

Side Hustle

in

SAVANNAH



HOPE CALLAGHAN

Side Hustle in Savannah

Made in Savannah

Cozy Mystery Series Book Twenty

Hope Callaghan

hopecallaghan.com

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Cast of Characters

Carlita Garlucci. The widow of a mafia “made” man, Carlita promised her husband on his deathbed to get their sons out of the “family” business, so she moves from New York to the historic city of Savannah, Georgia. But escaping the “family” isn’t as easy as she hoped it would be, and trouble follows Carlita to her new home.

Mercedes Garlucci. Carlita’s daughter and the first to move to Savannah with her mother. As a writer, Mercedes has a knack for finding mysteries and adventure and dragging her mother along for the ride.

Vincent Garlucci, Jr. Carlita’s oldest son and a younger version of his father, Vinnie, is deeply entrenched in the “family” business and not interested in leaving New Jersey for the Deep South.

Tony Garlucci. Carlita’s middle son and the second to follow his mother to Savannah. Tony is protective of both his mother and his sister, which is a good thing since the female Garluccis are always in some sort of predicament.

Paulie Garlucci. Carlita’s youngest son. Mayor of the small town of Clifton Falls, New York, Paulie never joined the “family” business and is content to live his life with his wife and young children away from a life of crime. His wife, Gina, rules the family household with an iron fist.

Chapter 1

“Where’s Mike?” Carlita cast a concerned glance at the clock on Ravello’s kitchen wall. “He shoulda been back from his deliveries by now.”

Arnie, the restaurant manager, wiped his hands on his apron, and hurried over. “I was wondering the same thing. I’ll call him.” He plucked his cell phone from his pocket and tapped the screen.

The back door leading to the alley flew open and Mike appeared.

“There you are. We were getting worried about you,” Carlita said. “How did the deliveries go this time around?”

“The same as last.” The delivery driver pulled a stack of receipts from his pocket and tossed them on the counter. “I got lost over on Stalwart Street. I drove around and around those shock busters the city calls charming historic chunks of brick that rattle my muffler. The tips aren’t near enough for the wear and tear I’m putting on my car.”

Carlita’s heart plummeted. *Not another one.* “You’re quitting?”

“Yeah. Not only am I putting wear and tear on my car, but my old lady is nagging me to death. She doesn’t think it’s safe and keeps insisting that taking on a second job isn’t worth the hassle.” Mike apologized for the short notice and after Arnie told him his last paycheck—which wouldn’t be much

considering he'd only been employed for a few days—would be direct-deposited into his account, he left.

“We’ve gone through three drivers in less than two weeks.” Carlita stared at the pile of delivery receipts. Her dreams of taking her restaurant to the next level with *Downtown Deliveries*, her new food delivery service, were fizzling.

She had the customers, had the business now that they were in the holiday season. Catering and food delivery were in high demand. Unfortunately, Carlita was struggling to find a dependable delivery person.

Her success had come with a price tag, namely feeling overwhelmed and overworked, not to mention bone-tired. But she was also stubborn and not ready to give up on the lucrative food delivery gig.

“I’ll start running the help-wanted ad again,” Arnie said. “First thing tomorrow morning.”

“Why bother?” Carlita asked. “No one wants to do the deliveries. We’re getting one excuse after another.”

“What choice do we have? To pack it in and try again in a month or two?”

“And give up all the holiday business. We could try a third-party delivery service again.”

“Last time we checked, the ones I contacted said they didn’t have anyone available and could put us on a waitlist,” Arnie reminded her.

Carlita’s eyes drifted to the doorway, watching as Mike’s headlights bounced off the side of the building. He sped to the corner, nearly colliding with one of Elvira’s EC Security

Services vans on the way in. Tires squealing, he sped off. “I’ll do it myself.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Savannah’s as safe as the next city and I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but being a woman making deliveries in the evening is asking for trouble.”

“I have a gun.”

“I didn’t ask, but I’m sure Mike did, too. How will it help you when some big, burly thug jumps you from behind?”

It was a concern, and one Carlita had worried about with all her drivers. “Maybe I could hire Luigi to go with me.” Her tenant, a former mafia bodyguard and formidable man, would make even the most hardened criminal think twice.

“And put him on the payroll and pay him for his time?” Arnie pointed out.

“True. It wouldn’t make much sense for me to hire Luigi to help me with deliveries. We would have to pay him even more than we were paying Mike. It would eat up the profits and we would barely break even,” she sighed.

“I’ll put my feelers out to see if I can come up with anything,” Arnie promised. “Although I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

“I appreciate it, but I’m leaning toward trying to do the deliveries myself, starting tomorrow. I can’t let this opportunity slip away.” Carlita settled in at the desk to close out the day’s sales, paying close attention to the deliveries.

Ravello’s Italian Eatery was making money. Good money. If she discontinued the deliveries, she would miss out on the

extra year-end income, something she planned to use to surprise her hard-working staff who had stuck with her, with a nice Christmas bonus.

Mercedes appeared, and out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Arnie pulled her aside. They began talking in low voices.

“Hey.” Carlita wrapped up her bookkeeping and felt a light tap on her shoulder. She turned to find her daughter standing behind her. “When are you coming home?”

“I’m almost done. In about half an hour. Have you heard from Sam?”

“Yeah. He decided to stay at his friend’s place up in Charleston until next Thursday.”

“Next Thursday, huh? I guess he figured he needed a real vacation. How did he seem on the phone?”

Mercedes shrugged. “Mellow.”

“Mellow in a good way?” Carlita’s daughter had recently voiced concerns her boyfriend, who was also her tenant, was acting somewhat strangely. According to Mercedes, he seemed distracted.

When questioned, Sam either blew it off or insisted he had a lot on his mind. At first, Carlita suspected her daughter’s investigative tendencies were overreacting, creating a mystery when it was simply what Sam said—that he was preoccupied with his business or any other number of things.

“Mellow, as in, I’m not getting a good read,” Mercedes said. “He originally planned to come home Sunday afternoon, but then extended it.”

“Have you met his friend, the one he’s visiting?”

“Nope, but Sam talks about him a lot.”

“So, you think the trip is legit?” Carlita asked.

Mercedes tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I have no reason not to believe him, other than I’m still getting a weird vibe. Not all the time. It comes and goes.”

Carlita could see her daughter was concerned and decided it was best to let it drop. If Mercedes needed an ear, she was there. If not, she was confident the couple would work through whatever was going on. Instead, she changed the subject. “If you’re hungry, I’ll grab us something to eat on the way out.”

“Sounds good, Ma.” Mercedes slipped out the back door and Carlita finished updating the books, ready to call it a day.

She grabbed some leftovers and waited for Arnie, who wasn’t far behind.

“Don’t worry about the deliveries, Carlita. We’ll figure something out.”

“I hope so. Tomorrow’s a new day.” Carlita told him goodbye and shifted the bag of food to her other arm, contemplating her current situation on her way home. Mike’s abrupt departure left her little choice. There was no way she could walk away from the lucrative delivery service.

Ravello’s was already building a steady, loyal clientele of regular delivery customers. If she pulled out now, they would go somewhere else and she would lose the business she’d worked so hard to get.

Carlita suspected some of the uptick was a direct result of her restaurant being featured on *Divine Eats in Savannah*, a Channel Eleven News show hosted by none other than Autumn Winter, another one of her tenants. The exposure had placed Ravello's on the list of one of *the* places to dine in historic downtown Savannah.

Business was humming along, but it came with a price tag, namely feeling overwhelmed, overworked, not to mention exhausted.

"Hey." Elvira emerged from her building and sprinted toward Carlita's stoop. "We have a problem."

"Let me guess...the building department finally condemned your place as unsafe because the foundation is crumbling with all the jackhammering and excavating you're doing," Carlita joked.

"I'm giving the basement project a rest," Elvira said. "I've contacted the city. An inspector is coming by to approve me to work on my parking lot."

"Nice. You're finally going to get rid of the gravel and pave it?"

"No. I'm digging it up."

Carlita made a choking sound. "Where are you going to park?"

"Sandy Sue Jarvis offered to let me and my crew use her lot across the street. It won't be for long." Elvira made a digging motion. "My plan is to dig it up and fill it back in within a day or two."

Carlita had noticed her neighbor spending an extraordinary amount of time wandering around her property, metal detector in hand, along with another device she was certain was some sort of treasure-hunting equipment. “You found something.”

“Big.” Elvira’s eyes lit. “I dug down about a foot and the detector went nuts.”

“Good luck.” Carlita turned to go.

Elvira stopped her. “That new delivery guy of yours is tearing up and down our alley. He almost sideswiped my work van a couple of hours ago. I think his name is Mike.”

“It won’t happen again. He quit.”

“Seriously?” Elvira’s eyes widened. “You sure do have a lot of trouble keeping delivery drivers. How many have you gone through now? Let me guess, they find out you have mafia ties and freak out.”

“It has nothing to do with my family. At least I don’t think so. They all have excuses. It’s a tight job market right now and, let’s be honest, delivering food isn’t one of the most desirable jobs.”

“It wouldn’t be at the top of my list.”

“I’ve decided I’m going to do it myself.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m building a good customer base. If I give up on it now, I’ll lose those customers.”

Elvira wrinkled her nose. “You might want to rethink that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not safe for a woman, especially one your age, to be out alone after dark making deliveries.”

“What do you mean...a woman my age?”

“An older, more mature woman.”

“I...”

Elvira lifted a hand. “Don’t take what I said the wrong way. I’m not trying to insult you because I’m right up there with you. Anyway, I think you’re asking for trouble. You might as well put a big bold bullseye on your back, one with reflectors, so the criminals can easily spot you.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” Carlita chided.

“I’m only telling you like it is.” Elvira tapped the EC Security Services patch on her jacket. “Crimes increase this time of the year, especially as we get closer to the holidays. Criminals are looking for easy money and delivery people are ripe for the picking.”

Elvira was right, and she and Arnie had voiced a similar fear, one that had been nagging in the back of Carlita’s mind all evening. And if anyone knew about safety and crime statistics, it would be a woman who owned not only a security services company but also an investigative services business.

“I appreciate your input. Unfortunately, I don’t have much of a choice.” Carlita stuck her key in the lock and opened her back door. “Good luck with the inspector.”

“Thanks.” Elvira crossed over to her side of the alley. “I hope you reconsider about doing those deliveries,” she said before slipping inside and closing the door behind her.

A small sigh escaped Carlita's lips as she entered her building and traipsed up the stairs.

She could hear muffled voices coming from her apartment and eased the door open.

Her son, Tony, Mercedes, and her fiancé Pete were seated at the table, their heads close together and talking in low voices.

“What's going on?”

Pete sprang from his chair and grabbed the bags of food.
“We've been waiting for you.”

Carlita's scalp started to tingle. “What's wrong?”

“Mercedes called an emergency family meeting,” Tony said.

Chapter 2

“An emergency family meeting? Is everyone okay?” Carlita dropped her keys on the table near the door. “Don’t tell me Vinnie’s in trouble.”

“This has nothing to do with Vinnie,” Mercedes said. “It’s about Ravello’s delivery service. Arnie told me Mike quit, and you planned to take over the deliveries.”

“I have no choice and am at my wit’s end. I’ve gone through three delivery drivers in two weeks. No one wants to stick with the job. Ravello’s has only scratched the surface and we’re making good money. I can’t give up on it now.” Carlita motioned to Pete. “Why don’t you go in with me? Maybe you can find someone willing to work and they can deliver for the Parrot House Restaurant and Ravello’s.”

“I would love to, but as you know, I’m already having difficulties staffing my restaurant and pirate ship. Finding dependable workers is getting tougher every day,” Pete said. “As it is, I’m only offering limited deliveries for catering services.”

Tony patted his mother’s arm. “We’re all in agreement. We don’t think it’s safe for you to be out there making deliveries by yourself.”

“I could go with her,” Mercedes offered. “How late are you delivering?”

“Until nine. They start at five and end at nine at night.”

“I’m not sure it’s any safer with two of you, petite women at that,” Pete said.

“I have my gun,” Mercedes said.

“Which is asking for trouble,” Tony said. “Let’s say a couple of thugs jumped you and you tried pulling a gun on them. They’re going to grab that out of your hand so fast it’ll make your head spin.”

Carlita pressed a hand to her forehead. Maybe it was a mistake taking on the deliveries herself. Not only did her family think it was a bad idea, but Elvira had also mentioned an uptick in area crimes. Her dream of Ravello’s becoming one of the top restaurants in Savannah was slipping through her fingers. “You guys sure know how to take the wind out of a gal’s sails.”

“There’s gotta be a way.” Mercedes gave her mother a quick hug. “Maybe you could up the pay for the delivery drivers.”

“I tried that with Mike and it only worked because I snagged some business in the Live Oaks Neighborhood. I spent a bunch of money on fancy flyers and discount coupons. It breaks my heart to think of the time and money I’ve invested.”

Pete let out a low whistle. “You’re going after the big spenders.”

“To turn a profit. You know how slim the margins can be in the restaurant business.” Carlita’s shoulders slumped. “Elvira said the same thing. Crime is on the uptick, partly due to the holiday season.”

“What if...” Tony’s voice trailed off.

“What if what?” Mercedes asked.

“I handled the deliveries, at least until Ma can find someone else, someone willing to stick with it for the long haul,” Tony said.

Carlita could feel a glimmer of hope. Perhaps her delivery service wasn’t on its last leg after all. “Would you? What about Shelby? I mean, that’s not fair for you to have to run around town making deliveries when you’ve already put in a full day.”

“I could take her with me. She can ride along and help me navigate.”

“I’ll watch Violet.” Carlita warmed to the idea. “You and Shelby can do the evening deliveries, but only until I hire another driver. By then, I should have enough business in the Live Oaks Neighborhood where I can bump up the delivery driver’s salary even more. We’ve also been getting a lot of interest from the Second Street River District. In fact, I’m getting almost as many orders over there.”

There was some discussion about the plan, with Carlita insisting Tony talk it over with Shelby before committing. He promised he would and was the first to head out.

Mercedes wasn’t far behind. “I think Tony’s offer will get you through in a pinch.”

“He’s a wonderful son, a good husband and father to Violet.” Carlita’s throat clogged at the thought of Tony’s generous offer.

“He wants to help. Besides, he and Shelby could treat it as a night out. The other day, she mentioned how much she loved filling in at the pawn shop, helping Tony, and wondered if maybe she could do more. The only thing is finding someone to watch Violet.”

“Which I can do. She can hang out at the restaurant on the nights I’m working. The kitchen help love her. We’ll all spoil her rotten.”

“I’m running over to Autumn’s. She’s sitting in on this week’s author group meeting.” Mercedes grabbed her phone and keys and slipped out of the apartment, leaving Carlita and Pete alone.

“Tony’s offer is very generous. I have to say, your kids are gold, sticking together and helping each other.”

“We’ve always been a tight-knit family. If Shelby says no to the deliveries, I’ve decided I’m going to put it on the back burner for a while. It’s not the end of the world and maybe it’s a sign that it’s not time for Ravello’s to expand.”

Pete pulled her into his arms. “At our age, we’re supposed to start thinking about winding down and spending more of our time enjoying what we’ve worked so hard to achieve. It appears, my dear, we’re doing the opposite by expanding our businesses and taking on more.”

“Good point. Ravello’s was always my dream. I wanted to open a restaurant from the moment I laid eyes on this place. Besides, I want to leave something behind for my kids, to remember me after I’m gone.” Carlita placed her hands on both sides of Pete’s face and leaned in for a kiss.

Deliveries and employees were momentarily forgotten as the kiss deepened.

Finally, Carlita pulled back, her cheeks flushed and her pulse racing. “One thing is certain. You know how to help me forget all about my troubles.”

Pete lightly caressed the side of her neck. “There’s more where that came from. At least our wedding plans are almost wrapped up and all we have left to do is walk down the aisle.”

“Or, in our case, walk the plank,” Carlita joked. “Maybe I’m subconsciously trying to get everything up and running smoothly before we marry and sail off into the sunset on our honeymoon.”

Pete’s cell phone *pinged*. “Speaking of running smoothly, I have a staff meeting this evening and need to head over to the dock. One of my supervisors put in his notice and now I’m scrambling to find a replacement.”

