. After Jax unclamped his jaw from Marco's wrist, Jamie flipped him onto his belly. One of the officers handed him a set of handcuffs that he swiftly locked onto Marco's wrists.

Barely able to stand, Bella plastered herself against the nearest wall, sinking to the floor as she watched the absolute bedlam.

Jamie and the other officers, who looked like Navy SEALs, had somehow managed to take complete control of over twenty mobsters. Every single one of them, including Salvatore Palumbo, lay prostrate on the floor, their hands linked behind their heads.

“Bella? *Bella?*”

She looked up into Jamie’s face, finally comprehending that he was talking to her.

“Are you all right?” He knelt and ran his hands up and down her arms and shoulders. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

She shook her head. Physically, she was fine. Emotionally, she was a hot mess.

“Stay here,” he ordered in a gentle, commanding voice, then disappeared from her view.

Paola continued crying at Tony’s side, rocking and wailing at the top of her lungs.

Part of her didn’t know what to feel. As she watched her aunt—the same woman who’d just ordered her to die—she felt sorry for her. She’d lost her husband and two sons to Mafia violence. This time, Tony’s death was on her.

Not knowing what else to do, she pushed to her feet and went to stand over Tony’s body. Her cousin, a boy she’d grown up with, had been about to drag her to God knew where and kill her. Surprisingly, her heart ached with sadness.

Tears streamed down Paola’s cheeks. When she looked up at Bella, she seemed to have aged twenty years. In a heartbeat, her aunt’s expression turned from one of grief to rage. “You did this. *You did this!*”

“No,” Bella replied quietly. “You did. Now you have to live with it.” With numbness seeping into her soul, she turned and walked from the room.

“Bella?” Sierra called to her from the kitchen as she walked past. “What in the world just happened?”

Vaguely, she registered her entire staff watching as she continued into the dining room and out the front door into the night.

The tears came quickly and unchecked. Tears for Tony. For Paola. For herself. They were all victims, all products of events that had taken place in their lives and made them who they were. Mostly, her tears were for the loss of family. Her parents long ago. Even for Paola and Tony. Last, for the family she would never have with the one person she now realized she loved most in the world.

Sergeant Jamie Pataglio.

• • •

Jamie tightened zip ties around Nicky’s wrists, then did the same to Sammy.

All around him, his friends guarded the other prisoners, cuffing them and calling in for police backup.

“You good?” Kade asked, coming up behind him and resting a hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah.” Inside, his emotions were a pile of bloody mush. He stared at the doorway through which Bella had disappeared. Every instinct he possessed pushed him to go after her. But he had to let her go.

Just before walking out the door, he’d seen the pain in her eyes. Pain both he and Paola had put there. The only thing he could do now was to not add more pain to her life.

Jax pinned him with a stern expression. Normally, he knew exactly what his dog was thinking. Not today. He could swear there was censure there, or maybe he was projecting his own feelings on Jax.

He swept his gaze around the room. In all, he and his friends had secured more than two dozen men in less than two minutes. The only ones not already cuffed or zip tied lay prostrate on the floor, totally compliant, with their fingers laced behind their heads. They were all mobsters. They all knew the drill.

He looked at his friends. Matt and Nick, Eric and Dayne, Markus and Kade. Not that he’d doubted it. They’d all been there for him, no questions asked. “Anyone hurt?” Jamie asked.

“Nah, we’re all good,” Kade assured him.

It had been Kade who’d taken the kill shot at Tony that had saved Jamie’s life.

Smoke, Kade’s Belgian sheepdog K-9, guarded the two prisoners already cuffed nearest to where they stood—Salvatore Palumbo and his consigliere, Dominick Escalanto.

“I’ll have your badges for this,” Escalanto shouted. “You have no reason to barge in here and arrest us. Where is your warrant? I demand to see it.”

“Jax, you look bored.” Jax snorted. “Keep Mr. Escalanto company.” He hitched his head to the red-faced consigliere.

Jax padded over and sat between Escalanto and Salvatore Palumbo. The second Escalanto opened his mouth to spew more demands, Jax lowered his head and growled, shutting the man up instantly.

Kade and Markus chuckled.

Voices came from the kitchen, followed by shouting and heavy-booted feet.

Smoke lowered his head and growled just as Special Agent Jenkins entered the room, followed by an entire cadre of agents dressed in perfectly pressed suits that screamed “Fed.”

Jenkins’s face twisted with rage. “What the hell happened? I *told* you we weren’t taking this down tonight.”

“Plans change,” Jamie replied calmly, using the exact words Jenkins had used on him. “Bella Bianco’s life was at stake. Paola Mancuso had just ordered her execution. Did you really think I’d stand by and let that happen?” Over his dead body.

“I told you before, this is an *FBI* investigation.” Jenkins had the stupidity to actually waggle a finger in Jamie’s face. “You don’t make the decisions. *I* do. Do you have any idea what you’ve *done*?” Jenkins shook his head in disbelief. “You just destroyed what could have been the most incredible bust the FBI’s had in decades.”

Jenkins’s team of agents crowded in closer.

The rest of Jamie’s friends formed a protective semi-circle of six-foot-plus men around him. Ghost, Markus York’s enormous white German shepherd, and Sheba, Matt Connors’s Belgian Malinois, took point.

Jenkins had the smarts to take a few steps back. “The FBI director will have both our heads. The U.S. Attorney’s Office will want *yours* on a silver platter.”