Carlita followed him out of the apartment and into the alley. “Tony’s put some feelers out to get the Marshland Isles Diamond we found appraised.”

Pete arched a brow. “Have you decided what you’ll do with it?”

“I have some ideas. I would like to help pay for some of the wedding expenses and share it with you and Tori, although I’m still kinda nervous about doing anything with it.”

“Because you think if certain individuals catch wind that you found it, they’ll be beating down your door or come after you.”

“Exactly. One word to the wrong group of people.” Carlita made a slicing motion across her neck. “And I’ll have trouble again.”

“Can’t say as I blame you.” Pete leaned in for a kiss. “I’m glad you decided against running the delivery route. I would be worried sick the entire time.”

“It probably wasn’t my brightest decision, but one made of desperation. If Tony helps, he can buy me a little time to get someone else, someone who will stick around. Good luck at your meeting.”

“Thanks. I’ve been dreading it all day.”

Carlita waited until Pete disappeared around the corner to head back inside.

Rambo met her at the door, ready for his evening stroll. They circled the block and as they walked, Carlita thought about the whirlwind the last few months had been...planning the wedding, adding the restaurant delivery service, preparing for her eventual move to Pete’s place.

It seemed the harder she tried to slow down, the faster paced her life had become. Hopefully, after the end of the year with the wedding and honeymoon behind them, the couple could settle into a less stressful routine.

Back home, Carlita followed Rambo up the stairs. Autumn’s apartment door was ajar, and she could hear the tinkle of laughter.

Rambo heard it too. He nudged the door open with his nose and made a mad dash inside.

“Rambo!”

It was too late. The pup was long gone.

Mercedes appeared, keeping a firm grip on Rambo's collar. "Hey, Ma."

"Sorry about Rambo. He decided to let himself in." Carlita grabbed hold of his leash. "We need to knock first," she scolded.

"Tony called. He was looking for you."

"Oh?" Carlita tugged her cell phone from her pocket and realized she'd missed his call. "I bet it's about the deliveries."

"Shelby's on board." Mercedes gave a thumbs up. "In fact, Tony said she was excited about making some extra money and getting out of the house."

Carlita thanked her for the good news and, as soon as she was back inside their apartment, she gave her son a call. He confirmed Shelby had agreed they could start the following evening.

"It shouldn't be too bad. A few of the deliveries are over in the Live Oaks Neighborhood. Mike said they were good tippers."

"For me, it's not about the tips, although Shelby's excited about having some extra pocket money," Tony said. "It's more about helping you get out of a tight spot."

"And I'll be looking for a permanent, dependable replacement starting tomorrow," Carlita promised.

"We'll need someone to keep an eye on Violet," Tony hinted.

“Bring her by the restaurant. The employees will spoil her rotten and then I’ll take her home with me and spoil her even more,” Carlita joked.

“We haven’t told her yet. We didn’t want to get her hopes up until we knew for sure we had a plan in place.”

“What about the pawn shop?”

“I have plenty of staff to cover for the last hour or so.”

“Are you sure?” Carlita wandered to the French doors overlooking the alley. Her cat, Grayvie, jumped onto the back of the chair and rubbed up against her. “I feel like I’m putting you on the spot.”

“Not at all. It’ll be a win-win. Shelby gets out of the house and earns some extra pocket money. Violet gets to spend time with Nana and you have a little breathing room to find someone new.”

“Thank you, Son. You don’t know what a relief this is to me. I owe you one.”

“And we owe you even more. We’re family, Ma. That’s what we’re supposed to do—help each other.”

Carlita thanked him again before ending the call, thinking to herself she had the most wonderful children in the world, who were not only concerned for her safety but also willing to help her out of a tight situation.

Carlita pitched in to help at the pawn shop the following morning and spent the afternoon seating guests at the restaurant. Finally, the dinner hour rolled around. She ran to the back to check the online order system and found Melanie, one of her kitchen workers, seated at the desk. “How’s it going?”

Melanie jerked back and placed a hand on her chest. “Oh my gosh!”

“I didn’t mean to sneak up on you. I saw you were in the online delivery orders and was wondering how it was going,” Carlita said.

“Great. Those people over in the Live Oaks Neighborhood are our best customers.”

“Which is good for us. It keeps the deliveries close together.” Carlita scanned the screen, thrilled by the number of orders being placed. “Friday night business is booming.”

Collin, the line cook, stepped closer. “How many we got for tonight, boss lady?”

Carlita counted the orders. “We’re booked solid. The first delivery is right at five and the last one at eight-thirty.”

“Still in the Live Oaks Neighborhood?” he asked.

“Not all. The Second Street River District is giving them a run for their money. There must be a lot of Italian food lovers in the neighborhood, not to mention that’s where I’ve been targeting my marketing.” Carlita headed back to the front and lost track of time until Tony strolled in the front door, with Shelby by his side and Violet trailing close behind. “We’re here, reporting for duty.”

Carlita tugged on Violet's backpack. "We'll have so much fun."

"I brought some of my new drawing pencils and sketchpads."

"We have a budding artist on our hands," Shelby said.

"I can't wait to see what you're working on," Carlita said. "We have a full schedule of deliveries on tap. Follow me to the back."

Carlita led them to the delivery staging station where Collin and Arnie were bagging to-go containers. "How many do we have for our first run?"

"Ten with another nine at six." Arnie rattled off the number and Carlita mentally calculated the profits. Ravello's was going to have a very good Friday night.

Working together, Carlita, Shelby, and Tony carried the bags out back to her son's car, which was parked in the alley.

She handed him the delivery tickets and ran back inside. Violet and Arnie were in the kitchen picking through the treat basket.

"Arnie said I could have a piece of candy," Violet said.

Carlita lifted a finger. "Only one."

"Tony's a good guy to help with the deliveries," Arnie said.

"He's the best."

"I heard Mike quit already. Is Tony our new delivery driver?" Collin asked.

“Temporarily. Tony is my son. He’s offered to take over the deliveries until I can find someone dependable who will stick around.”

“He looks familiar,” Collin said.

“He manages Savannah Swag, my pawn shop at the end of the block.”

“I’ve been in there before. You have some nice stuff.”

“Thanks.” Carlita, with Violet by her side, returned to the dining room to seat guests.

Several times, she stopped by the kitchen for an update on orders and to make sure the delivery schedule was running smoothly.

Violet grew weary of greeting guests and asked to sit at the computer and play games while Carlita finished her shift.

Finally, Tony and Shelby returned for the last order, a new-to-Ravello’s customer who requested an eight forty-five delivery.

“There’s always one,” Tony joked.

“Where’s Shelby?” Carlita craned her neck.

“Waiting in the car.”

She followed him to the alley, thanking him again for their help. She watched as they drove off and an uneasiness settled over her. It was getting late, and she knew Violet had already put in a long day, starting with getting up early that morning to go to school.

Perhaps she was asking too much of her children to take on the delivery jobs. She made a mental note to check again with

them now that they had finished a full shift.

The kitchen crew made quick work of cleaning up after closing, and Carlita and Violet lingered, waiting for the couple to return. Near nine, she was getting ready to phone them to check to see how they were doing, when Tony and Shelby appeared.

She could tell right away something was wrong by the pinched expression on her daughter-in-law's face. "Is everything all right?"

"No." Shelby shook her head. "We were almost robbed."

Chapter 3

Carlita's hand flew to her chest. "Robbed?"

"Shelby *thinks* we were almost robbed," Tony said. "I'm not sure that was the case."

"Because I started honking the horn and it scared them off. They didn't realize you had someone with you."

"None of the other drivers mentioned any sort of incidents." Carlita turned to Arnie. "Did they mention anything to you?"

Arnie shook his head. "No, and I specifically asked if they ever felt unsafe making the deliveries."

"See? I'm sure it was nothing." Tony nudged Violet, who was nodding off in front of the computer. "You ready to go, kiddo?"

Carlita could tell Shelby wasn't convinced, but let it drop.

"We made out on the delivery tips. The people who live in Live Oaks are generous tippers. A hundred bucks for a few hours of our time is a nice chunk of change."

"I'm glad it's paying off," Carlita said. "You don't know how much I appreciate your help. I already placed an ad and have a few people who responded. Arnie is checking around too. I'll start interviewing on Sunday, so you shouldn't have to keep helping much longer."

The couple assured Carlita they would continue to deliver food for as long as she needed and when Violet started

complaining she was tired; they headed out.

Carlita finished logging out of the delivery system and turned to find Arnie staring at her. “What is it?”

“I was thinking about what Shelby said. Maybe she saw something he didn’t.”

“Because he was distracted while making the delivery. I’ll talk to him about it again tomorrow.” Carlita grabbed her phone and keys and trekked out into the alley. During the walk home, she thought about the incident. On the one hand, none of the previous drivers had ever mentioned being concerned, but they had always delivered alone. Maybe they had never noticed potential danger lurking nearby.

The last thing she wanted was for something to happen to her son and Shelby. She would never forgive herself. Carlita stepped into the apartment and could hear soft jazz music playing. She followed it to her daughter’s room and found Mercedes seated at her desk.

Rambo was sprawled out on the bed. He opened one eye and stretched when he saw Carlita standing in the doorway.

“Hey, Ma.” Mercedes ran a light hand across Grayvie, who was curled up in her lap. “How did the deliveries go?”

“Good, except Shelby thought someone was going to rob Tony.”

Mercedes’ eyes widened. “Rob him?”

“Tony didn’t seem to think it was anything. None of the other drivers mentioned being concerned for their safety. I’m going to talk to him tomorrow and remind him he needs to carry when he’s delivering.”

“Tony carries his gun all the time. I’m sure he had it with him tonight.”

Carlita perched on the edge of her daughter’s bed and motioned to the laptop. “What are you working on?”

“A new story that’s going to be part of an anthology some of the other suspense / mystery authors in our group are putting together.” Mercedes spun back around. “How does ‘High Stakes Shakedown’ sound for a book title?”

“High Stakes Shakedown,” Carlita repeated. “Another mafia story? I thought you were moving away from the whole mafia theme.”

“It’s all I know. I tried writing another sappy sweet love story.” Mercedes grimaced. “I shared the first chapter with the others in my author group tonight and they told me to stick with the criminal element books.”

“You asked a suspense / mystery writers’ group to critique a romance?” Carlita pursed her lips. “Maybe you were asking the wrong group of people.”

“I suppose, but I find it easier writing about crime,” Mercedes said. “Maybe because we have our share on a pretty consistent basis.”

“Like when?”

“Most recently, Louise Delmario’s kidnapping. Vito’s death, Brittney’s bodyguard drowning on board Pete’s pirate ship.”

Carlita held up her hand. “You’re right. You have more than enough fodder to write crime books.” She stifled a yawn. “I’m calling it a day.”

Despite being exhausted, it took hours for Carlita to fall asleep. She tossed and turned, worrying about Tony and the deliveries. What if Shelby had averted a potential robbery?

Her son could easily handle himself, but with Shelby running the delivery route with him, the potential for one or both of them being targeted was a legitimate concern. Finally, after midnight, she drifted off, but it was a restless sleep and Carlita woke early the next morning more tired than when she'd gone to bed.

She started a pot of coffee and took Rambo out for their morning walk.

He led the way around the block, following their usual route when he paused at the intersection, gazing longingly toward Morrell Park and the river.

“I get the hint,” Carlita said. “We’ll take a long walk today. The coffee can wait.”

The pup excitedly tugged on his leash, picking up the pace as they exited Walton Square. They passed by Pete’s Parrot House Restaurant and she glimpsed his pickup truck parked near the back.

The park was empty except for an early morning jogger who gave a friendly wave as he ran along the Savannah River.

With Rambo leading the way, he took them as far as the ferryboat docking area and then they circled back, passing by The Flying Gunner, Pete’s pirate ship.

A long walk was just what the doctor ordered, and by the time Carlita and Rambo arrived home, she was feeling much better about everything—her slightly cold feet about the

upcoming wedding, handling the busy holiday season and even the evening delivery service.

She fed Rambo and Grayvie, who had emerged from Mercedes' bedroom and sat patiently waiting for his breakfast and then poured a cup of coffee as she settled in at the computer.

She sifted through her messages and reconciled the bank accounts before heading to the bathroom to get ready. After finishing, Carlita caught up with Tony as he was opening the pawn shop.

“Hey, Ma. You’re looking chipper this morning.”

“I had a rough night, but Rambo and I took a long walk and I’m feeling much better.” Carlita grabbed her nametag from the drawer and fastened it to her blouse. “I figured I would help you run the shop this morning, since I don’t have to work at Ravello’s until later this afternoon.”

“Thanks. I can always use an extra hand.”

“Have you changed your mind about handling my deliveries?”

“No. In fact, Shelby already has our tip money spent. In another week, she’ll have enough cash to put a down payment down on the leather sectional sofa she’s been eyeing for a while now.”

“Good. I probably don’t even need to ask this, but are you carrying your gun with you when you deliver the food?”

“You bet. It’s almost always with me. In fact, I’m carrying now.” Tony patted his pocket. “Pawn shops are a magnet for the criminal element. I’ve learned to always be on guard.”

As soon as Tony unlocked the front door, shoppers followed him in. Business was brisk, and it was music to Carlita's ears every time the front doorbell chimed.

The morning passed quickly and before she knew it; it was time to head home and swap out her pawn shop work clothes for her restaurant uniform.

Mercedes was seated at the counter, already dressed and ready for her afternoon shift at Ravello's.

"You're working today, too?"

"Yep. I wrote a thousand words last night after you went to bed and another thousand this morning."

"Good for you. All those gangsters and criminals didn't keep you awake?" her mother teased.

"Nah. The only scenes that creep me out are the stalker ones." Mercedes shivered involuntarily. "I always picture them coming here and hunting me down."

"Better you than me. Writing about crimes hits a little too close to home, if you ask me." Carlita ran to her bedroom to change into her work clothes and found Mercedes waiting for her near the door.

"I took Rambo out already." Mercedes tugged on her mother's sleeve. "Your work clothes are getting baggy. Have you lost some weight?"

Carlita absentmindedly ran a light hand over her loose-fitting slacks. She'd noticed the same thing and chalked it up to working nonstop to keep up. Half the time, she forgot to eat lunch. Dinner was typically little more than a cup of soup and garden salad. "Yeah. I could stand to lose a few pounds."

Mercedes linked arms with her mother as they strolled toward the restaurant. “Elvira’s parking lot is empty.”

“She’s tearing it apart.”

“Tearing it apart?”

“Let me clarify...she’s digging for treasures, gold, whatever.”

Mercedes wrinkled her nose. “The city is allowing her to dig it up?”

“Not yet, although she claims she’s working on getting their approval.”

“Meaning, she might get the approval, but either way, she’s digging up her parking lot.”

“Knowing Elvira, I’m sure that’s the case.”

They arrived at Ravello’s and sprang into action. Carlita greeted the first diners as soon as the doors opened and the rest of the day played out the same. It was a busy Saturday afternoon and by the time her shift ended, her feet ached. She would have loved nothing more than to flop down on the sofa, put her feet up and relax.

Until Shelby, Violet and Tony arrived to start the deliveries.

Violet hovered near the doorway, backpack firmly in place, and gave her grandmother a quick wave. “Are we staying at the restaurant again tonight?”

“No. We’re heading back to my place,” Carlita said.

Violet patted her stomach. “I’m hungry.”

“What sounds good?”

“Hmm.” Violet placed her finger to her lips. “Homemade spaghetti and meatballs.”

“We ate the last batch I had stashed in the freezer. We’ll have to make more.”

“Okay.” Violet beamed at her mother. “Nana and I are going to make meatballs.”

Shelby placed a light kiss on her daughter’s cheek. “Behave and save me one.”

“I will,” Violet solemnly promised. “Can we take some for show-and-tell?”

“Show-and-tell?”

“You and Rambo are going to visit my class,” the young girl reminded her grandmother.

“You’re right. Monday morning. I thought you were going to show them the new trick you taught Rambo. The muffin cup trick.”

“Did you forget?” Violet asked.

“I did, but only for a second. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Carlita stayed long enough to take a quick look at the delivery schedule and help Tony and Shelby assemble the first round of orders. She carried an armload to the car and handed them to Tony who was arranging them in the backseat. “You ready for tonight?”

“Yeah. We have everything we need.” Tony patted his jacket pocket. “This evening’s runs are gonna go as smooth as silk.”

“I hope so.”

“You worry too much, Ma.” Tony hugged his mother and then gave Violet, who had trailed after them, a quick hug. “Have fun with Nana.”

“I will.”

“We’ll be back for the next set within the hour.” Tony waited for Shelby to climb into the passenger seat and then slid behind the wheel.

An uneasiness settled in the pit of Carlita’s stomach as they drove off. She started to run after her son’s car, now near the end of the alley, but it was too late.

Tony turned right and they were gone.

Chapter 4

“Let’s put an apron on first,” Carlita said. “Making meatballs can get a little messy.”

“Can we use my special apron...the one we made?”

“Of course.” Carlita grabbed Violet’s apron from the hook and slid it over the young girl’s head. She spun her around and tied the back.

“I love my apron, Nana.”

“Me too.” Carlita pressed against the painted imprint of her hand and Violet giggled as she pressed her hand to her own imprint.

“It’s our special apron. We should always use it to make our special dishes.”

“The yummiest dishes ever,” Violet insisted.

“You betcha.” Carlita carried her helper’s step stool to the counter and slid it against the cabinet. “Let me grab what we need.”

Violet hummed under her breath, watching as Carlita placed everything they would need on the counter. She chopped the scallion, minced the garlic and slid the cutting board off to the side before measuring out the dry ingredients.

Carlita grabbed the salt and pepper from the spice rack. She showed Violet how to measure out the exact amounts and stood by as she dumped them in an empty bowl.

“I’ll stir, right Nana?”

“Right.”

Violet stirred the salt and pepper. One by one, they added the other ingredients...the scallion, minced garlic, egg, bread crumbs, Worcestershire sauce, pesto, grated cheese and heavy cream.

After finishing, Carlita eased the ground turkey into the bowl and blended it.

“I want to help,” Violet said.

“You can help me make the meatballs.” Carlita finished mixing and turned the oven on before placing parchment paper on top of each baking sheet. “This is the messy part. We’ll need to wear gloves.”

She helped Violet put hers on first and then carefully taped the wrists so they would stay in place. Carlita slipped her gloves on, grabbed a handful of the mixture, and formed a ball. “Are you ready to start on yours?”

“Sure.”

It took a few attempts before Violet got the hang of it, but when she did, she easily kept pace with her grandmother. They ran out of room and ended up filling a third smaller baking sheet before popping them into the oven.

“I’m hungry.”

“Let’s have a snack.” Carlita helped Violet remove her gloves and tossed both pairs in the trash before washing their hands. “What would you like?”

“Cheese and...do you have chocolate?”

Carlita laughed. “You can have some cheese. I also have fresh veggies and dip. We don’t want to eat too much or we won’t have room for our spaghetti and meatballs.”

“Sghetti and meatballs,” Violet sing-songed. “Sghetti and meatballs.”

Carlita fixed a small snack plate, and they headed to the living room to watch television while they waited.

“Hey, Ma. Hi, Violet.” Mercedes breezed into the apartment.

Carlita scooped forward. “Have you finished your shift?”

“Yeah. I stayed late to help cover the tables.” Mercedes let out a low groan and kicked her shoes off. “The tips were great, but it was one long day.”

“I hear ya. Maybe I need to add a few more servers to get us through until the end of the year.”

“It probably wouldn’t be a bad idea.” Mercedes lifted her head and took a deep breath. “Something smells delish.”

“I made a batch of stuffed pesto turkey meatballs. Violet wanted spaghetti and meatballs.”

“I helped Nana make them.”

Mercedes ruffled Violet’s hair. “You did? I can’t wait to try them. I bet they’re going to taste delicious.”

“They’ll be the best meatballs in the whole world,” the young girl proclaimed. “I’m going to eat twenty.”

“You are?” Mercedes chuckled.

“Did you see Tony and Shelby while you were there?”

“Yeah. They were picking up for their last delivery of the night, so it looks like they might finish a little ahead of schedule.”

Carlita glanced at the clock. It was nearly eight-thirty. “I guess there weren’t as many orders for delivery tonight.”

“No. I think there were plenty. Between the two of them, they probably worked out a system and are getting fast at it.” Mercedes plodded to the kitchen and returned with a can of ginger ale. “Shelby is pretty pumped. They’re raking in the dough.”

“Thanks to my heavy marketing. It’s finally paying off. I noticed an uptick in orders from the Second Street River District area,” Carlita said. “I’m not sure exactly where it is other than near the river.”

“If it’s the area I’m thinking of, it’s in a little rougher section of town,” Mercedes said. “Arnie is hanging out, waiting for them to get back.”

The oven timer chimed, and Carlita hustled to the kitchen to remove the meatballs from the oven.

Mercedes hovered near the doorway. “What can I do to help?”

“There’s some homemade spaghetti and sauce thawing in the fridge. Let’s warm it up and then we can eat.” Carlita’s stomach grumbled as she critiqued the meatballs.

Violet carried her empty snack plate into the kitchen and placed it in the sink. She smacked her lips as she eyed the baking sheets. “They look yummy, Nana.”

“I’m sure they are.” While the pasta and sauce warmed, Carlita stabbed one with a fork and handed it to Violet. “This is the chef’s sample piece.”

“Because we did all the work.” Violet popped the tasty morsel in her mouth, deeming it the best meatball she’d ever had.

Mercedes patted her head, laughing at Violet’s bulging cheeks. “You only have nineteen more to go.”

“And sghetti and sauce,” Violet reminded her.

After the sauce and spaghetti warmed, Carlita assembled a small bowl for Violet and a plate for herself. Mercedes filled her plate and joined them at the table.

While they ate, they talked about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. It would be a small gathering since Carlita’s other two sons, Vinnie and Paulie, and their families, wouldn’t be coming down until Carlita and Pete’s December wedding.

To combine the two, they’d decided to get married the day after Christmas and embark on their honeymoon “cruise” on board the Flying Gunner the following day.

While Pete had left the wedding planning to Carlita, he’d insisted on handling the honeymoon and the stops along their way to Key West, Florida, their final destination before turning around and heading back home.

“Are you still getting wedding jitters?” Mercedes twirled her fork, filling it with pasta before taking a big bite.

“I am and mainly because we’re so busy. I don’t know why Pete and I decided a holiday wedding would be perfect. More

like perfectly busy. We should've waited until the middle of January, after the holidays are over."

"You worry too much." Mercedes patted her mother's hand. "It's going to be a beautiful wedding, a day of celebrating, and then you and Pete can sail off into the sunset."

"I'm full." Violet pushed her half-eaten bowl of pasta away.

"Full?" Mercedes counted the meatballs still resting on top of the mound of pasta. "You still have sixteen meatballs to eat."

Violet rolled her eyes, playfully clutched her stomach and flipped onto her side. "I can't eat anymore."

"I'll wrap up what's left. You can take it home and eat it later," Carlita said as she shoved her chair back. "Let's get this cleaned up. Tony and Shelby should be here anytime."

With Mercedes' help, it didn't take long for mother and daughter to clean the kitchen and store the leftovers in the fridge.

Violet, who had been sifting through her backpack, flew into the kitchen. "Do you have my dress?"

"Dress?" Carlita asked.

"My flower girl dress for the wedding."

"I do. It's hanging in the closet."

"Can I try it on?"

"I..."

"Please." Violet clasped her hands, mustering up an adorable pout Carlita was unable to resist.

“I suppose. But you’ll need to take it right back off so it doesn’t get dirty.” Carlita did a thorough inspection of Violet’s arms, hands, and face, making sure there was no leftover pasta sauce on her granddaughter before leading her into the hall, where she removed the dress from the closet.

Violet’s eyes shined brightly as Carlita unzipped the bag. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “I’m going to be a princess.”

“Yes, you will. You, Gracie and Noel, as the flower girls and Paulie, Jr. as our junior groomsman.” Carlita helped Violet change into the dress and even let her try on the silky ballet slippers they had picked out. She twirled her way into the living room to show Aunt Mercedes and then reluctantly sashayed back into the hall where Carlita stood waiting to put them away.

“Can I keep the dress after the wedding?” Violet ran a light hand over the delicate lace and pearl beads meticulously sewn around the neckline.

“Absolutely. It will be all yours,” Carlita said. “We need to be very careful to keep it clean for now so we don’t mess it up.”

“Okay.” Violet solemnly nodded. “I can wait.”

“Good girl. You’ll get to keep the flower basket too.”

Violet’s mouth formed an ‘o’. “I’m going to have flowers?”

“You are. Pretty red roses and rose petals that all three of you will drop as you walk down the aisle.”

“Like this?” Violet pretended to hold a basket and drop petals on the floor.

“Just like that.”

“It’s going to be so much fun.” Violet pirouetted. “I can’t wait.”

“It won’t be long now.” Carlita could hear sirens off in the distance. “I’ll be right back.” She strolled across the living room and stepped out onto the balcony, peering toward the end of the alley and Ravello’s, hoping to see that Tony and Shelby had returned. Their parking spot was empty. She glanced at her watch thinking they were running late and the uneasiness that something bad was going to happen returned with a vengeance.

Chapter 5

Tony climbed back into the car. “According to your fancy delivery app, where are we heading next?”

Shelby tapped her phone. “Second Street River District.” She rattled off the address and began giving him turn-by-turn directions. They drove out of the touristy area and into one occupied by locals.

She peered out the window, taking note of the dark alleys and the distance in between the streetlamps. “I was checking out some of the past delivery routes and don’t think this is one of the regular delivery areas.”

“It means Ravello’s is already expanding its reach.” Tony coasted to the stop sign and turned left. “We’re almost there.”

He slowed to a crawl and eyed the old brick building sporting a *Selling Now. Historic District: two bed / two bath condo units* banner in bold black letters.

“Is this place even open?”

“I see lights.” Tony pointed to some windows with lights. “Someone moving in probably placed the order and is looking for an authentic Italian meal.”

Shelby repeated the address.

“This is it.”

“You wanna call and let them know you’re here?” Shelby’s brows drew together as she warily studied the street.

“Nah. I’ll drop off the goods and be back before you know it.” Tony eased the door open and leaned in. “Lock the doors, just in case.”

“I’m not...”

It was too late.

The door closed. Shelby watched as her husband went around to the back seat. He grabbed the delivery bags and did a quick check to make sure the order was accurate before making his way around the front of the car and onto the sidewalk.

A flash of movement caught Shelby’s eye. Two tall men clad in dark clothing ran toward him.

“Tony!” Shelby yelled his name, but it was too late. The men shoved him to the ground with one of them waving a gun in his face.

Everything moved in slow motion. The gun. Tony on the ground. One of the robbers kicked him as he tried rolling onto his side.

The one with the gun stood over him while the other robber emptied Tony’s pockets. His wallet, his cell phone, his gun.

Shelby shrank down in the passenger seat, trembling violently as she dialed 911.

“911. What’s your emergency?”

“My husband is being robbed. One of them has a gun.” Her voice shook as she told the operator the address.

“Where are you?”

“Locked in the car. He was making a delivery. They came out of nowhere.”

“Officers are en route.”

The operator wanted to stay on the line, but Shelby hung up, desperate to keep Tony in sight.

The robbers began shoving his stuff in their pockets.

Shelby gritted her teeth, struggling to hold her cell phone steady as she snapped a picture.

It took less than a minute for the robbery to take place. The first robber ran off. The second robber paused long enough to grab the delivery bags before following him.

Shelby flung the door open and raced to her husband’s side.

There was blood on Tony’s forehead and around his lips. He let out a low moan and struggled to an upright position. “What are you doing out of the car?”

“They’re gone. The cops are on the way.” Shelby leaned in. “I saw the gun. They took your gun.”

“At least they didn’t shoot me.”

“Where are you hurt?”

Tony winced. “My ribs. They kicked me when I was on the ground and took my wallet, my gun, my phone.”

“Your phone is here.” Shelby snatched the phone off the steps.

“They musta figured it wouldn’t do them much good.” Tony tried to stand, and Shelby stopped him. “Maybe you should wait to be checked out.”

“I’m fine.” Using both hands, he struggled to pull himself to his feet. He lost his grip and fell back. “I hit the cement step on my way down. I think my arm is busted.”

Waaahhh. The wail of a police siren grew louder. With lights flashing, a patrol car flew around the corner and pulled in behind their vehicle.

Two officers sprang from the vehicle and sprinted toward them.

Shelby met them halfway. “They robbed my husband. It was two tall men in dark clothing. They went that way.”

One officer headed in the direction Shelby pointed out while the second knelt next to Tony. “What happened?”

“I was making a food delivery. Two thugs jumped me, pulled a gun, robbed me and took off with my customer’s food.”

“Do you need an ambulance? Looks like they roughed you up while they were at it.”

Tony absentmindedly dabbed at the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. “It would’ve been a little fairer of a fight if they hadn’t pulled a gun on me.”

“Are you okay, ma’am?” The officer turned to Shelby.

“Yes. I was...I was in the car with the doors locked when it happened. I was the one who called 911.” She ran back to the car, grabbed her phone and showed the officer the picture she’d snapped.

“Hang onto that. I’ll need a copy when I file the report.”

The second officer returned. “I couldn’t find anyone.”

With an officer on each side, they helped Tony to his feet. He reached out to grab the railing to steady himself and let out a cry of pain. “I’m pretty sure my arm got busted on the cement step when I fell.”

“Where were you going?” the cop asked.

“Two doors down.” Tony motioned toward the building. “Looks like they’re not gonna eat tonight.”

An ambulance appeared and parked alongside the cop car. A pair of EMTs emerged and jogged over. “What’s the situation?”

The first cop briefly filled them in. “As a precaution, he’ll need a ride to Savannah Memorial to make sure there aren’t any internal injuries.”

They began escorting Tony to the back of the ambulance.

“My car.”

“I-I’ll follow you there,” Shelby said.

“Are you okay to drive?” Tony cast a concerned look at his wife.

“Yeah. I’m...I’ll be okay.” Shelby waited for the EMTs to place Tony in the back. They climbed into the front and drove off, with her following close behind in their car.

They reached the hospital, and she took the first parking spot she could find. Shelby ran across the parking lot and caught up with the EMTs, who were wheeling Tony through the double doors, past the waiting room area and to the back.

Although the ER area appeared chaotic, it didn’t take long for a doctor to join them. He gave Tony a thorough exam.

“You have a few bumps and bruises. I’m almost certain you broke your arm and will send you down for x-rays to confirm. We’ll wrap it up, give it a day or two for the swelling to go down and then swap out the splint for a hard cast.”

“Good thing it’s my writing hand,” Tony joked. “Guess I’m going to have to learn to write left-handed.”

“It could have been worse,” the doctor said.

Tony sobered. “You’re right. It could have. They could have gone after my wife, shot me, shot us.”

The doctor nodded as he slowly made his way to the door. “If I were you, I would consider a new line of work. Delivery drivers are easy targets.”

He promised to send someone in to wheel Tony down for x-rays and the door closed behind him.

Shelby clutched her gut, reliving the terrifying moment of Tony’s attack. “They came out of nowhere. Cowardly thugs.”

Using his uninjured arm, Tony shifted his position. “They’ll be sorry...sorry they ever messed with Tony Garlucci. I’m going after them and when I find them, it ain’t gonna be pretty.”

Chapter 6

Carlita glanced at her watch, wondering if she should send Shelby a text to see how they were doing. She made a beeline for her phone, which was sitting on the counter.

Bang. Bang. Rapid-fire knocking shook the front door.

Carlita switched direction and caught up with Mercedes, who was peering through the peephole. “It’s Autumn.”

She swung the door open and found her resident standing on the other side. “It’s terrible. The reporter from our news station is on his way there now. They aren’t sure what happened, but I think they’re going to be okay.”

Carlita grasped Autumn’s arm. “Hold on. What are you talking about?”

“It’s Tony and Shelby. They’re going to the hospital.”

Carlita began to feel lightheaded and reached out to steady herself. “Tony and Shelby are on the way to the hospital?”

Autumn nodded.

“Ma.” Mercedes jabbed a finger toward the hall where they could hear Violet singing.

“What happened?” Carlita whispered.

“Tony was robbed at gunpoint. Shelby was in the car, saw what was happening, and called 911.”