Jamie prayed for a non-violent solution that wouldn’t involve embedding Jenkins’s body in the sheet rock. He leaned in so neither Palumbo, Escalanto, nor any of the other men on the floor would hear. “Between everything I’ve got, plus what’s on those sim cards”—he flicked his eyes to a corner of the ceiling—“you’ve got enough to put Paola Mancuso and her entire crew away for a long time. Human smuggling, conspiracy to commit murder, money laundering. She ordered the death of her own niece. She ordered the death of a federal agent—*me*. And it’s all on those sim cards. You may not have RICO charges on Palumbo, but you’ve got enough to end the entire Mancuso operation for good.” Jamie took a breath to steady himself. “*That* was the plan. *That* was the deal. *Not* Palumbo. I got you the evidence to take down Paola, now *you* get my father out of prison.”

Jenkins snorted and gave a quick shake of his head. “You blew it, sergeant. You didn’t play by the rules, and now one of my targets is dead.” He tipped his head to Tony’s body, beside which lay Paola Mancuso, cuffed and face down on the carpet. “Now I don’t owe you a thing.”

Jamie curled back his lip. The heat that had been building inside him soared to an inferno, then blasted out the top of his head. He grabbed Jenkins by the shoulders, backing him up until his head cracked against the wall.

“You sonofa—” Jenkins snarled, but Jamie rammed his forearm against the man’s trachea, cutting him off.

“I get it. The only thing that matters to you are stats. Your panties are all bunched up, because now you won’t get as many arrests to notch on your belt as you wanted.” Including Tony Mancuso. The FBI couldn’t arrest and charge a dead man. “Either my father walks out of prison Monday morning, or you’ll never see those sim cards.”

Jenkins struggled in Jamie’s grip, but he was no match. “You can’t stop me from getting them.”

“Wanna bet?” From the corner of his eye, he caught his friends and their dogs moving closer. They had his back. Literally.

“You’re insane,” Jenkins spat. “Stealing evidence, assaulting an FBI agent in front of a room full of witnesses.”

A deadly calm came over Jamie. Family was everything, and he’d give up everything to save his. “Get my father paroled, or you have no case. I won’t testify, and every second of recorded evidence will disappear. Forever.”

There might be a dozen FBI agents in the room Jenkins could order to retrieve those sim cards, but they’d never get past Jamie and his friends. And Jenkins knew it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Six months later

Blustery January wind buffeted the door. Freezing rain pelted the windows. Bella looked around the restaurant she'd so lovingly created eight years ago, and her mood turned every bit as miserable as the weather.

As expected, the federal government had officially seized the Bistro. The restaurant had been used to commit money laundering and other organized crimes, making it subject to seizure with zero compensation to the owner. Even though Bella had never committed those crimes herself, and had never condoned what Paola was doing, she had no "innocent owner defense." It hadn't mattered that Paola owned the majority stake in the Bistro. Bella had known what her aunt was doing. The government didn't care that she'd been powerless to stop it.

A staff member from the Department of Justice's Asset Forfeiture Program sat at one of the dining room tables, going over a list of seized property. Two men from a local moving company lifted Big Mama into a specially designed wood crate. Along with the handcrafted wine rack, her beloved espresso machine was one of the few things the government had allowed her to keep.

Peggy Freeman, the asset forfeiture person, looked up. Bella had no doubt Peggy was also there to make sure she didn't walk off with something that wasn't in the formal agreement Bella had signed with the U.S. Attorney's Office.

At her own personal expense, she'd retained an attorney who'd managed to work out a meager agreement that had netted Bella the personal items she'd decorated the Bistro with, along with ten thousand dollars from the Bistro's accounts, barely enough to pay for the attorney and the movers. Other than that, she was flat broke.

Using an old kitchen towel, she wrapped up a favorite terra cotta urn she'd

brought home from Italy. Peggy had gone back to whatever she was doing. Ironically, the woman had chosen Tony's favorite table. Thoughts of her cousin brought a familiar ache to her heart.

Despite all that had happened, the decision not to attend his funeral had been a difficult one. She wasn't even certain who had attended, since everyone else had been arrested and was still in jail, either awaiting trial or plea agreements. Including Paola.

Bella picked up a small watercolor and wrapped that in another towel. Since the night of the raid, all her contact with the authorities had been through her attorney. In addition to the Bistro and the restaurant's bank accounts, the FBI had seized the two hundred grand in the suitcase, along with Paola's mansion and everything in it. They'd tried talking to Bettina, Paola's housekeeper, but the woman had disappeared, back to Italy, most likely.

Recently, Bella heard on the news that Paola hadn't contested the charges against her. While there'd been no word on what happened to Marco Ianetti and the rest of Tony's crew, Paola was about to sign a plea agreement that would sentence her to the equivalent of life in prison.

Until Bella had seen a news photo on TV of her aunt in the federal courthouse in White Plains, that would have come as a surprise. She'd expected Paola to fight to the bitter end. The woman in that photo was nothing like she remembered. Paola Mancuso was sixty-three years old. Now she looked closer to a hundred. Old and withered, but it was more than that. The woman in the photo was lifeless, every bit of energy sapped dry.

Carefully, Bella placed the wrapped painting and urn in a box on the floor, then taped it shut. She regretted her parting words to Paola. They hadn't been kind, but in some small way, they were a personal victory. A liberation of sorts, because now she was free. Free to do what, she didn't know. The restaurant business was her passion, but perhaps that, too, was part of her past. Without any income or much in savings, there was no way to start over. There was barely enough money in her personal account to pay her mortgage for the next few months. Selling her beautiful little house was a distinct and ugly possibility looming on the horizon.

She stood and turned in a slow circle, taking in every bit of detail and committing it to memory. This had been her home for so long now. She spent more time here than at her house. Although she still had dinner occasionally with Sierra and Lou, it wasn't the same as seeing them every day. And she

missed the rest of her staff. They'd all managed to find employment elsewhere but had told her they'd have preferred working for her.