“Was he?” Carlita couldn’t bring herself to ask the question. “How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. An ambulance transported him to Savannah Memorial Hospital.”

Carlita could feel a sense of panic set in. “We gotta go. We need to get to the hospital.”

“Nana?” Violet skipped into the living room, still wearing the dress.

Carlita forced a smile. “Something’s come up. I have to leave for a little while.”

“Can I go with you?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. Not this time.” Carlita’s mind drew a blank. “Where is the hospital?”

“I know how to get there,” Mercedes said. “You’re in no condition to drive.”

“Both of you go,” Autumn said. “I’ll stay here and keep an eye on Violet. Call me when you have a chance.”

Carlita hugged her granddaughter. “Autumn is going to stay with you for a little while. We shouldn’t be long.”

Violet’s eyes widened. “But...”

“I was getting ready to make cookies,” Autumn interrupted. “Would you like to help me?”

“Cookies?” Violet brightened. “What kind?”

“Chocolate chip, but first, we’ll have to put your pretty dress away. Making cookies can get messy.”

“Okay.”

Carlita stepped back. “Thank you, Autumn.”

“You’re welcome. Don’t worry. We’ll be fine.”

Carlita and Mercedes rushed to grab their phones and keys, and within moments were in the car, racing across town toward the hospital. While Mercedes drove, Carlita texted both Shelby and Tony, asking them if they were okay.

Her anxiety skyrocketed when neither of them replied.

“It could be they’re in an examining room, which means their phones are turned off or they aren’t getting reception,” Mercedes said.

“This is all my fault.” Carlita forced herself to take a deep breath. “Ravello’s could have lived without a delivery service.”

“You can’t blame yourself. Tony volunteered. Shelby was excited about it. You weren’t twisting anyone’s arm.”

Despite Mercedes’ argument, Carlita *did* blame herself. It *was* her fault. When Shelby mentioned getting the feeling they were being followed the previous night, she should have immediately called off the deliveries.

Carlita’s cell phone rang. It was Arnie, her restaurant manager. “Hey, Carlita. You heard from Tony? His last delivery called. Their food never showed up, and I wanted to make sure everything was all right.”

“No, but I just found out he was robbed. He and Shelby are at the hospital.”

Arnie made a choking sound. “Robbed?”

“I don’t have any details yet. Mercedes and I are on our way to Savannah Memorial.”

“No kidding. Okay. I’ll handle the customer. Let me know how they are.”

Carlita promised she would and ended the call.

“Who was that?” Mercedes asked.

“Arnie. The customer called, wanting to know what happened to their food.” Carlita grew quiet so her daughter could focus on driving and mentally tried preparing herself for what they might find when they reached the hospital.

The fact that an ambulance had transported them meant they were alive. But what condition would she find them in when they got there?

“Where are we going?” Carlita gazed out the window, certain they had passed by the same set of buildings again.

“I got turned around.” Mercedes tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “It doesn’t help that it’s dark and I’ve only been by here a few times. I see it now.”

Savannah Memorial Hospital Emergency Room sign appeared. They followed it past the drop-off area to the parking lot where Mercedes pulled into the first available spot.

The women hustled across the parking lot and through the sliding doors, making a beeline for the check-in desk.

The clerk behind the counter greeted them. “Hello. How can I help you?”

“My son and daughter-in-law came in here by ambulance.”

“What are their names?”

“Tony and Shelby Garlucci.”

The clerk reached for her mouse. “Can I see some identification?”

Carlita fumbled inside her purse, pulled out her wallet, and handed the clerk her driver’s license.

She glanced at it and handed it back. “Both are here. I don’t have any information about their condition.”

“Can you...” Carlita’s voice cracked. “Could you please find out?”

The clerk cast her a sympathetic gaze. “I’ll try. Please have a seat.”

Mercedes led her mother to an empty corner off to the side. The woman disappeared in the back. The minutes ticked by. Five minutes. Ten minutes.

“The longer she’s gone, the worse it looks,” Carlita whispered.

“Not necessarily,” Mercedes said. “Look around. This place is busy. I can only imagine what a madhouse it is in the back on a Saturday night.”

Her daughter had a point. The ER’s waiting room was almost full. While they waited, an ambulance arrived, sirens blaring and lights flashing. The EMTs moved fast as they flew to the back of the emergency vehicle and flung the doors open.

They lowered a stretcher to the pavement and wheeled the person strapped to it inside, not stopping as they raced toward the double set of doors.

A nurse appeared. The doors closed behind them, but before they did, Carlita glimpsed several people wearing white coats who were rushing back and forth. “You’re right. It looks a little chaotic back there.”

Moments later, the clerk reappeared and called them over. “I tracked down Shelby Garlucci, who wasn’t brought in by ambulance. She knows you’re here and will be out momentarily.”

“Thank you.” Carlita could feel tears well up in her eyes. Shelby was all right.

Mother and daughter returned to their seats, and Mercedes’ cell phone chimed.

“Who is it?” Carlita asked.

“Autumn. She wants to know if we’ve heard anything.” Mercedes grew quiet as she tapped out a reply. “She said Violet is asking for her mother.”

“I’m sure she is.” Carlita pressed a hand to her chest. “At least you can tell her Shelby is okay.”

“I did. I told her we would let her know when we had word on Tony.”

The ER doors slowly opened and a pale Shelby emerged. She caught Carlita’s eye and made her way over. “How did you know we were here?”

“Autumn heard about it from a colleague over at the news station. They were on their way to the scene. The reporter remembered the last name and called Autumn. She came over as soon as she found out.” Carlita clenched her fists, her nails

digging into her palms as she braced herself for what was next.
“How is Tony?”

“He’s going to be fine.”

Carlita’s knees buckled, and she dropped into the nearby chair. “Thank you, God.”

Shelby explained what had transpired, starting with her concern over the new delivery location in a more isolated area. “It was in the Second Street River District. We were delivering to a new condo building. I was getting a bad feeling ‘cuz it didn’t seem like there were too many people around. I was already spooked after last night, when I noticed someone lurking nearby while Tony was making a delivery.”

“And I should’ve stopped the deliveries then.”

“You didn’t know,” Shelby said. “Tony and I wanted to help. Anyway, he grabbed the food and told me to lock the doors. He was almost to the building when I saw these two big burly guys come out of nowhere. They knocked Tony down, robbed him and even took the food.”

“You called the cops?” Mercedes asked.

“While it was still happening. I also got a picture of them.” Shelby slid her cell phone from her pocket, tapped the screen and handed it to Mercedes.

Carlita leaned in, staring at the image of exactly what Shelby described. Two tall men dressed in dark clothing. Her stomach churned at the image of one man standing over her son, who was on the ground. “Is one of them pointing a gun at Tony?”

“Yeah. He didn’t stand a chance,” Shelby said.

“Did they...they didn't shoot him?” Carlita could barely force the question out.

“No, but they took his gun. They got his wallet, his watch, his gold bracelet. They even took the food.” Shelby cast a concerned look toward the ER doors. “I should get back there. Tony's getting antsy and is in a hurry for them to wrap his arm.”

“What's wrong with his arm?” Mercedes asked.

“He broke it when he fell. The doctor is putting a splint on. It's only temporary until the swelling goes down and then he'll have to get a cast. You know how he doesn't sit still very well.” Shelby glanced around. “Where's Violet?”

“She's making cookies with Autumn,” Carlita said. “You get back to Tony. We'll head home to Violet now that I know both of you are all right.”

“Thanks, Carlita.” Shelby turned to go and stopped. “The credit cards. I'm sure the thieves have already gone on a shopping spree.”

“Tony and I share the pawn shop's credit card account. I'll take care of canceling his card.”

“And I'll take care of our personal credit cards.” Shelby thanked them again before hurrying back toward the ER.

Mercedes slipped her arm around her mother and began nudging her toward the exit. “I'll drive if you wanna start working on getting Tony's business card cancelled.”

“I would except I left the business card at home. I'll have to do it when we get there.” Carlita sent Arnie a text, telling him

Tony and Shelby were going to be all right and asking him to pull the delivery order page from their website.

The drive back across town took even longer than the drive to the hospital. They got stuck behind a string of late night downtown traffic, missed their turn and by the time they reached Walton Square, Carlita was frazzled.

“That was a fun one.” Mercedes shifted into park and shut the car off.

“At least we made it.”

Back inside, Carlita found Autumn on the couch with Violet snuggled up against her and sound asleep. She held a finger to her lips and slowly slid away.

Violet sighed softly but never opened her eyes when Autumn tucked the blanket around her.

The trio gathered in the outer hall where Mercedes and Carlita took turns filling Autumn in on what had happened.

“Thank God they’re okay,” Autumn said. “It could have been so much worse.”

“Especially seeing how one of them pulled a gun and pointed it at Tony,” Mercedes said.

“I appreciate you giving us a heads up and for watching Violet,” Carlita said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Autumn smiled. “She’s such a sweetheart. I had a heck of a time getting her to take her flower girl dress off. She loves that thing.”

“I was thinking about buying her a whole box of dress up clothes for Christmas this year. She would have a ball.”

“I did my best to keep her busy, although she kept asking for her mom and dad.”

“And she’ll get to see them soon, I hope.” After Autumn left, Carlita tracked down the business credit card and dialed the number on the back. She explained to the operator what had happened and asked her to immediately cancel Tony’s card.

She could hear tapping on the other end. “I found your account and see his card.” There was a moment of silence. “It’s a good thing you called. The card has been used.”

Carlita’s heart plummeted. “I was afraid of that.”

“In fact, it appears the card has been used multiple times,” the operator said.

Chapter 7

The credit card company's operator continued. "The good news is the transactions are still showing in the pending screen. As far as I can tell, none of the charges have gone through. It looks like these robbers have been busy."

"So we won't have to pay."

"The maximum liability is fifty dollars." There was a slight hesitation on the other end of the line.

"What is it?"

"There's a substantial transaction sitting out there. I can't tell what it is yet."

"Substantial?"

"Meaning a higher dollar amount. If you're concerned, call back tomorrow and we should be able to verify none of the transactions made it through." Carlita could hear tapping again on the other end. "I've already put in a request for a replacement card. You should receive it within ten business days."

Carlita thanked the rep and ended the call.

"What did they say?" Mercedes asked.

"The card has already been used multiple times."

"To buy what?"

“I didn’t ask. The good news is she said all the orders were still in the pending screen, hadn’t hit the card yet and we wouldn’t be responsible. She did say there was some sort of larger transaction sitting out there. It hadn’t made it through yet and suggested I call back tomorrow.”

Rambo trotted over and nudged Carlita’s hand. “Rambo’s gotta go out. You stay here with Violet. We won’t be long.”

Carlita followed her pup down the stairs and into the alley. They reached the corner and turned right, circling around the pawn shop.

The sound of music and laughter echoed from her enclosed courtyard.

She reached the open gate, and the music grew louder. Carlita glimpsed Cool Bones and the Jazz Boys band set up near the fountain while small groups of guests mingled.

She lingered in the doorway, listening to her tenant and his band play, and began humming along to a tune she’d heard him practicing.

Several weeks had passed since the last time Cool Bones had hosted a private event in the shared courtyard, and remembered he’d given her a heads up about this one the previous week when they crossed paths in the hall.

“Can I help you?” A slender woman with long, dark hair approached.

“I heard Cool Bones and his band playing and thought I would listen in for a second.”

“Hello, puppy.” The woman patted Rambo’s head.

“This is Rambo. He’s spoiled rotten,” Carlita joked.

“He’s a pretty dog. Are you and Cool Bones friends?”

“Friends, and I’m also his landlord.”

“You own this building?”

“I do.”

“Cool Bones has mentioned you before. You also own the Italian restaurant next door.” She clasped her hands. “I hosted a small party at my house last weekend and ordered your food to be delivered. It was fabulous. The baked lasagna is some of the best I’ve ever tasted. Your delivery service was a lifesaver. I’ll be ordering again soon.”

“I’m glad it worked out for you.” They chatted for a few more minutes before Carlita excused herself and continued walking. It was a shame she was going to end the delivery service. And it was depressing considering how much time and money she’d spent getting it up and running, not to mention how well it was working.

Despite the popularity and profitability of her new venture, it wasn’t worth risking her family’s lives, or anyone else’s life for that matter.

She returned home and found Violet and Mercedes seated at the dining room table munching on leftovers. “More meatballs?”

“Violet said she was going to eat twenty and I think she’s trying to make good on her promise,” Mercedes joked. “These are delicious.”

“With or without sauce,” Carlita said.

“Here. Have one.” Mercedes swirled a meatball in the marinara sauce and held out the fork.

“Thanks.” Carlita popped it into her mouth, savoring the pesto and garlic mingled with the other spices. “These are pretty darned good, if I do say so myself.”

“When are Mom and Dad coming to pick me up?” Violet asked.

Carlita and Mercedes exchanged a glance.

“It shouldn’t be much longer.” Carlita grabbed her cell phone and discovered she’d missed a text from Shelby, sent only minutes earlier.

We’re on our way.

Carlita texted back. *Let me know when you’re here. Mercedes and I will bring Violet to you.*

Will do.

“Your mom texted. They’re on the way. Mercedes and I will walk you home, so finish your food.”

Violet polished off one more meatball before insisting she was stuffed. She slid out of the chair and, without having to be told, started placing her drawing supplies inside her backpack and set it by the door.

Ping.

Carlita grabbed her phone. “They’re home. Let’s go.”

Violet slid her backpack on and followed her aunt and grandmother into the alley. She grabbed each of their hands and began pulling them along as she sang a little ditty about

rainbows and pink unicorns. She kept it up all the way up the stairs to her apartment.

They found Shelby standing at the top, waiting for them.

“How is Tony?” Carlita asked.

“A little banged up and sore.” Shelby placed a hand to her mouth. “And cranky,” she whispered.

“I bet.” Carlita knew her son and wasn’t surprised to hear he wasn’t happy. “Where is he?”

“In the living room.” Shelby opened the door wider and motioned them inside.

Carlita found Tony seated on the edge of the couch, his cell phone in hand and a scowl on his face.

“Hey, Son.” Carlita’s eyes were drawn to the thick bandage wrapped around his arm. It started at his right elbow and continued all the way down. The tips of his fingers were the only things visible. “How you feelin’?”

“Like I got run over by a bulldozer.” Tony winced. “They got me good in the ribs. Busted my arm. Cut my lip. I’ll have a nice shiner on my forehead.”

Violet’s eyes grew round as saucers as she stared at Tony’s bandaged arm. “What happened?”

“I had a little accident. I fell and broke my arm.”

Violet timidly approached her father, and Tony reached out to put his uninjured arm around her. “I’m okay.”

“You got cut.” Violet’s lower lip trembled, and Carlita thought she was going to cry.

Tony must've thought the same. He pulled her close and began talking to her in a low, soft voice, reassuring his daughter he was going to be all right.

Shelby slipped in beside him. "Daddy needs to get some rest in a minute. It's time for you to go to bed."

Carlita nearly broke down and started sobbing when Violet flung her arms around her father and buried her small head in his chest. "I want to stay with Dad."

Shelby gently pulled her away. "You can see him first thing tomorrow morning after everyone gets some sleep. It's bedtime," she reminded her.

Violet reluctantly released her grip. "I love you."

"I love you too." Tony leaned in and hugged her one last time, briefly closing his eyes and Carlita had to turn away.

The ending could have been bad. So very bad, and Carlita never would have forgiven herself. She gave Violet a hug and kiss, and so did Aunt Mercedes.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Shelby said.

"Take your time," Carlita said. "Violet is understandably upset and might need to settle down."

Mother and daughter trekked out of the living room and the bathroom door closed behind them.

Carlita eased onto the sofa. "I'm sorry, Son. This is all my fault. When Shelby mentioned someone lurking nearby last night, I should've shut the deliveries down. Thank God she was there and called 911. I saw the picture she took. One of them had a gun pointed at you."

Tony cut her off. “You can’t blame yourself. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I should’ve been more aware of my surroundings and not let them get the upper hand. I should’ve seen them coming.”

“How?” Mercedes asked. “Shelby said they came out of nowhere and jumped you from behind. There were two of them and only one of you.”

“I can tell you one thing. It won’t happen again,” Tony vowed.