With the Bistro closed for good, her only reason to get up every morning was Gnocchi. The little dog had been, and still was, her savior, giving her the love and companionship she'd so sorely needed to get through the day. With him, she was never alone. Most of her tears had long ago dried up, but Gnocchi instinctively knew whenever her thoughts turned to the one topic that could still make her cry.

Jamie.

Since that fateful night, they hadn't seen, spoken, or reached out to each other. She stared wistfully at the barstools where they'd sat as he'd helped her with the puppy cams. That night, and so many others, had brought them closer than she ever thought possible. Whatever they'd had—or *could* have had—was over before it had the chance to grow into something solid. Now it never would. There was far too much between them. Mainly hurt and mistrust.

Speaking of the puppy cams, she had no idea what had happened to them. When she'd had the stomach to return to the Bistro three days after the raid, there'd been documents left on the bar. A copy of a search warrant and a receipt for items seized. The FBI had taken most of what was in her office. Her computer, her hard copy files containing receipts and invoices, an old inventory logbook. The puppy cams and sim cards weren't on the receipt.

"Peggy," she said to the woman still poring over documents. "I'm going to my car to get another box. I'll be back in a minute." Peggy nodded, practically ignoring her.

Outside, she pulled a large cardboard box from the back of the Mini Cooper. Stupidly, she looked at the spot in the alley where Jamie had always parked his Tahoe. Gnocchi missed Jax. *She* missed Jax. She missed *Jamie*.

The pain he'd inflicted had been deep, but he'd taught her to open herself up again to love. Those few moments of bliss when she'd realized just how deeply in love she'd actually fallen had been...wonderful.

Not that she was ready to open herself up again so soon, but Jamie had been one of many changes in her life she'd needed and didn't even know it. He was the stone dropped into still waters, causing a ripple effect before dissipating, then disappearing entirely.

She laughed softly.

Jamie Pataglio had been more than a gentle ripple in her life. He'd been a

force of nature, sweeping into her life like a hurricane, then leaving it just as dramatically. It had taken six months, but this now was the calm after the storm. Ironically, from all the stress, she'd lost twenty-one pounds. It didn't make her feel different or more beautiful—a testament that there was more to her than her outward appearance. It had been her own false perception of herself, ingrained, in part, due to her aunt's emotional abuse.

As she went back inside, voices drifted to her from the dining room. Next to the bar, two men stood talking to Peggy. Both were tall, although not quite as tall as Jamie. One was knock-down gorgeous, about the same age as Jamie and with incredible hazel eyes. The other man was much older, gaunt in appearance, but something told her he'd once been an exceedingly handsome man. And he looked familiar.

“My name's Kade Sampson,” the younger man said to her. “You probably don't remember me. I was here the night of the raid. I'm sorry about...” He looked around the restaurant. “All this.”

“Thank you,” Bella said, realizing this was the same man who'd killed Tony and saved Jamie's life.

The other man extended his hand, and when Bella shook it, she had the impression he was ill. “I'm Michael Pataglio. Jamie's father.”

“Oh.” Her mouth fell open, and she quickly closed it. Now she understood the resemblance. While clearly frail, she could see that, at one time, Michael Pataglio must have been a vibrant, robust version of Jamie. “Would you like to sit down?”

He cracked a smile, again reminding her of Jamie. “I would. I'm a bit run-down.”

“Peggy, we'll be in my office.” She nearly laughed. Technically, it was the U.S. government's office now. She led the way to the office and indicated one of the chairs.

Kade helped Michael to sit, then rested his hand gently on the other man's shoulder. “I'll wait for you outside.”

“Thank you, Kade.” Michael watched him leave, then shifted in the chair, clearly uncomfortable.

Bella worried, since he looked rather pale. “Are you all right?”

“I will be.” He winked, then smiled. “It will take some time, but they tell me I'm on the mend.”

“That's good news.” Something about the man exuded sincerity. Although, given the Pataglio track record for honesty, perhaps she shouldn't jump to

anymore gut-inspired conclusions. The anger she had toward Jamie might be gone, but in its place was a bucketful of emptiness and sorrow. Jamie's father continued to watch her, scrutinize her, really. "May I ask why you're here? Did Jamie send you?"

"Yes. And no."

Bella sat behind her desk and shook her head. "I don't understand. Are you saying he did or didn't send you?" Her heart rate sped up just thinking Jamie had actually done that. Her gut said he hadn't. Jamie would never send anyone, not even his father, to do his dirty work.

Michael gave her that craggy smile, leading her to believe the man smiled a lot. "Yes, you can ask why I'm here. And no, Jamie didn't send me." Her heart sank in a sea of disappointment. "I understand you lost something very special."

Yes. My heart. To your son.

"Bianco's Bistro. I'm very sorry about that. More than I can ever say."

"That's not your fault, but thank you." It wasn't Jamie's fault, either. Not really. If anything, it was hers. For being naive enough to get caught up in Paola's mess in the first place.

He held up a finger. "Actually, it is my fault, albeit indirectly. You see, I have an unusual form of leukemia."

"I'm so sorry." That explained why he looked so frail.

"Thank you, but I didn't tell you that to garner sympathy. My illness is indirectly responsible for everything that's happened at your restaurant."

"I don't understand."

"You will." Again, Michael shifted uncomfortably. "For the last seventeen years, I've been in prison. I did something stupid a long time ago. I've been paying the price, but what I hadn't counted on was that my son would pay the price, too. He was in high school when I was sentenced to twenty years. The worst sentence I received, however, was knowing that what I did made *him* feel like he was a bad person, and he's been trying to make up for it ever since. That's why he became a cop." Michael's forehead glistened with perspiration.