“You’re right. It won’t because I’m stopping the delivery service as of right now,” Carlita said. “It’s too dangerous and not worth the risk.”

Mother and son went back and forth until finally Tony relented.

“I cancelled your business credit card. A new one is on the way.”

“Shelby canceled my personal ones. There were already some pending charges, only small stuff. I think one was an online gaming purchase.”

“The robbers have been busy. They also tried to run several charges through the business account.” Carlita told him about the one the rep mentioned, a larger transaction without any additional details. “I’ll call them in the morning to confirm there aren’t any issues.”

Shelby emerged from the bedroom. “Violet’s out like a light, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she tries sneaking into our bed later tonight.”

Tony let out a small gasp and slowly stood, the color draining from his face. “It’s time for another pain pill.”

“We’re gonna get out of your hair.” Carlita insisted on opening the pawn shop the following morning. “Take the day off, stay home, and get some rest.”

Tony limped around the coffee table. “The more I think about what happened, the more ticked off I am.”

“Tony,” Shelby chided. “It could’ve happened to anyone.”

“Well, it happened to me. To us. This ain’t the end of it.” Tony’s jaw tightened, and his eyes flashed with anger. “These thugs messed with the wrong guy.”

Chapter 8

Before turning in for the night, Carlita called Pete to fill him in on what had happened.

“I was thinking if your delivery service was successful, I might put some effort into the Parrot House’s deliveries. I’ll be putting it on the back burner for now, at least until after the first of the year.”

“I don’t blame you. It’s a mess. At least Tony and Shelby are all right.”

“Which is the most important thing,” Pete said. “You’re still upset. I can hear it in your voice. Would you like me to come by?”

“I appreciate the offer, but it’s late and I’m exhausted. Something tells me tomorrow is going to be a long day. I’ll be fine.” Carlita stifled a yawn. “See? I’m already half asleep.”

“All right, but if you need me, I’ll have my phone by my bedside,” Pete said. “I love you, Carlita.”

“I love you too. Sometimes it helps just being able to vent.” After Carlita hung up, she brushed her teeth and crawled into bed.

Sleep was elusive. Every time she closed her eyes, the image of the men attacking her son and one of them pointing a gun at him popped into her head.

It was her fault he'd been injured. Her one consolation was that Tony would be all right and Shelby hadn't been harmed. When she wasn't blaming herself, she wondered exactly what the credit card rep had noticed—the significant charge that was in limbo on the pawn shop's business credit card.

Hours later, faint light filtered in through a gap in her bedroom curtains. Carlita rolled over to check the time. Five forty-five. She flung the covers back and reached for her bathrobe.

Rambo, who was sleeping near the foot of her bed, flopped over and opened one eye.

"I know. It's early. I can't sleep and I gotta get a move on so I can run the pawn shop this morning." Carlita's first task was to start a pot of coffee. She took Rambo out for a brief walk, fed him and their cat, Grayvie, and headed to the shower.

Feeling more awake, she grabbed a cup of coffee and settled in front of her computer. Carlita clicked on the local news site and checked the forecast. She scanned the headlines, wondering if they had released the story about Tony's attack, and found it on the first page:

A string of recent robberies has residents on edge.

She double-clicked on the link, her heart skipping a beat as she read about several robberies near Savannah's riverfront district. Similar to what had happened to Tony, some unsavory characters were targeting unsuspecting delivery drivers and even a few locals.

One thing stood out to Carlita about the incidents—each of the victims had been alone at the time of the attack.

“Cowards,” Carlita muttered.

The latest victim was a local driver who had finished deliveries and been down by the river dining with friends. The woman had parked her car a short distance from the restaurant. According to the report, she’d fought back and ended up with a concussion, along with some cuts on her arms and face.

Carlita searched for similar stories on the other news stations, but Autumn’s employer, Channel Eleven News, was the only one reporting on it. Making a mental note to check with her tenant and neighbor to see if she had an inside scoop and additional information, she logged onto her email, balanced her online bank accounts, and headed downstairs to the pawn shop.

Josh, the full-time employee, showed up a short time later. “Hey, Carlita. Where’s Tony this morning?”

“Taking the day off. He was robbed last night while making deliveries for Ravello’s and ended up with a broken arm.”

“Robbed?” Josh’s jaw dropped. “I wouldn’t ever tangle with Tony.”

“Me either. They caught him off guard, knocked him down and robbed him at gunpoint.”

“Tony carries. What about his gun?”

“They took his gun, his identification, his credit cards, which reminds me.” Carlita glanced at her watch. “When I cancelled the business card last night, the rep mentioned a ghosted transaction.”

“One that was sitting in between pending and approved,” Josh guessed.

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

A customer arrived and Carlita helped the woman with some jewelry purchases while Josh rearranged shelves near the door. Business was brisk, and the morning flew by. A part-time employee arrived, giving Carlita time to take a break.

She sent Tony a brief text. *How are you feeling?*

Fine.

How’s your arm? Carlita texted back.

Sore.

You sound a little cranky.

More like a lot.

Carlita chuckled. *I’m gonna swing by Ravello’s, grab some lunch and drop it off.*

Tony didn’t reply, so Carlita took it as his approval. She tracked Josh down and told him she was taking a break to check on her son.

“Tell him I hope he’s feeling better soon.”

“I will.” It was a quick trip down the alley to Ravello’s kitchen. Arnie was there. He pulled Carlita aside to ask her how Tony was doing.

“He’s home resting.” She briefly filled him in on what had transpired. “Did you pull the delivery order page from Ravello’s website?”

“I did. We’ve already had a few people call the restaurant to ask what happened to it,” Arnie said. “You sure you wanna shut it down?”

Carlita told him about the Channel Eleven News story and how robbers were targeting the downtown river area. “Until they can catch these guys, no one is safe. It’s like putting a bullseye on our driver’s back. I can’t risk it.”

“Maybe we should leave the website up and post that it’s temporarily unavailable,” Arnie suggested.

“Yeah. Let’s go that route, at least for now. I hate to give up on it. It’s just getting up and running, but I would never forgive myself if anyone else got hurt.”

“Sounds good. Tell Tony I’m thinking about him and to let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I will.” Carlita packed up a dish of cannelloni, some breadsticks and minestrone soup, enough for Tony’s family and for her, added some Italian wedding cookies for Violet and slipped out the back door.

She reached the landing at the top of the stairs and could hear muffled voices. Carlita gave the door a light rap.

It eased open, and Shelby appeared. “Hey, Carlita. Tony mentioned you might stop by with lunch.”

“I hope I’m not bothering you. I figured I would check on you guys and get him up to speed on what’s happening at the pawn shop.”

“Hey, Ma.” Tony limped into the kitchen.

Carlita's sharp eye noted the faint bruise on the side of his face and a cut above his eyebrow. "You don't look too much worse for the wear. How are you feeling?"

"Restless," Shelby answered.

"I'm not good at sittin' still," Tony said. "How's it goin' at the pawn shop?"

"Good. Business is brisk. Josh and a part-timer are covering for me, so I could take a break and check on you." Carlita held up the bags of food. "Where do you want these?"

Shelby made room at the bar and emptied the bags.

"Nana." Violet skipped across the room. "Is Rambo here?"

Carlita hugged her granddaughter. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. He's at home with Aunt Mercedes."

Violet's face fell. She quickly brightened. "I drew a picture for you." She scampered off and reappeared moments later. "It's you and me when we were making meatballs."

Carlita studied the drawing, her heart melting at the sketch of the two of them standing at the counter, a mixing bowl between them. She smiled when she saw Rambo on the floor nearby. Grayvie sat next to him. "I love this picture. I'm going to frame it and put it on the fireplace mantel."

Violet kept the conversation going while they ate, bouncing from one topic to the next, starting with school, her best friend, Rylee, and then chattered about how her parents were going to take her to the zoo.

"Don't forget about show-and-tell," Violet said.

“Tomorrow morning. I have a note taped to my fridge to remind me. Rambo and I will be there.”

“So we can show my friends his new trick,” Violet said.

“Yes.”

She ate most of her food, inhaled a cookie, and then ran off to watch her favorite television show.

“She’s a little whirlwind,” Carlita joked.

“Violet’s mind is always working, always thinking of things. It can be exhausting.”

“They grow up so fast. Enjoy each moment while you can. I suppose if you gave her a baby brother or sister, it would keep her entertained,” Carlita hinted.

“Ma...”

“I know. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“You’ll be the first to know if, and when, we have news,” Shelby promised.

“I can’t remember what we talked about last night. Were you able to cancel my business credit card?” Tony asked.

“I was. Your new card is on the way.” Carlita polished off her breadstick and reached for her napkin. “Which reminds me. The credit card rep said something about a significant transaction that was out there but had no information about what it was.”

“No information?”

“It was in some sort of limbo screen.”

Shelby's brows knitted. "They couldn't tell you what it was?"

"No. They suggested I call back today." Carlita pulled her cell phone from her pocket and scrolled through the screen of recent calls. "I found the number."

She started to place the call, and Tony stopped her. "Don't you need the credit card number to check on it?"

"Crud. You're right. I left my purse at home." Carlita made a quick call to Mercedes, who tracked down her mother's purse, found the credit card and rattled off the number. "How's Tony?"

"Sore. I'm with Shelby and him now, having lunch."

"You want me to go cover down at the pawn shop?"

Carlita glanced at the clock. Her lunch hour was almost over. "If you don't mind. I'm running a little behind."

Mercedes promised her mother she was on her way, and Carlita thanked her.

She hung up and dialed the card services number. She briefly filled the call center in on what had happened and told them she wanted to check the status of the pending charges.

Carlita could hear a rapid tapping on the other end of the line. "I've accessed the card's information. I see the call log where you cancelled it last night. All charges were removed except for one."

More clicking. "Hmmm."

"The person I talked to last night mentioned a significant charge. It wasn't in the pending screen or the transaction

screen, but in some sort of limbo.”

“I found it.”

Carlita nearly dropped the phone when the agent told her what the charge was for.

“Unfortunately, it’s gone through, and this may cause a huge issue for you.”

Chapter 9

Carlita briefly closed her eyes, mentally preparing for the worst-case scenario. She wasn't far off.

"It appears whoever stole your business credit card with the name Anthony Garlucci as the primary cardholder used it to rent a vehicle."

"Rent a vehicle?" Carlita sucked in a breath. "How can... how can they do that?"

"It depends," the man on the other end of the line said. "Was anything other than the credit card stolen?"

"My son's driver's license, some other credit cards, his wallet with some cash. Do you..." Carlita's mind reeled. "Do you have the name of the car rental company?"

"It was Coastal Car Rentals." There was a moment of silence. "The address is somewhere in Savannah, Georgia. I can't tell you for certain, but my guess is whoever stole his wallet used his identification and credit card to rent a vehicle. Are you anywhere near there?"

"We live in Savannah."

"Are you kidding me?" Tony hissed. "Someone rented a car using my name?"

Carlita held up a hand, trying to hear her son in one ear and the credit card representative in her other. "What do you suggest we do, other than dispute the charge?"

“Contact the local driver’s license office and police department. Notify them of the theft. If I were in your shoes, I would also visit the rental company.” The guy on the phone was sympathetic but basically told Carlita there was nothing he could do considering the rental had already gone through.

She thanked him for the information, ended the call, and set the phone on the counter. “This is awful. You need to call the Georgia Department of Driver Services and let them know your driver’s license was stolen.”

“I already did, last night.”

“What exactly did the credit card company say?” Shelby asked.

“The robbers took Tony’s identification and credit card to Coastal Car Rentals, somewhere here in Savannah, used both to rent a vehicle and the charge went through.”

“So we’re on the hook for the rental?” Tony asked.

“Because we reported the card stolen, I believe we only have to pay the fifty-dollar fee. At least that’s the way I understood it when I asked,” Carlita said. “Unfortunately, we have a much bigger problem.”

“The crooks are driving around in a car they rented in my name using my identification.” Tony’s jaw tightened. “We gotta get over there and see what’s up.”

“I agree. I would rather do it in person.”

While Tony got ready, Carlita called Mercedes to fill her in and ask her to continue covering at the pawn shop until she and Tony got back.

“This is bad,” Mercedes said. “What if they smash the car?”

“I don’t even want to think about it.” Carlita pressed a light hand to her forehead. The possibilities of what might happen were endless. There was no way the robbers would return the vehicle. What if they wrecked it, or worse yet, caused an accident and hurt someone?

And the robbers had her son’s identification tied to their business account. The implications took her breath away.

“We’ll know more once we get over there.” Carlita caught Tony’s eye as he limped back into the room. “Tony’s ready to go. We’ll stop by after we’re done.”

“Who was that?”

“Mercedes. She’s going to cover for me while we go to the car rental place.” Carlita followed her son down the steps and to her vehicle.

She could tell from the stormy expression on his face he was in no mood to talk. She wasn’t either as she teetered between being furious someone had the nerve to use Tony’s license, not to mention his credit card, and feeling like she was going to throw up.

Using Tony’s phone for directions, they reached the rental place a short time later.

Carlita pulled alongside the curb and studied the building. It wasn’t a national car rental chain but more of a mom ‘n pop standalone rental shop. An angular parking lot surrounded the small brick building. A massive chain-link fence ran along the perimeter of the property.

She stepped out of the car and heard a dog barking off in the distance. It wasn't necessarily the worst neighborhood, but it wasn't exactly the best either.

Tony waited for her to join him on the sidewalk. Carlita saw her son wince and slowed her pace as they made their way to the front entrance.

The overhead bell chimed, announcing their arrival.

The faint aroma of mothballs and peppermint wafted in the air. Carlita hesitated for a fraction of a second, taking in their surroundings. Early eighties honey oak paneling lined the office walls. Faded checkerboard linoleum covered the floor. A faux butcher block ran the length of the counter. On closer inspection, she realized it was missing several sections.

A woman, heavy-set and with short gray hair, placed the book she was reading on the desk. She eased out of her chair and approached the counter. "Hello. How can I help you?"

Tony stepped forward. "My wallet was stolen last night, along with my driver's license and some credit cards. The credit card company told us someone rented a vehicle from this place using one of the cards."

The woman's eyes narrowed, and Carlita glanced at her nametag, *Teri*.

"You're saying someone rented a vehicle last night using a stolen identification and credit card?"

"Yes, ma'am," Tony said. "My credit card was used and, more than likely, my driver's license."

"What's your name?" The woman slipped her reading glasses on and pulled an old tin container toward her. She

licked the tip of her finger and began flipping through a thick stack of index cards.

“Anthony Garlucci.”

“Anthony Garlucci. We had several rentals yesterday.” She repeated Tony’s name several times as she continued flipping.

She abruptly stopped. “I found it.”

“Don’t you...keep the rental information online?” Carlita asked.

“We do both.” Teri patted the laptop next to her. “This thing is glitchy, so we keep paper copies for backup. Besides, I’m old school and prefer pen and paper, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I see where it might come in handy,” Carlita said.

Teri unfolded the sheets of paper and smoothed them out. “Anthony Garlucci.” She started to slide the paperwork across the counter and then snatched it back. “Before I let you see this, I’ll need to see some identification.”

Tony’s jaw tightened. “It was stolen. Last night. Which is why we’re here.”

“Right. Right.” The woman tapped the side of her forehead. “Duh.”

“I can show you mine.” Carlita removed her wallet from her purse and showed the woman her driver’s license.

“Thank you.” Teri slid the papers toward them.

Carlita leaned in, her breath catching in her throat when she saw the photocopy of Tony’s driver’s license. There was also a receipt for hundreds of dollars.

The third sheet was the rental agreement where the agent had filled in the vehicle's information and the VIN number. "Premium sedan." Carlita's eyes squinted as she struggled to read the handwritten information.

Teri shifted the papers. "They rented a white four-door sedan. A BMW. Someone has good taste."

Tony quickly scanned the sheets. "When are they supposed to return it?"

Teri tapped the top corner. "Looks like they only rented it for a couple of days. It's supposed to be returned Tuesday." She craned her neck. "Noon Tuesday."

Carlita stared at Tony's driver's license, her son's solemn expression staring back at her. "How can you rent to someone without proof of insurance?"

"We tack on our own insurance if a customer doesn't have proof." Teri tilted her head. "Without looking at the backup, I'll guess it added a few hundred or so bucks to the rental."