"Can I get you some water?" Without waiting for a reply, Bella grabbed an unopened bottle of water from the desk. She opened it and handed it to him.

His hand shook as he held the bottle to his mouth and drank. "Thank you." He cleared his throat and continued. "Until recently, Jamie and I were estranged. Then I was diagnosed with cancer. Unbeknownst to me, Jamie

made a pact with the devil—the government. In exchange for helping them, they agreed to work their behind-the-scenes magic to get me paroled, so I could get into a hospital better suited to treat patients with my form of cancer.”

“Oh, God.” Bella covered her mouth with her hand. Jamie said he’d never meant to hurt her, but he’d had no choice. And when he’d said it was a matter of life or death, he hadn’t been talking about his own life.

He’d meant his *father’s* life.

“I told him he should come and tell you all this himself. He said you wouldn’t want to see him, but I think there’s more to it than that.” Michael smiled kindly, sadly. “Some part of Jamie’s soul will always carry the stain of what I did. He’s in love with you, but he doesn’t think he deserves you. A father can only say so much. There comes a point when a man has to find it within himself to believe he deserves happiness as much as anyone else does.” He paused, watching her speculatively. “Or perhaps it takes someone special to help him find his path to happiness.”

While Bella did her best to fathom all of what Michael was really talking about, the only words that kept blinking in her head were that Jamie was in love with her.

“Well.” Michael reached into his pocket. “I should be going. I’ve given you a lot to noodle over. I truly hope I see you again.”

Not likely, and a shame, too. In a few short moments, she’d formed an instant fondness for the man. Given that her own father was dead, it would have been nice to get to know Michael better.

When he pushed from the chair, he wobbled slightly, and she rushed around the desk, offering her arm to lean on. “Here, let me help you.”

Together, they walked to the front door. Peggy looked up for a moment, then went back to whatever she’d been doing. Outside, the rain had stopped. Kade and a beautiful black dog she remembered from the raid waited beside an SUV. Kade rushed over and held the door. He gave Bella a quick nod of thanks, then helped Jamie’s father to the SUV and into the passenger seat. He opened the rear door for the dog. Through the window, Michael Pataglio waved, and she watched them drive away.

As she processed all Jamie’s father had told her, a lump the size of a potato dumpling—a gnocchi—formed in her throat. Jamie had done what was necessary to save his family. If she’d had a father who loved her, she would have done the same.

“This came for you while you were in your office.” Peggy picked up a FedEx express envelope and handed it to Bella.

In a numb haze, she took the envelope, then went back to her office and sat behind the desk. Now she understood Jamie’s motivations so clearly, but did it really change anything? Did it matter that he was in love with her? Did it matter that *she* was still in love with *him*? So much had happened. So many obstacles still lay between them.

Absently, and without looking at the label, she opened the FedEx envelope and pulled out a stack of documents. The first page, a signed and notarized commercial lease agreement, had her frowning in confusion. She recognized the address. That building was vacant now but had once been a Mediterranean café. The address was on a side street in Nyack, not as desirable a location as the Bistro’s on Main Street but a nice spot nonetheless.

She blinked, not understanding what she read next. Her name had been typed into the document as the lessee. “What the—”

Bella flipped to the next page. A receipt. The lease had been paid in full for twelve months with an option to buy after three years. “Who paid this rent?”

The second to last page in the stack was a handwritten letter in neat masculine script.

Bella,

You—not Paola—are what made the Bistro a success. Don’t ever doubt that. Don’t ever doubt yourself. You can do it again. People will follow you. Customers will follow you. And you don’t owe me a thing. If anything, I owe you.

Good luck,

Jamie

Bella stared a moment longer at the letter. She honestly didn’t know what to think or feel. Jamie had paid thousands of dollars out of his own pocket so she could get a fresh start.

Squeezing her eyes shut for a moment, she set the documents on her desk. When she opened her eyes, a folded piece of paper that hadn’t been there before caught her attention.

She picked up the paper and unfolded it. It was a note, written in a shaky, scraggly scrawl, as if the writer’s hands had actually *been* shaking. *Jamie’s father*. Just before he’d left, she remembered he’d reached into his pocket. While she’d been helping him to stand, he must have dropped the note on her

desk.

The note contained only one thing—an address in Manasquan, New Jersey. What the address meant exactly she couldn't be certain. Only that it must be important, or Michael wouldn't have wanted her to have it.

Tears slipped down her cheeks, wetting the page. A fluttery feeling took up residence in her chest. Finally, she had the power to fix things, and she knew what she had to do to make it happen.

Peggy poked her head in the doorway. "I need to lock up. I—" She came into the office. "Are you okay?"

Bella nodded, smiling for the first time in six months. "I will be." Right now, she had to get cooking.

Chapter Thirty-Five

With one hand resting on Jax's head and an ice-cold microbrew in the other, watching the waves crash onto the Manasquan beach had become one of Jamie's favorite pastimes.

He'd gone back to work at JFK Airport but had taken the entire month off after the holidays, intending to spend it in blissful peace and quiet, doing nothing more than staring at the ocean.

The Pataglio beach shack was stunning now, but it hadn't always been that way. His father had purchased it as a wedding gift for his mother, who loved the Jersey Shore. Shortly after his dad was arrested, they'd been unable to pay the mortgage on their family house on Long Island. His mother had refused to sell the shack to pay the mortgage, so she sold the house in Long Island and moved in with a friend.