"Which will be charged to us," Tony grimaced. "What about a phone number? They must have given you a phone number."

"Right there." Teri pointed to a number jotted at the bottom.

Carlita's heart plummeted. The thugs had thought of everything, even using Savannah Swag's phone number as the contact. "This is our pawn shop's phone number."

Teri perked up. "You own a pawn shop?"

"Savannah Swag over in Walton Square."

“I love your place. You get some good stuff.” Teri’s brows furrowed as she eyed Tony. “I thought you looked kinda familiar. You work there.”

“It’s a family-owned business,” Carlita said. “Tony also manages it.”

“Sorry about the bad luck,” Teri said. “I suggest you report the car stolen, tell the cops what happened, and go from there. If you’re lucky, and I mean really lucky, they’ll bring it back.”

“Can we have a copy of this?” Carlita placed her hand on top of the papers.

“Sure.” The woman gathered them up and hustled over to the copier. She ran copies and returned. “It’s been a while since we’ve had a bogus rental.”

“It’s happened before?” Tony asked.

“Yeah.” Teri leaned an elbow on the counter. “It usually involves families or couples. They split. One of them decides to screw the other one over by using their ID and credit card to go out for a joyride.” She shook her head. “I’ll never forget the young gal who came in, rented a hot rod car, trashed it and her ex was on the hook.”

“How awful,” Carlita said.

“Not much we can do except report it to the police, have them be on the lookout for it, keep your fingers crossed and hope for the best.”

“We’ll be in touch.” Tony thanked her for the information and followed his mother out of the building.

He folded the papers and shoved them in his pocket before climbing into the passenger seat.

“I’m sorry, Son,” Carlita apologized. “This is all my fault.”

“Quit blaming yourself, Ma. It could’ve happened to anyone.”

Carlita told him what she’d discovered about the string of robberies in the river district area.

“Figures. I don’t even know if it’s worth bothering to call on Tuesday. There’s no way they’ll return the car. I’m going to track them down and make them pay.”

“How you gonna do that?”

“Start driving around town, looking for a white BMW sedan.”

Carlita wrinkled her nose.

“I’ll find ‘em. One way or another, I’ll find them if I have to chase down every white sedan within a fifty-mile radius.”

If Carlita Garlucci knew one thing about her son, it was once he set his mind to something, nothing was going to stop him. She almost felt sorry for them. When Tony got his hands on them they were going to regret the day they robbed her son.

Chapter 10

On their way home from the car rental company, Carlita and Tony stopped by the downtown police station to make sure the robbery report had been filed and to fill them in on the car rental. She mentioned the Channel Eleven News story about the string of robberies to the officer on duty.

“We’ve had an uptick in reported robberies,” the cop admitted. “Unfortunately, it’s that time of the year.”

“Time of the year?” Carlita echoed.

“The holidays. Seems like these types of crimes happen more often during the holiday season.”

Tony leaned his uninjured elbow on the counter. “I’ve been wondering, did the officers who showed up after my attack talk to anyone in the building?”

“I can’t confirm because I wasn’t there, but it’s standard operating procedure, to find out if there were any witnesses.” The cop reached for the mouse. “Let me pull up the file to see if there are any notes.”

He adjusted his glasses and peered down his nose. “One of the responding officers knocked on a few doors. There aren’t any names listed as potential witnesses.”

“Meaning no one was around?” Carlita frowned. “How can that be? What about the customer, the one Tony was delivering to?”

The cop shrugged. “Could be they were home but didn’t want to get involved, so they didn’t answer the door. It happens more than you think.”

“Figures,” Tony muttered.

“I have the information on the rental car and will enter it into the system. I also have your contact information as Savannah Swag pawn shop.” The cop rattled off their business number. “Is this correct?”

“It is.”

“We’ll keep you posted if we find anything.”

Tony thanked him. Back outside, he held the car door for his mother before returning to the passenger seat. “What a waste of time. Ten bucks says they won’t do anything.”

“They have the license plate number and a description of the vehicle. It’s possible once they put it out there, someone will spot it.” Despite trying to sound encouraging, Carlita’s gut told her the expensive luxury car was long gone.

Tony was on the hook for it, at least he could be. If not, it would be a tangled mess of figuring out who was responsible for the loss. The car rental company for not doing a better job of verifying the renter? Their insurance company for the loss? The credit card company who approved the charge?

Or the Garlucci family and her businesses. The thought of what could happen if the rented vehicle wasn’t returned or found took Carlita’s breath away. She reminded herself the most important thing was her son and Shelby were okay. Nothing was more important than their lives.

Cards, licenses, vehicles could all be replaced. The thought helped put everything into perspective. Carlita was also certain she would stick with her plan to suspend deliveries. It wasn't worth it.

Back home, she eased the car into her parking spot.

“What's she up to now?” Tony asked.

“Who?”

“Elvira.” He jabbed his finger toward their neighbor's parking lot. “She rented an excavator and is digging a hole.”

Carlita shut the car off and reached for the door handle. “She told me she was getting permission to dig up her parking lot after her metal detector hit on something.”

“She's crazy.” Tony grabbed his sunglasses. “And she's making a mess.”

They exited the car and crossed over to Elvira's lot, where they found her sporting a bright yellow hardhat, brown overalls and a pair of black rubber boots. She was seated atop a large piece of excavating equipment. She swung around and dumped a bucket full of dirt on top of a large pile.

She maneuvered the equipment back around and Carlita began waving her arms.

Elvira waved back. She shut the engine off and hopped down. “Hey, Carlita. Tony.” She eyed Tony's bandaged arm. “What happened to you?”

“A couple of thugs robbed me at gunpoint last night.”

“Seriously?” Elvira blinked rapidly. “Let me guess...you were over in the Second Street River District.”

“How did you know?” Carlita asked.

“It’s my job to know. Besides, I’ve been getting a few inquiries from businesses in that area who are nervous. A string of robberies can kill a business. No pun intended.”

“We stopped by the police station to let them know the robbers used Tony’s business credit card to rent a car. The cop who took down the information didn’t completely brush it off, although he wasn’t getting super excited about it either,” Carlita said.

“Your credit card got stolen, and they rented a car?”

“All it took was a credit card and my driver’s license,” Tony said. “They got some cash and, believe it or not, they even took the bag of food.”

“I have a hard time picturing anyone sneaking up on you,” Elvira said.

“It happened. Two guys jumped me and then one of them stuck a gun in my face. I busted my arm when they knocked me to the ground.”

“Sounds like the same group who robbed one of The Ghost Roast delivery guys.”

Carlita’s eyebrows shot up. “They were robbed too?”

“Yep. Tierney, the owner, had me swing by to see how she could beef up not only building security, but she was also looking for pointers on keeping her drivers safe.”

“And her driver was robbed over in the same area?” Carlita asked.

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like I’ll be patrolling the area at night after work.”

“Son, you can’t become a one-man vigilante.”

“I’m not gonna sit back and let them get away with what they did, not only to me but to every other delivery driver they’ve been terrorizing,” Tony said.

Carlita could tell from the look on her son’s face there was no room for discussion and let it drop. “How’s it going?”

“Eh.” Elvira tipped her hand back and forth. “Every time I use the metal detector it finds something else.”

“Which means it’s working.”

“To find this kinda stuff.” Elvira reached into the bin on the back of the excavator and held up a dented metal coffee can. “I better find something soon or I’m going to be in the hole as far as costs on this project.” She grinned. “I did it again. Get it? I’ll be in the hole?”

Carlita rolled her eyes. “You’re on a roll. You haven’t found anything yet.”

“I found a couple of things, some old coins I need to get checked out.” Elvira shaded her eyes and surveyed what was left of her gravel parking lot. “I figure I have one more day of digging and then I’ll throw in the towel and fill it back in. Renting an excavator isn’t cheap.”

“Your vans are clogging up the alley.” Tony jabbed a finger toward the EC Security Services vans lined up alongside Elvira’s building. “It’s already a tight squeeze.”

“Like I said, I’ll start wrapping this up either later today or tomorrow morning, filling it all back in and move on to the

next phase of my quest for fame and fortune. Sandy Sue offered to let us park in her lot, but it's a hike all the way over here, especially if we're lugging equipment around." Elvira kicked at a pile of dirt with the tip of her rubber boot. "I figured I would've hit on something good by now."

"It isn't for a lack of trying." Carlita placed a hand on her hip, wondering how in the world Elvira would finish her excavating and fill everything back in—not only fill it in, but turn it back into an actual parking lot, in such a short amount of time. It was a daunting task, and one she wouldn't want to tackle.

"I better get back to work." Elvira climbed back into the cab. "Time is money."

"I'm surprised you got the city's approval this fast. It was only the other day you said they were coming by to review your request," Carlita said. "These things typically take forever. Who is your contact?"

"I...uh." Elvira averted her gaze. "I can't remember and will have to get back to you."

"Elvira Cobb." Carlita folded her arms. "You're trying to hurry because you don't have the city's approval yet."

"It's merely a formality." Elvira waved dismissively. "The inspector said he would start working on it."

"Do you have any idea what will happen if they find out you started excavating without a permit?" Tony asked.

"I don't plan on getting caught, but if I do, they'll probably fine me a few hundred bucks, which is why I'm trying to wrap this up ASAP."

Carlita shook her head and turned to go.

Elvira stopped them. “Hey. You’re not going to turn me in, are you?”

“No, Elvira. We won’t rat you out, but all it will take is one disgruntled neighbor or even one of your employees to place an anonymous call to the city and you’ll be busted.”

“Exactly, which is why...”

“You’re in a hurry.” Carlita finished her sentence. “Thanks for the information on The Ghost Roast.”

Elvira promised to let Carlita know if she heard anything else and waited for them to exit the area.

Whirr. Whirr. Elvira fired up the excavator. The alley shook as she dug into the ground and scooped up another bucket full of dirt.

“She’s a trip,” Tony chuckled. “I gotta hand it to her—once she sets her mind to something, she doesn’t let it go.”

“Ever. At least she’s sectioned off the area that she’s tearing up and not digging up the entire thing.” Carlita paused when they reached the stairway leading to Tony and Shelby’s apartment. “Are you seriously thinking about driving around town looking for the rental car?”

“We both know whoever rented it doesn’t plan on returning it. They have a free car. Not only a free car, but a luxury sports car. It wouldn’t be hard to swap out the license plate. No one would be the wiser.”

Tony had a point. Why return the vehicle? All they had to do was swap out the plate and they would have a free ride for

as long as they wanted—at the Garlucci family’s expense.
“I’m heading over to the pawn shop to give Mercedes a break.”

“I’m gonna run upstairs to let Shelby know what happened and will catch up with you.”

“You don’t want to take the rest of the day off?”

“I spent the morning sittin’ around twiddling my thumbs. I need to keep busy.”

“As long as you’re feeling up to it.”

“I am.”

Carlita made the short trek back to the pawn shop. On her way, she called Pete to fill him in on the recent developments.

“They rented a vehicle using Tony’s driver’s license and your business credit card, and Tony plans to drive around town and try to track them down,” Pete said.

“In a nutshell.”

“It doesn’t sound safe to me.”

“I agree, but my son...actually all of my sons are bullheaded. Once they get something in their heads, they won’t stop. Tony’s mad, not only at the creeps who robbed him, but I think he’s angry at himself for what he thinks was allowing it to happen.”

“Because he has the tough guy mindset and can’t stand the thought of the robbers getting the jump on him.”

“Literally. Not only are my sons bullheaded, but they also feel they have to defend the Garlucci family reputation.”

Carlita circled the building and stopped near the pawn shop’s

front entrance. “I gotta get back to work. Mercedes has been covering for me and Tony.”

“Don’t forget about our Wednesday dinner date,” Pete reminded her. “I’m itching to try out my new grill. I bought some beautiful king salmon and plan to grill it over cedar planks.”

“It sounds delicious. And healthy.” Carlita’s voice softened. “I love you Pirate Pete Taylor.”

“And I love you soon-to-be Mrs. Pete Taylor.”

A soft smile lifted the corners of Carlita’s mouth. If nothing else, she had Pete...and her family.

Chapter 11

Mercedes circled the store floor and caught up with her mother. “I was just getting ready to call you. How did it go?”

“The robbers rented an expensive car using Tony’s driver’s license and credit card. They’re supposed to return it by noon Tuesday, which we all know won’t happen, so Tony’s planning on driving around town looking for a white BMW.”

“By himself?”

“Yeah.” Carlita wagged her finger. “And don’t be getting any ideas about going with him.”

“Me?” Her daughter innocently batted her eyes. “What makes you think I would do that?”

“Because you’re just like your brothers.”

“We’re Garluccis.”

“Through and through,” Carlita said. “Maybe I should go with him. I don’t want him confronting them alone if he somehow manages to track them down.”

“That’s a big ‘if.’”

“Right. The scary thing is, we aren’t the only ones. There’s been a string of robberies. Elvira mentioned The Ghost Roast’s driver was robbed in the same area—the Second Street River District.”

“You’re a member of the Savannah Area Restaurant Association,” Mercedes reminded her. “Have you checked around to see if anyone else has been targeted?”

“No, but I think I will.”

Mercedes’ cell phone chimed. She snatched it from her pocket and tapped the screen.

“Who is that?”

“No one.” Mercedes held it away, blocking her mother from seeing. “I’ve been working on something all day.”

“What kinda working on something?”

The phone rang. “I gotta take this call.” Mercedes pivoted and darted out into the hall.

“Kids.” Carlita shook her head and plopped down in front of the computer. She logged into her email account, tracked down the association’s group list and tapped out a quick message with the subject line, “Have you been robbed?”

She hit send and started to walk away when she received her first reply and then a second, quickly followed by a third, all echoing a similar story, about how their delivery drivers were wrapping up their evening route and had been robbed.

One of the other restaurant owners suggested an emergency meeting, and the others quickly agreed. With a little back and forth, they set up a meeting for later the following week.

She felt a light tap on her shoulder and spun around to find Tony standing behind her. “What’s that?”

“I emailed the SARA group to see if anyone else has been targeted. At least three other restaurant delivery drivers were

recently robbed.”

Tony’s expression grew grim. “I figured I wasn’t the only one.”

“We’re meeting at Ravello’s Thursday at two. We can compare notes and maybe come up with some sort of clue about who might be behind it.”

“Unless I track the weasels down and start banging some heads together.”

Carlita sucked in a breath but remained silent.

“I know you don’t like the idea of me going after them.”

“I don’t, but I also understand. Maybe I should go with you.”

Tony began shaking his head. “No way, Ma. Shelby said the same thing. I’ll handle this myself.”

Carlita excused herself to help a customer, her son’s words echoing in her head. It would be two—or more—against one...again, and even though her son would be ready this time, he would also be outnumbered.

She stayed to help until Josh returned from his late lunch and had enough time to swap out her street clothes for her restaurant uniform.

Ravello’s was filled with Sunday brunch diners, another dining option Carlita had recently implemented. Her restaurant was quickly becoming *the* hotspot for tourists and locals alike, and she attributed part of the success to Autumn’s feature stories. Half the battle was having people discover her Italian eatery.

She was competing against some wonderful establishments, Savannah fixtures, including Pete's Parrot House Restaurant. It was hard to compete with an authentic pirate restaurant steeped in history, both owned and run by a pirate.

More than once, she tossed around the idea of advertising as an authentic mafioso family eatery, but quickly dismissed it. She was on the "family's" radar as it was.

Despite her desire to avoid drawing unwanted attention to the Garluccis, trouble seemed to follow her and her children.

Perhaps it was a family curse. Whatever it was, she would handle this new crisis like she always did. Head on.

Chapter 12

Carlita was up early the next morning and spent some extra time grooming Rambo. She tied a blue and white bandana covered in doggy treats around his neck and then gathered up the stuff she would need for the new trick Violet and Rambo had been working on.

They crossed town by foot, arriving at the elementary school as morning recess was ending.

Carlita made her way to the office to check-in and was directed to her granddaughter's second-grade classroom. The teacher greeted her at the door and they chatted until the students began making their way inside.

The room quickly filled, and the children whispered excitedly as they pointed at Rambo, who sat obediently by Carlita's side. When he saw Violet, his tail thumped and Carlita's heart melted at the look of pure joy on her granddaughter's face.