Years later, Jamie and his sister scraped enough together to buy their mother another house in the same area so she could still be near her friends and not too far from Otisville. Recently, Jamie had put his own money into renovating the shack, which had, literally, been no more than that when his parents had first bought it. Hence the nickname.

Two days ago, he'd driven to the shack, but the blissful peace and quiet part had, thus far, eluded him.

"Jamie!" his sister, Ariana, shouted from the kitchen amidst the slamming of cabinet doors and banging pots. "Whatdya want for dinner? I can make spaghetti, baked chicken, or lasagna."

"Anything's good," he shouted back. In truth, he wasn't hungry, but feeding people whether they wanted to eat or not was ingrained in his family's Italian DNA.

"Make all of them," his mother said, coming into the living room and sitting on a chair facing Jamie. "You're not eating enough."

“You’re hovering,” Jamie countered.

His mother arched a brow. “That’s because you’re not *eating* enough. At Thanksgiving, you hardly ate any stuffing or mashed potatoes like you usually do. At Christmas, you barely touched anything on your plate.”

“Sorry, Ma.” He reached over to squeeze her hand. Normally, he loved his mother’s cooking. She was an awesome cook. All the traditional Italian food was her specialty. The problem was all that food made him think of Bella.

“That’s all right, son.” She covered his hand with hers, then stood and kissed him on the top of his head, the same as she’d been doing for as long as he could remember. “I know you’ve been through a lot. A good meal will do you wonders.”

When she’d returned to the kitchen, Jamie closed his eyes and pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose. He hadn’t told his mother or sister about Bella. Only his father knew the truth. That he missed Bella’s smile, her snark, and the way she cared for everyone around her. Most of all, he missed talking with her and loving her because, yeah, that was always at the root of the problem. He was so in love with her it killed him to get up every morning knowing she would never again be a part of his life. The only good thing was that his dad was here and doing better.

After the raid, Jamie had held the puppy cam sim cards for ransom, forcing the FBI’s hand. The evidence on those cards was so valuable to their case against Paola Mancuso and her crew that Jamie’s father had been released from prison within days of the takedown.

Special Agent Jenkins had been royally pissed, along with the rest of the FBI and the U.S. Attorney’s Office. They’d all wanted to wait until they had evidence against Salvatore Palumbo.

Instead, Jenkins had to settle for charging Paola with human smuggling, money laundering, and conspiracy to commit murder—four counts for the men strangled in Italy, plus charges for ordering Jamie’s and Bella’s executions. The entire Mancuso crew, including Marco Ianetti, had been charged with aiding and abetting all of Paola’s crimes. Paola would never live to see the light of day outside prison walls. The others would be old and gray before they were eligible for parole.

Salvatore Palumbo and his entourage who’d attended Paola’s “big splash” that night at the Bistro had all been released. Palumbo’s only loss that night had been one of his enforcers, who’d succumbed to the shot fired by Marcus.

That, and Palumbo hadn’t walked away with the suitcase filled with two

hundred grand Paola had intended to gift him as homage to the Palumbo Crime Family. Jamie had tried to secure that cash for Bella, but the U.S. Attorney's Office wouldn't hear of it.

The only unproven aspect of the case involved the murder of Misty Morris. It was suspected Tony had strangled his ex-girlfriend after somehow discovering she'd become an FBI informant. Jenkins had confirmed she'd done it out of spite after Tony had dumped her. Most likely, her death would never be formally solved.

While Jamie hadn't wanted it, his CO, Captain Washington, had recommended him for the Port Authority Police Department's highest honor, citing "service above and beyond the call of duty."

Whitecaps crested the waves rolling onshore. Going back to work at JFK Airport had been difficult, but having Jax back at his side eased the transition. First, he'd made good on his promises and taken Steve, Artie, and Lt. Achebe out for a big steak dinner. Then he'd helped the detectives retrieve the mini-bottles of liquor stashed at the storage unit and transport them back to the Peekskill Incinerator for destruction. With no more undercover work in his future, he wouldn't owe any more favors. Good thing that. Steak dinners in New York City were a serious drain on his wallet.

A hand rested on Jamie's shoulder. His dad's.

"Soon we'll be out there fishing again," his father said.

Jamie looked over his shoulder, and his heart filled with relief. His dad was still weak, but color had finally come back to his cheeks. "I'd like that."

Jax snorted and rested his head on Jamie's thigh. "You can come, too, buddy," he said, ruffling his dog's ears.

The doorbell rang, and Jax's ears flicked skyward.

"I'll get it," his dad said.

Jax snorted, then trotted after Jamie's father, leaving him alone in peace to stare at the fishing trawlers trudging through the rough ocean seas.

Loud barking and yipping tore through his peace and quiet. The barking came from Jax, the yipping higher pitched and sounding an awful lot like—

Jamie bolted to his feet. A larger version of the tiny puppy he hadn't seen in six months cavorted and danced around Jax, nipping at his dog's legs. He blinked, then shook his head. He must have been dreaming. Standing behind the dogs and holding two large shopping bags was Bella.

His heart took up a steady staccato in his chest. *She's here. She's really here.*

“Come in. Come in. It’s cold out there.” His father waved Bella inside, then closed the door and ushered her into the living room. “Carmen, Ari, we have company.”

Vaguely, Jamie registered that his sister and mother had joined them in the living room, but all he could do was stare at Bella. Stupidly, his first thoughts were that she’d lost weight and grown her hair out. It was past her ears, falling in thick blond waves. His next thoughts were: What was she doing here? And how did she find him?

His dad grinned as he made introductions. “This is Bella Bianco.”

Well, that answered his last question. Somehow, his father knew who Bella was and had told her he was staying at the shack. Jamie watched as she shook hands with his mother and sister.

She smiled hesitantly at him, then tipped her head toward the beer still in his hand. “Any chance I could get one of those?”

“I’ll get it.” Ari grinned as she disappeared into the kitchen.

As Jamie continued staring at Bella, the sound of a beer cap hitting the counter came to his ears, then Ari returned, handing Bella the bottle.

Bella set down the bags she’d been holding. Scents of herbs, garlic, and cheese wafted to his nose, making his stomach growl.

“Someone’s hungry,” Bella said. “Good thing I brought dinner.”

“Why don’t we go into the kitchen so Jamie and Bella can talk?” Jamie’s father draped an arm over his sister’s and mother’s shoulders, maneuvering them both into the kitchen.

Over her shoulder, Ari waggled her eyebrows.

Gnocchi trotted over to Jamie and whined until he reached down and scratched the dog’s ears. “He’s grown.” Wow, could he sound any dumber?

Still holding her beer, Bella picked up the bags, then came around the sofa to set them on the coffee table. Jax stuck his head in the bags and snorted noisily. “Sorry, Jax.” She tugged his head from the bag. “Not for you.” To Jamie, she said, “Gnocchi is at least twenty pounds heavier than when you last saw him. Could be he was just so malnourished when we found him. At the rate he’s growing, he might be as big as Jax one day.” She laughed nervously. “I’m babbling.”

“I like it when you babble.” He liked it when she did just about anything.

Jax went to a corner and lay down. Gnocchi promptly lay down next to him, plopping his head on Jax’s belly as if they’d never been apart.

As much as Jamie wanted to pull Bella into his arms and never let her go,

he put down the beer and shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. Nothing he could ever say or do could possibly make up for how much he'd hurt her. She was here for a reason, but the ball was in her court.

"May I sit down?" she asked quietly, and when he stepped aside, she set her beer on the table and sat on the sofa. "I brought you some dishes for the new restaurant. They're experimental, and I need to test them out on someone." She bit her lower lip. "I hope you like them. There's plenty for everyone, including your family."

"Thanks." He sat next to her, leaving a good two feet between them. "I'm sure we'll love whatever you brought." And he was sure they were listening in, too. Especially Ari and his mother.

Bella twisted her hands on her lap. "Thank you for paying my lease for a year. You didn't have to do that."

Jamie shook his head. "I *did*. My actions took everything from you. I didn't go into this intending to hurt you. I'll never be able to make up for that or say how sorry I am." He only wished he could have done more. If he'd had the cash to buy her the damn place outright, he would have.

She held up her hand. "Let me finish. Please. If—no, make that *when*—the place is in the black, I'll pay you back."

"No!" He shoved a hand through his hair. "I don't want your money. That was a gift. Just accept it, will you?"

Bella sighed, then looked through the large plate glass window overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. "Okay," she whispered. "If you insist, but I have my own conditions. If you won't take my money, then accept my food."

He inhaled the warm, rich scents of whatever was sitting in those bags she'd brought. "Gladly."

"I'm not talking solely about what's in these bags," she added. "You and your family are welcome anytime at the new restaurant for free meals and cappuccinos for life."

"That's too generous."

"No, it's not," his sister whispered loudly from the kitchen, confirming what he suspected. That his entire family was eavesdropping.

The corners of Bella's lips lifted. She'd heard Ari, too. "It's not too generous," she insisted. "You said you owed me. I owe you something as well. As painful as it was to lose the Bistro, it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I've been living under Paola's iron hand for too long. Now I'm free, and it's because of you. Free to prove to myself that I can

make a go of it and be a success without her.”

“I told you that you could.” And he’d meant every word.

“What I don’t want to do is make a go of things without *you*.”

Huh?

“One of your friends, Kade, and your father paid me a visit,” she continued. “I had a very nice chat with your father. Is it true what he said? That you’re in love with me?”

More than you’ll ever know. But he hadn’t actually said that to his dad. And he hadn’t known his father had paid her a visit.

“Please answer me.” The smooth skin on her forehead creased. “If it is true, I need to hear it. From *you*.”

Jamie took a deep breath, then swallowed. “It’s true. I love you.” More than he could say, more than he could possibly show her, even if he lived to be a thousand. “But it doesn’t matter. I’m not good enough for you. I’m working on being better, but I’m not there yet.” For a brief moment in time, she’d helped him to see the kind of man he wanted to be. The kind he wasn’t yet.

Being so close to her, but not being able to touch her, kiss her, or hold her in his arms, was cracking his heart wide open all over again, but he refused to bring her down with him. He needed to end this before there was nothing left of him but a sad sack blubbering idiot. “Bella, I—”

“Shh.” She leaned over and touched two fingers to his mouth, silencing him. Her touch was a laser, scorching him from the outside in. Never in his life had anyone had that power over him. Only she did. “You *are* a good person, and you *are* a good man.”

He shook his head adamantly. “You’ve got that wrong.” *Unbelievably wrong.* The ugly, soiled soul festering deep inside him would probably always be there, dragging him down into a deep dark hole he could never crawl out of.

“I *don’t* have it wrong.” She cupped his face. “If you weren’t good inside, I wouldn’t be in love with you. As for becoming a better man, I’d like to help you with that.” She pushed from the sofa, then plunked down on his lap and looped her arms around his neck. “I love you, Sergeant Pataglio, and I want to be part of your life.”

He must have misheard her. After all the terrible things he’d done to her—turned her life completely upside down and shattered her dream—in what alternate universe could she possibly love him?

Skepticism must have shown on his face.