The teacher waited until everyone was seated. "Today is show-and-tell day, and it's Violet Garlucci's turn." The teacher motioned to Violet, who promptly slid from her seat and marched to the front of the classroom.

"Why don't you tell the class who our special visitors are, Violet?" the teacher prompted.

"This is my Nana and Rambo. They live next door to me and my family. Rambo and I like to go for walks and I teach

him new tricks.”

Carlita beamed with pride as Violet took the bag from her and set it on the desk. “We call this the muffin cup trick.” She unzipped the bag of treats and gave one to Rambo.

“I think he’s ready,” Carlita said. “We’ll go out into the hall. Let us know when you want us to come back in.”

She led the pup out of the classroom and patted his head. “I think you made Violet’s day,” she whispered.

Moments later, Violet appeared and escorted her grandmother and pup back inside and to the front of the classroom.

“I hid treats in two of the muffin cups. Rambo is going to find them.” Violet placed the muffin tin in the center of the floor. She hurried to her grandmother’s side, grasped Rambo’s leash, and led the pup to the tin. “Find the treats, Rambo.”

Rambo circled the tin and sniffed the paper cups. He nosed a center one out of the way and promptly gobbled up the treats beneath it.

He circled a second time and snagged the next set of treats hidden beneath the paper cup.

Violet triumphantly lifted the tin. “He got them all on the first try.”

Rambo’s success was met with an enthusiastic round of applause.

“Show us another trick,” one of the children called out.

Violet turned to her teacher, who nodded her head.

“Shake Rambo.” Rambo and Violet shook. He scooted back for his second command and for his grand finale, the clever pup took a bow.

The class applauded again.

“Is it okay for the children to pet Rambo?” the teacher whispered under her breath.

“Yes,” Carlita whispered back. “He’s very good with children.”

Going by rows, Violet’s teacher invited the children to say “hello.”

Carlita wasn’t sure who was more thrilled—Violet for a clever show-and-tell or Rambo, who was eating up every second of the adoration and affection.

Finally, it was time to leave, and the teacher allowed Violet to walk her grandmother and Rambo to the door.

“Thanks for coming, Nana.” She impulsively hugged her grandmother and Carlita briefly closed her eyes, hugging her back. “You’re welcome, Violet. This is the best day I’ve had in a very long time.”

“Me too.”

Violet patted Rambo’s head. “Good job, Rambo.”

“We’ll see you later.”

The smile was still on Violet’s face when Carlita reached the end of the hall and waved goodbye. It had been a good day. One of the best.

She arrived home to find Mercedes was gone. Her daughter had left a note saying she would be out for a while and had taken the car. Carlita sent her a quick text to make sure everything was all right.

Are you okay?

Her daughter promptly replied. *Yeah. I'm fine.*

Where are you?

Running some errands.

In town?

Around town.

“What is she up to?” Restless, Carlita and Rambo headed back out. They meandered down to the river, watching as the ferryboat chugged across the river toward Hutchinson Island.

It picked up speed as a freighter appeared off in the distance. Carlita lingered, watching the massive ship slip past. She could see workers on the open deck.

Carlita waved, and one of them waved back.

Rambo began tugging on his leash, eyeing a squirrel who was within chasing distance.

“We have plenty of squirrels at home,” Carlita reminded him.

They settled onto the nearby bench, where she kicked off her shoes and began massaging her sore feet. Her thoughts

drifted to the robbery and Tony's insistence on tracking down his attackers.

What if he somehow found them? What if Tony confronted them and one of them pulled a gun and shot him?

The "what ifs" made her stomach churn. She recognized the look in her son's eyes. He was going to try to track them down, regardless of the consequences.

"C'mon, Rambo."

The pup abandoned his limited pursuit of the squirrel and trotted ahead of Carlita. They took the long way around the block, savoring the mild November weather.

The holidays and wedding were right around the corner. Life was going to get very busy for Carlita. Not that she minded. Busy was better than being bored.

Back at home, she tidied up the kitchen and then trekked downstairs to the pawn shop to check on Tony. "Any word on the car yet?"

"Nope. They have until noon tomorrow. I'll call again, but I'm not holding my breath."

"Either way, we'll figure out what to do."

The rest of Carlita's day passed quietly and noon the following day, she ran down to the pawn shop to check in again.

She found Tony sitting in front of the computer, a glum expression on his face.

"How's it going?"

"Okay."

“You gonna call to see if the BMW was returned?” Carlita asked.

“Already did. Just like we figured, it hasn’t.”

“I’m sorry, Son.”

“Not as sorry as those thugs will be when I find them.”

Sensing her son was in no mood to discuss it, she wisely headed back upstairs to get ready for her shift at Ravello’s.

The hours flew by and before she knew it; it was time to head home.

The following day was a repeat of the previous, with Carlita checking on Tony after her shift at the restaurant ended. He seemed in slightly better spirits, although she still detected an undercurrent of aggravation and anger.

She ran into her daughter, who was on her way out. “Where are you headed?”

“To run a few errands.”

“Where?”

“Around town,” Mercedes said. “Have you talked to Tony today?”

“Yes. If you can call it that. It was more of a one-sided conversation. He’s still upset about the robbers and the car.”

“And making plans to start searching for both.”

“I can’t stop him, but it does worry me,” Carlita admitted.

“Me too.” Mercedes motioned toward the stairs. “It’s Wednesday, date day with Pete. Where are you going?”

Carlita's hand flew to her mouth. "I almost forgot. Oh my gosh. I gotta go get ready."

"Have fun," Mercedes called out as her mother flew up the stairs.

Back home, Grayvie greeted her at the door. He followed her to the bathroom and watched while she turned the water on and started filling the tub.

"Did you miss me?"

Meow.

"I guess you did." Carlita scooped the cat up and snuggled him. "Maybe someday we can take you to Violet's school for show-and-tell."

The tub finished filling and Carlita stripped down. A small sigh escaped her lips as she slipped into the warm water. She closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing, reassuring herself the robberies were behind them. Her son was safe and maybe, just maybe, the SARA group, who was meeting the following day, could compare notes and uncover some clues about the robbers.

Feeling re-energized from her bath, Carlita chose one of her favorite maxi dresses, a vibrant purple one with hints of pale pink woven into the silky pattern.

She did a slow twirl in front of the mirror, critically eyeing her reflection. Carlita had shed a few pounds, mainly because she was always on the run. She often wondered what married life would be like the second time around.

Mercedes occasionally reminded her she wasn't getting any younger, and that it was time to think about slowing down and

enjoying life.

Pete had hinted at the same. Both were successful business entrepreneurs. The only problem was, Carlita had worked so hard to reach her level of success. She was afraid if she took a step back and wasn't constantly pushing forward, she would lose momentum.

Tony had a good grip on the pawn shop. Ravello's was her main concern. Mercedes could easily handle the business end of it, but Carlita didn't want to ask.

Her daughter had her own life, which included her blossoming writing career. She also handled the apartment rentals. It wasn't fair to place the burden of the restaurant on her when it was Carlita's idea to open Ravello's in the first place.

She applied a light layer of foundation, a few brushes of mascara, and a dab of color to her cheeks. She stepped back to critique the results.

Four years. Four years had passed since Vinnie's death and their move from New York to Savannah. There were times it seemed like only months and others it seemed like they had lived in Georgia forever.

She studied the wrinkles around her lips and creases in her forehead. Carlita had earned every single one of them and was proud of every line. Mother, grandmother, business owner and soon-to-be wife.

Her cell phone chimed. It was Pete, giving her a heads up he was in the alley waiting.

Carlita grabbed her purse and dashed down the stairs. She flung the door open, nearly colliding with her betrothed. Both took a quick step back.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I didn’t mean to plow you over.”

“You can plow me over any day.” Pete leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. “You look beautiful. I love the dress.”

“Thanks.” Carlita smoothed the front. “It’s one of my favorites.”

Pete escorted her to the passenger side of his truck and held the door. She scooted all the way across to the center and he chuckled as he climbed in.

“I feel like a teenager on my first date. I hope we never stop being in love.”

“We won’t, not if I can help it.” Pete placed a light hand on her leg as they coasted out of the alley and headed toward his apartment.

He circled around the parking lot and pulled into his private spot in the back. At his insistence, Carlita waited for him to make his way around to open her door.

Her feet touched the ground, and he pulled her into his arms, kissing her soundly.

All thoughts of thugs, stolen cards, missing rental cars and identification were forgotten as the kiss deepened.

Carlita leaned in, placing a light hand on the front of Pete’s shirt, feeling the steady beat of his heart and the warmth of his skin through the thin material.

He began lightly caressing her neck.

Finally, he stepped back, his eyes dark. “Many more kisses at that heat level and we’ll be heading to the justice of the peace tonight.”

“You started it, kissing me like that.”

His eyes twinkled with mischief. “Have I convinced you to head downtown and get hitched?”

“No.” She playfully punched him in the arm. “We can’t change everything up now. Besides, Violet and my other granddaughters would be crushed if they weren’t able to wear their flower girl dresses.”

“I suppose I can wait.” Pete grasped her hand and led her up the stairs. They stepped inside his recently renovated apartment. Soft music played in the background, and the faint aroma of cinnamon greeted them.

“Something smells good.”

“It’s cinnamon meringue pie.”

“Yum. It sounds intriguing.”

“The salmon is ready for the grill.” Pete poured them both a drink and carried them to the rooftop balcony.

The couple chatted while he cooked and then Carlita headed inside to grab the dinnerware and set the table, strategically placing them near the heat lamp that warmed the area.

While Pete finished grilling the fish, she placed the baked potatoes, grilled asparagus, tossed salad and glasses of ice water on a cart and wheeled it from the kitchen to the table.

He plated the fish and set the pieces next to the potatoes.

Carlita's mouth watered. "The fish looks delicious."

"Wait until you try it. Have you ever tasted king salmon?"

"No."

"You're in for a real treat." Pete eased her piece onto an empty plate. "Salad first, but try a small sample."

Carlita grabbed her dinner fork and dug into the corner of the flaky fish. The buttery piece melted in her mouth. "This is delicious."

"King salmon has a buttery flavor."

Unable to resist, Carlita took another bite. "It doesn't taste fishy at all."

"I hoped you would like it."

"Like it? I love it."

While they dined, they talked about the upcoming wedding, the holidays, and finally Tony's robbery.

"Did you see the email reminder I sent to the SARA group earlier today? We're meeting at Ravello's at two tomorrow."

"I'll be there. Perhaps we can all compare notes and come up with some good information. I'm sure Tony isn't taking this sitting down."

"That's an understatement. He's fit to be tied." Carlita shifted the topic to a more pleasant one and before she knew it, it was time to head home.

She helped Pete finish clearing the dessert dishes and load the dishwasher before the couple meandered out of the

apartment and climbed back into his truck.

It was a short drive to her place and as they coasted into Carlita's alley, she could see the apartment lights were on. "Mercedes is home. She took the car and went somewhere earlier, but didn't want to tell me what she was up to. I hope she wasn't driving around town trying to help Tony find the car." Carlita confessed the robbery still had her on edge.

"Mercedes reminds me a lot of you."

"I hope that's a compliment," Carlita teased.

"Of course it is." Pete walked her to the door and waited for her to unlock it. He gave her a long, lingering kiss. "I'll see you tomorrow at two."

"At Ravello's. I think the side room will give us enough privacy to talk openly," Carlita said. "Thank you for a wonderful dinner. It was delicious. I enjoyed every bite."

"You're welcome, and I promise you many more." Pete gave her a kiss goodbye and circled back around to the driver's side.

Carlita locked the door behind her and peered through the peephole, watching as he drove off.

She slowly climbed the stairs. When she reached the top, she found their front door was ajar. She could hear voices—several male voices talking loudly.

"Mercedes?" Carlita eased the door open, her breath catching in her throat when she saw who her daughter was talking to.

Chapter 13

Carlita dropped her purse on the side table and stared at her children—all of her children, who were sitting in the living room, except for her oldest son, Vinnie, who stood on the balcony smoking a cigarette.

“What are you doing here?”

Paulie sprang from the sofa. “What kinda greeting is that?” he said as he wrapped his arms around his mother and gave her a warm hug.

She embraced her youngest son. Sudden tears burned the back of her eyes. “What’s going on?”

“I guess we gotta make an appointment to visit our own family.” Vinnie put his cigarette out and joined them inside. He hugged his mother, and she closed her eyes, squeezing him tightly.

“No. But you should at least give me a heads up to let me know you’re coming.” Carlita took a step back and playfully tugged on her eldest son’s thick beard. “What’s all this?”

Vinnie ran a hand along the side of it. “I’m trying out a new look. Do you like it?”

“Eh.” Carlita tilted her head. “I’m not sure. It makes you look...”

“Older,” Mercedes teased. “You look like an old man now.”

“Hey. Hey.” Vinnie playfully punched his sister in the arm.
“Brittney likes it.”

“How are Brittney and the baby?” Carlita glanced around.
“Are they here?”

“No. It’s just me and Paulie.”

Tony tugged on his sling. “They’re here for me.”

“Because of what happened,” Carlita guessed.

“When Tony kept insisting he was gonna track down the robbers, I figured he might need some backup,” Mercedes said. “So I called Paulie and Vinnie and told them what happened.”

“We came to see if we could help. Besides, we haven’t seen you in a while,” Vinnie said.

“But you’re coming back for the wedding.”

“Of course. There’s no way we’ll miss your big day,” Paulie said.

“Tony was filling us in,” Vinnie said. “He mentioned there have been several delivery driver robberies happening in the same area. Sounds like the same group of clowns.”

“That would be my guess.” Carlita told them she was meeting with other area restaurant owners the following day to compare notes. “My gut tells me these guys know ahead of time who they’re going after. It’s almost like they know who to target before they make a hit.”

“These kinda guys aren’t typically very bright,” Vinnie said. “I think the BMW is long gone.”

“Why would they bring it back?” Paulie asked. “They have a free vehicle.”

“Can I get you something to eat?” Carlita stepped toward the kitchen. “Some pasta? Something to drink?”

“We’re fine, Ma,” Paulie said. “We ordered pizza earlier, right after we got here.”

Carlita nudged Mercedes. “This is what you’ve been working on, sneaking away and borrowing the car.”

“Yeah. Mostly coordinating flights, so I only had to make one trip to the airport.”

“It’s so good to see you.” Carlita hugged Paulie again and then Vinnie.

Bam. Bam. She jerked back as someone pounded loudly on her front door. “Now who?” She cautiously eased it open and found her tenant and former mafia bodyguard, Luigi Baruzzo, standing on the other side. “Hey, Mrs. G. I heard you got some company.”

Vinnie strode across the room. He clasped Luigi’s hand and gave him a man hug. “Here’s trouble if I ever saw it,” he joked.

“Right back atcha.” Luigi thumped Vinnie on the back. “How’s it going, boss? How’s biz in Atlantic City?”

“Biz as in busy,” Vinnie said. “Still livin’ the dream. How’s it going with you?”

“I’m settled in, enjoying a slower pace of life here in Savannah. Still dating Dernice.”

“Dernice?” Vinnie arched a brow.

“Elvira’s sister,” Carlita said.

“Right. I remember her.”

Luigi held up a hand. “Before you say anything, she’s nothing like her sister.”

“In other words, she’s almost normal,” Carlita joked.

“Good for you, man.” Vinnie stepped back. “You’re lookin’ good. Clean living must agree with you.”

“It does. I thought I would stop by to offer my pad as a place to crash. I know Mrs. G and Mercedes are kinda tight on space and figured since I had extra room, you could bunk with me.”

“Sure. Thanks, man,” Vinnie said. “I’ll take you up on that.”

“I have room for Paulie here on the couch,” Carlita said.

“Or he can have my bed,” Mercedes chimed in.

“The couch will be fine.” Paulie rubbed his palms together. “So what’s the plan?”

“I figured we could start driving around town to see if we can find the car,” Tony said. “Whoever it is, is targeting the Second Street River District, so it makes sense to start there.”

“I should have more information after I meet with the other local restaurant owners,” Carlita said.

“You guys need any help?” Luigi began cracking his knuckles. “I’m up for a good fight.”

“Hold that thought,” Vinnie said. “We might need to take you up on it.”