Bella gazed down at him with so much emotion he dared to long and hope for things he'd never thought possible. "Would you agree that if you make personal sacrifices for love that you're a good person?"

Honestly not knowing how to contradict her words, he nodded.

"You went to jail to save someone you love." She looked into the kitchen where his father stood. "You put your life in jeopardy and almost died for him. Everything you've done since I've known you were sacrifices you made for love. Those are not the acts of a bad person. Are they?"

No, he had to admit. Why he wasn't capable of seeing that for himself remained a mystery.

"I can only wish that I had a family to love that much. If I did, I'd do anything for them. *Anything*. All I'm asking for is a chance to experience that kind of love. With you. Will you give me that chance? Please?"

Right now, he'd give her anything she wanted. Today. Tomorrow. Any day for the rest of his life. He was still a work in progress, but with her strength, her kindness, her love in his life...

Jamie must have nodded because the next thing he knew, her lips were on his, kissing him, and he was kissing her back, both of them laughing as she landed kiss after kiss on his lips.

From eyes blurry with tears, he looked over her shoulder. His sister was, literally, jumping up and down for joy. His mother clapped her hands to her cheeks, her eyes visibly wet, too. His father stood there smiling and nodding, contentment and the knowledge of the entire world shining in his tired expression.

For seventeen long years, Jamie had been apart from his father, but somehow his dad had known exactly what he'd needed to make him whole.

Bella.

Epilogue

Bella cracked open one of the kitchen's swinging doors, savoring the moment, trying to imprint every last detail in her memory so she would never forget it.

The dining room of her new restaurant—Bella's—was packed, not with paying customers, but packed nonetheless.

Jamie tended the brand-new bar, pouring beer and mixing drinks for his friends, father, and his Port Authority colleagues who'd been invited to a special preopening event. In all, she counted nearly a dozen large, hunky, handsome men leaning against the shiny oak bar, clinking glasses and slapping each other on the back. It had taken a while for her to memorize all their names. Now that she had, they'd become an extended part of her newfound family. Along with their dogs, of course.

Allowing dogs in a public restaurant would never pass a health inspector's scrutiny, but since this was a preopening event and the restaurant wasn't technically open yet, what the heck?

CIA Sergeant Matt Connors had driven up from Virginia with his petite, green-eyed wife, Trista, their little boy Joey, baby girl Angeline, and Matt's Belgian Malinois, Sheba.

State Trooper Nick Houston toasted beer glasses with Jamie. Nick had come down from Springfield, Massachusetts with his wife, Andi, and their little girl. Bella had felt an instant connection with Andi, who also owned a restaurant—the Dog Park Café. Saxon, Nick's enormous black German shepherd, trotted after Sheba. Saxon had his work cut out for him. The moment Gnocchi had laid eyes on the beautiful Malinois, he'd fallen in love and was also currently trailing after Sheba as if she hung the moon.

ATF Special Agent Eric Miller was deep in conversation with Dayne Andrews, an FBI agent who lived in a castle with beautiful billionaire

Katrina Vandenburg. Dayne's German shepherd, Remy, dutifully watched the bassinette on the table, in which Dayne and Katrina's newborn baby boy, Dayne, Jr., slept quietly. Eric's Dutch shepherd, Tiger, stood guard over a very pregnant Tess Miller, refusing to leave the woman's side.

Cassidy York, Secret Service Officer Markus York's new wife, was four months pregnant with their first child. Cassidy's hand rested on the head of a ghostly white German shepherd appropriately named Ghost.

Laia Velez, soon to be Laia Sampson, once she married DHS Sergeant Kade Sampson, talked with Jamie's mother and his sister, Ari. Kade's K-9, a large, pure black Belgian sheepdog named Smoke, busied himself with Kade and Laia's young daughter, Rosa, doing what looked uncannily like that talk-to-the-hand thing from the old TV show *The Nanny*.

Unlike his K-9 counterparts, Jax still followed Jamie everywhere, including behind the bar. She hadn't realized how much his six-month internment in prison had affected Jax.

"Scuse me, Bella." Sierra pushed past her through the swinging door, balancing two more trays laden with appetizers.

"And me." Rebecca carried bowls of family-style salad.

"And me." Lori followed up with baskets of fresh garlic bread.

More happiness flooded her system. Every one of her staff from Bianco's Bistro had followed her. To Bella's.

Thinking it was egotistical, at first she'd resisted naming the new bistro after herself, but Jamie had insisted. This place was about her, no one else, as he liked to remind her. Official opening day was still three days off, and the reservation book was completely filled for the next two months.

Behind her, Lou banged away in the kitchen, happy to be cooking his heart out. Smells of traditional Italian recipes she'd kept, such as fried calamari with marinara, wafted to her nose, as did the scents of the many new ones she and Lou had created to better exemplify the new bistro. One without the mystique—or *stigma*, depending on how one looked at it—of Paola Mancuso.

From her hiding spot, Bella watched Jamie. With every passing day, she fell more deeply in love with him. Dressed simply in black slacks and a white dress shirt rolled up to his elbows, he could still make her heart squeeze and her belly quiver in anticipation of how things were between them when they were alone. Watching TV. Talking. Holding hands. Or, her personal favorite, stripping the clothes of his muscled body, then making love with him until

they both fell into a glorious, blissful sleep.

Since their fateful conversation at “the shack,” which she’d since learned was the Pataglios’ Jersey Shore getaway, Jamie and Jax hadn’t officially moved into her Nyack house with her and Gnocchi, but they’d spent nearly every night there for the last three months.

Sierra went to the bar, saying something Bella couldn’t hear and pointing to Big Mama. Jamie pulled a cup and saucer from beneath the bar and began packing espresso into the filter.

Unable to stop herself, Bella strode to the bar, stood on her tiptoes, and pulled Jamie down for a deep kiss right there in front of everyone. Hoots and whistles met her ears. Every other one of her senses was completely oblivious to anything but the feel of the man pressed against her, the scent of him in her lungs, the taste of him on her tongue.

And the knowledge that he was hers.

• • •

The only thing worse than having to stop kissing Bella was the raging hard-on he’d have to hide. Kissing her never failed to send his body into overdrive.

More hoots and hollering came from his friends. Reluctantly, he let her pull away. Giving him one last saucy grin before sauntering out to the group of women in the dining room, she winked over her shoulder.

He tracked her every step of the way, grinning like an idiot and not caring that his friends were watching. Finally, he’d come to accept that even a bastard like himself deserved Bella Bianco in his life.

Jamie licked his lips, savoring her taste on his tongue.

Matt chuckled. “You are so whipped.”

“Never thought I’d see it happen.” Nick shook his head.

Markus snorted. “Your Romeo days are over.”

“Jesus.” This came from Eric. “You’ve fallen so hard, it’s a wonder the ground isn’t shaking.”

Dayne laughed outright. “True that.”

“So?” Kade leaned over the bar and clapped Jamie on the shoulder. “How’s it feel?”

“Not bad.” He struggled to hold back a smile, then failed miserably. “Not bad at all.”

Another round of laughter went around the bar, along with more clinking of glasses. For a moment, Jamie didn’t understand the odd, unfamiliar

emotions bubbling in his gut. Then it hit him.

Contentment. Fulfillment. Complete and utter love and happiness.

His friends had already found it. Now he'd found it, too, and he no longer felt he was a bad person. Bella had done that, made him feel good about himself. As long as he had her, all was right with his world.

As he poured himself a beer, he thought of how quickly he'd fallen for her. *Colpo di fulmine.* The lightning bolt of love.

His dad sat at the end of the bar, talking with Steve Palos and Artie Masamoto. Life was back in his father's step again. If Jamie had learned anything, it was that life was short. You never knew when it could be ruthlessly snatched away.

"Something on your mind?" Kade asked, raising his brows.

He looked at Bella, who laughed at something Ariana said. "Yeah."

Markus grinned. "Then what are you waiting for?"

"I don't have a ring." He'd known this moment was coming, had talked about it with his friends. He just hadn't planned on it being tonight.

"A ring is just a piece of metal," Matt said.

Nick nodded. "There are other ways to get the job done."

Jamie looked down at Jax. His dog cracked his jaws, then dipped his head in a nod. Jamie turned back to Big Mama. *Yes, there are.*

With shaking hands, he began making the most important cappuccino of his life.

A few minutes and a whole lot of gurgling and hissing later, he expertly poured the foamed milk on top of the dark, steaming liquid. He took a deep breath, then set the cup on a saucer. With his hands shaking worse now, the cup rattled.

As if knowing what he'd been about to do, his dad had come up behind him and looked at Jamie's creation. "Nicely done, son."

"Guys." Kade looked down the bar. "I'd say our man needs backup."

Dayne grimaced. "Again?"

Everyone laughed, then they all rose from their barstools and followed Jamie to where Bella stood with the rest of the women and children. Even the dogs had stopped exploring the dining room and come to listen. Like a best man, Jax stood beside Jamie. The rest of his friends and their dogs surrounded him in a supportive arc.

"Bella?" He waited for her to turn around, then kneeled, a cappuccino in his hand, his heart in his throat.

“What are you doing?” Smiling in confusion, her brow wrinkled. “Who’s that for?” She indicated the steaming cup.

“You.” With his heart hammering harder still and the cup rattling louder, he held the cappuccino higher so she could read the words he’d spelled in the milky foam: *Marry me?*

Bella’s eyes rounded, and she gasped. The other women peered over her shoulder. One by one, they, too, gasped. Bella covered her mouth with her hands.

“Bella Bianco,” he said, his throat so tight with emotion he prayed he could get out what he had to say. “You are my world. My lightning bolt. You light up my life. You light up my soul. Will you marry me?”

Her eyes shimmered, and she nodded, slowly at first, then more emphatically.

Vaguely, he registered someone taking the cup from him.

She let her hands drop. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes!”

On unsteady legs, he stood, wrapping his arms around the woman he loved and kissing her deeply as his family and best friends clapped and cheered.

He was the only one left. The last of them to fall. Never in a million years did he think it would ever happen to him. If he’d known this was how good it would feel, he would have fought harder to make it happen sooner.

Because he’d been blessed. With family, friends, and the deepest love he would ever know.



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Author's Note

K-9s are a highly specialized component of law enforcement few officers are blessed to experience, and they pose challenges most of us never encounter on the job. I've done my best to accurately reflect this unique aspect of law enforcement. Any mistakes contained within this book are entirely my own.

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About the Author

[Tee O'Fallon](#) is the award-winning author of the K-9 Special Ops, Federal K-9, and NYPD Blue & Gold Series. Tee spent twenty-three years as a federal agent conducting complex, long- and short-term criminal investigations, including undercover operations, across many agencies at the federal level, and four years conducting multi-state investigations as a police investigator. It felt only natural to combine her hands-on experience in the field with her love of romantic suspense. Tee has lived in New York State most of her life with a five-year stop in Colorado. When not writing, Tee enjoys cooking, gardening, chocolate, lychee martinis, and all creatures canine. Tee loves hearing from readers and can be contacted via her website <https://teeofallon.com> where you can also sign up for Tee's newsletters.

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