Carlita made a pot of coffee while the men and Mercedes gathered in the living room, tossing out ideas about who might be behind the robberies.

“What if it’s an inside job?” Carlita asked as she handed Tony the last cup.

“Inside job?” Paulie echoed. “You mean like a restaurant employee?”

Carlita grabbed a yellow pad and pen from her desk. “Think about it...we’re all in agreement these attacks are planned out, maybe even pre-planned, and the drivers specifically targeted.”

“At least in one area,” Mercedes said.

“There has to be something triggering them.” Carlita flipped the sheets until she found a clean one. “The key is going to be asking the right questions.”

“I would start with location,” Vinnie suggested. “Find out exactly where each robbery took place.”

“Like Tony already mentioned, from what we heard, they were all in the Second Street River District.” Carlita began writing. “I’ll try to confirm that. Number one is location.”

“Timing might be a clue too,” Tony said. “They robbed me while I was making the last delivery of the night.”

“Maybe try to get a description,” Paulie added. “Find out what they were wearing, how many of them there were, and if the drivers noticed any distinct features like scars or tattoos.”

“Look at you?” Mercedes jabbed her brother with her elbow. “Sounding all private eye-ish.”

“Hey, I love those detective shows,” Paulie said. “Maybe after I finish my run as mayor of Clifton Falls, I’ll start a new biz as a PI.”

“Elvira can give you some pointers,” Luigi said. “Speaking of Elvira, have you checked with her?”

“I have. In fact, she was the one who told me one of The Ghost Roast’s drivers was also robbed.”

“They shoved a gun in my face,” Tony said. “Probably wouldn’t hurt to find out if they were robbed at gunpoint.”

“Good one.” Carlita jotted down *weapon used*. “This is some good stuff. I’ll try to get a description, time of robbery, how they were robbed and where they were robbed.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if these all link to the same group or groups,” Vinnie said. “The last thing to find out is how many there were.”

“Two for me,” Tony said. “The one who took my wallet, gun and food and the one who was pointing a Glock in my face.”

“Which was probably also stolen.” Luigi reached for the door handle. “Unfortunately, I can’t hang around. Elvira’s got me working a clo-opening, which means I need to be up early in the morning.”

“Clo-opening?” Carlita asked.

“Closing late and working early tomorrow. I’m covering an RV show over at the stadium. I guess stealing RV décor is a thing.”

Vinnie slung his backpack over his shoulder. “It’s been a long day. I wouldn’t mind having one more smoke and then I’ll be ready to hit the hay.”

Carlita hugged her oldest son. “Thank you for coming,” she whispered. “Tony was determined to be a one-man vigilante, and it was scarin’ me...scaring us half to death.”

“Worry no more, Ma. Tony, Paulie and I are gonna track ‘em down and hit ‘em hard.”

Tony slowly stood, lifting his good arm over his head. “My arm is aching. I’m heading home.” He clasped his brother’s hand. “Thanks for coming.”

Vinnie gave it a light tap. “You would do the same for me.”

“You know it.”

“What time are you planning on cruising around, looking for the car and the clowns?” Paulie asked.

“Maybe around nine.”

“I’ll meet you in the alley,” Vinnie said.

“Ditto,” Paulie said.

“I’ll handle running the pawn shop,” Carlita offered.

“Can I tag along?” Mercedes asked. “I could get some great material for my new book.”

“No,” all three Garlucci brothers answered in unison.

Vinnie playfully tugged on his sister’s hair. “Maybe next time.”

Mercedes pretended to pout. “No fair.”

“You’ll get over it.” Paulie gave Mercedes a peck on the cheek. “You made the right call. You won a few brownie points from your bros for giving us a heads up.”

“And you won a few brownie points for answering the call,” she teased. She quickly sobered. “I hope you find these guys and teach them a lesson.”

“That’s the plan.” Vinnie winked and then sauntered out of the apartment, whistling as he went.

Tony wasn’t far behind. He gave his brother a hug using his good arm. “Good to see you, Paulie. I appreciate the backup.”

“That’s what family is for. Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

Carlita lingered near the door, giving Tony a hug. “Tomorrow will be a better day.”

“It’s already better. We’re going to take down some slimy scum.”

“In a safe way,” Carlita added.

“As safely as possible.”

She closed the door behind him and turned to Paulie. “You sure you don’t want my bed, Son? Our sofa sleeper isn’t the most comfortable.”

Paulie patted the armrest. “Thanks for the offer, Ma. This’ll be fine.”

She ran to the hall closet, grabbed sheets, blankets, and pillows, and darted back into the living room. While Paulie used the bathroom, Mercedes and Carlita made his bed.

Rambo followed him back into the living room. “Would you like me to take Rambo out?”

“You don’t have to.”

“I don’t mind. In fact, a little fresh air will do me good.”

“I’m sure Rambo would be thrilled.”

Paulie coaxed the pup into the outer hall, promising they wouldn’t be gone long.

Mercedes waited until she and her mother were alone. “I hope you’re not mad.”

“Of course not. I’ve been worried sick about Tony trying to track these guys down and take them on, one-armed at that.”

“Me too. Tony had that look in his eye. He was going to go after them and take them down or die trying.”

“Exactly. It’s the die trying part that has me worried.”

“I didn’t even have to ask Paulie or Vinnie if they wanted to come down here to help. As soon as they found out what was going on, they both insisted they wanted to be here.”

Carlita’s throat clogged. “I have the best children in the world. The only issue now is I’ll have to worry about all three of my sons instead of just one.”

“Are you kidding?” Mercedes grinned. “I wish they would let me go with them. Those thugs will be sorry they ever crossed paths with Tony Garlucci.”

“And now they’ll have to face three Garluccis. I almost feel sorry for them. Almost.”

Chapter 14

Vinnie climbed into the driver's seat while Tony slid into the passenger side and Paulie settled in the back. "Where we headed?"

"The Second Street River District, the side of town the thugs are targeting. It stands to reason they're focusing on areas they're familiar with. It's mostly up and coming, but there are a few blocks down by the river, which are a little rough around the edges."

"Tell me which way to go."

Tony directed his brother out of Walton Square to Bay Street, which ran parallel to the Savannah River. They reached the end of the tourist district and turned right. "I figured the best plan was to start at one end and cruise up and down the blocks."

"Sounds good." Vinnie slowly crisscrossed back and forth while Tony and his brother scoured the alleys and side streets searching for a white BMW sedan.

Paulie leaned forward in the seat. "What made you decide to deliver food? Does Ma need to give you a raise?"

"She was having trouble finding someone willing to stick with it. Shelby liked the idea of getting out of the house for a few hours at night. I didn't mind helping Ma until she found someone who would stay."

“In other words, you took on a side hustle,” Vinnie said.

“A side hustle about sums it up,” Tony said. “Most of the drivers, at least the ones I’ve met, already have a full-time job. They take on a second one to make some extra cash and then decide they don’t wanna do it.”

“Is Ma gonna keep delivering?” Vinnie asked.

“She’s suspended it for now. It’s too bad because it was making her a tidy profit.” Tony rubbed his thumb across his fingers. “I hate to see her give it up, which is why I want to find these scumbags. If we can take them down and get them off the streets, she can start delivering again.”

“I like the idea of being vigilantes,” Paulie said. “Nothing exciting ever happens in Clifton Falls.”

“I could pass on this kind of excitement.” Tony winced as he adjusted his seatbelt. “More like aggravation. I’m so ticked off about it. I barely slept last night.”

“Revenge will do that to you,” Vinnie warned. “Sometimes it’s best to let it go and move on.”

“I’d like to, but I can’t. I figure finding them and teaching them a lesson is doing society a favor,” Tony said. “Plus, it’ll make me feel better.”

They reached the end of the street. “Well? Where to now?”

Tony eyed their surroundings. “Let’s circle around City Market and then backtrack toward the other end of the river district.”

“You got it.” Following his brother’s directions, Vinnie cut through a rundown section of town. “This place looks

familiar.”

They cruised past the Black Stallion Club. “Vito and I visited that place a coupla years ago.”

“You’re right,” Tony said. “Speaking of Vito, how are Brittney and Mrs. Castellini doing?”

Vinnie tipped his hand back and forth. “Francesca, she’s a tough cookie, at least on the surface. Brittney is still sad whenever she thinks about her dad’s death and the fact little Vinnie will never meet his grandfather.”

“And Tommy?” Paulie asked. “Is he still running the family?”

“Running it, thinking he’s a bigshot now, all the while putting a target on his back.”

“You ever think about getting out?” Tony asked. “I mean, you got a son now. Do you want to raise him in the family and around a casino?”

Vinnie started to reply and abruptly stopped.

Paulie tapped his shoulder. “What were you gonna say?”

“Brittney wants out for the same reasons you just said. She wants another baby, and I would love to have a daughter, but it’s a no-go with her until I promise we can step away, move away and I find a new career.”

“So?” Tony prompted. “What are you thinkin’?”

“That she’s right. Where we are now is no place to raise kids. I don’t wanna see my son get involved in the family. Vito’s gone. The pull to stay isn’t as strong.” Vinnie tapped the

side of his forehead. “Brittney can come across as an airhead, but she’s not. She sees the writing on the wall.”

“Looking over your shoulder all the time has gotta get old,” Tony said.

“It does, and I’m not getting any younger. Back in the day, I loved the thought of being the boss. Once little Vinnie came along, I changed my mind.”

“Kids’ll do that to you,” Paulie said. “You learn the world doesn’t revolve around you.”

“Bingo. I’m looking at the big picture and figuring out what I want for my family.”

“All you gotta do is mention you’re thinking about getting out and Ma will find a job for you to do down here,” Tony chuckled.

“You can’t say a word to her. I don’t wanna get her hopes up.” Vinnie stopped at the light. “Which way?”

“Turn left,” Tony said. “We’re not far from where I was robbed.”

“About the family. I haven’t decided. Brit and I are in the discussion phase. If, and that’s a big ‘if,’ it happened, the move would be down the road.”

Paulie made a zipping motion across his lips. “My lips are sealed.”

“Ditto,” Tony said. “If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know. We would love to have you down here.”

“Brittney’s itching to move back to New York. Savannah might be a little too laid back for her.”

“I can see that,” Paulie said. “Savannah is southern charm, hospitality and a different way of life. Life at a slower pace.”

“And Brittney is a city girl.” Vinnie watched as a white BMW sedan passed by, going in the opposite direction.

“Did you see what I saw?” Tony asked.

“BMW alert,” Paulie said.

“I’m on it.” Vinnie did a U-turn in the middle of the street and began following the car. “I didn’t get a good look, but I think there was only one person inside.”

“I saw the same.”

Vinnie hit the gas, easily catching up with the sports car. He narrowed the gap between them. “Take a picture.”

“A picture of what?” Tony asked.

“Their license plate in case we lose them.”

Tony fished his cell phone from his pocket, turned it on, and snapped a picture. “You get much closer, bro, and we’ll hit them.”

“Not a bad idea,” Vinnie joked. “It would be one way to get them to stop.”

“And get you a ticket,” Paulie said.

“Ticket schmicket,” Vinnie quipped. “It would be worth it if we found one of the scumbags.”

“And tell Ma what? You used her car to catch the bad guys?” Tony asked.

“True. It probably wouldn’t make her very happy.”

“Not at all.”

“It looks like we won’t have to. Check it out.”

The brothers watched as the BMW slowed, as if the driver was getting ready to turn into a restaurant parking lot. At the last minute, they changed their mind and sped off.

Vinnie stepped on the gas and kept pace. “I’m thinkin’ they know we’re following them.”

“Back off. We don’t want to spook ‘em,” Paulie said.

Vinnie took his foot off the gas. A car pulled out in front of them. “Now we gotta try to get around.” He checked his side mirror.

“Hold up. You can’t pass on a double yellow line.”

“Only if we get caught.”

As luck would have it, a second car pulled onto the street, lengthening the gap.

“Great. We’re starting to lose them,” Tony said.

“I knew I should’ve stuck with tailgating.”

The car in front of them turned off. Up ahead, they could see the BMW slow again. The driver turned their signal on and pulled into a gas station parking lot.

“This might be our lucky day.” Vinnie cruised in behind them.

The trio watched as the BMW pulled alongside a gas pump.

Vinnie circled around and parked at the pump on the opposite side.

Tony reached for the door handle and Paulie stopped him. “Let Vinnie scope it out first.”

“Why?”

“Because if it is one of the robbers, they might recognize you.”

“So?” Tony shrugged. “I want them to recognize me, right before I punch them in the face.”

“Paulie’s right,” Vinnie said. “Let me scope out the scene before we start throwing punches.”

“Fine.” Tony clenched his jaw. “But if I see one of them pumping gas, I’m gonna get out and knock them into next year.”

“Chill.” Paulie squeezed his shoulder. “Be patient. You’ll get your chance.”

Vinnie stepped out of the car and sauntered around to the other side. He began whistling under his breath as he slid his credit card in the slot and entered his zip code. He leaned to the left, watching as the driver’s side door slowly opened.

A sneaker appeared, and then a second one. An elderly woman with gray hair and thick glasses emerged.

Her eyes narrowed as she zeroed in on Vinnie. The woman’s gaze shifted to the car. Her hand trembled as she fumbled inside her purse. She removed her card, tapped the screen and lifted the nozzle.

Their eyes met, and Vinnie looked away, softly whistling under his breath while he continued pumping. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her remove her gas cap and stick the nozzle in the tank.

He turned his back to her and gave a slow shake of his head to his brothers who were watching.

Paulie cracked his window. “Looks like we keep looking.”

Vinnie leaned in. “Yeah. Unless the innocent looking grandmother is driving the stolen vehicle,” he said in a low voice. “This ain’t who we’re lookin’ for.”

Paulie’s eyes widened and he cleared his throat. “Vinnie.”

“What? You didn’t hear me? I said...”

Paulie cut him off. “You got company.”

Chapter 15

“Company?”

“Behind you,” Paulie muttered under his breath.

Vinnie slowly turned to find the gray-haired lady standing directly behind him. “Hello.”

“You’ve been following me.”

“Following you?” Vinnie asked.

“Yes. You started following me over by City Market.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She wagged a finger at him. “You can’t fool me, young man. I recognize your car. There aren’t many 1977 Lincoln Town cars on the roads these days.”

“Ma’am, I have no idea.” Vinnie could see she wasn’t convinced and changed the subject. “I like your sporty set of wheels, too. Would you like to swap?”

Vinnie’s joke seemed to throw her off, and a small smile appeared. “It wouldn’t be much of a fair trade now, would it?”

“It depends. I’m sorry if you thought I was following you.” Vinnie turned on the charm and complimented her again on her car.

It worked, and she started to relax. “My husband was a retired cop and he drilled into my head to always be aware of my surroundings. I guess sometimes I carry it a little too far.”

She turned to go and paused. “You’re a nice-looking young man. Do you live around here?”

“No. I live up in New Jersey. I’m here visiting my mother.”

“Visiting your mother.” She gave him a thumbs up. “You’re a good son.”

“I try to be.”

She leaned in, and Vinnie caught a whiff of her lavender perfume. “What’s your name?”

“Vinnie.”

“Vinnie. I like your name. It’s strong. Solid. Are you married?”

“I am, and I have a young son.”

A look of disappointment flitted across her face. “Shoot. You seem so polite and well-mannered. My granddaughter just broke up with her boyfriend. He was a real jerk and treated her badly.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not in the market for a girlfriend,” Vinnie said. “I don’t think my wife would be very happy.”

The woman chuckled. “True enough. You have a good day.” She finished pumping her gas and Vinnie finished filling his mother’s tank. He grabbed the receipt and waved goodbye before climbing back inside the car.

“Well?” Tony asked as soon as he closed the door. “I take it she’s not the one we’re looking for.”

“Not even close.”

“You were having a friendly chat,” Paulie said. “I heard her ask you if you were married.”

“I think she was trying to set me up with her granddaughter. I told her I was married.”

“So you turned on the charm and she ate it up,” Paulie joked.

“Kinda. I felt bad about making her nervous, thinking we were following her. Her husband was a retired cop. She was admiring the car.”

“Ma keeps this thing in mint condition.”

“It’s a beauty.” Vinnie checked the side mirror. He pulled away from the pump and noticed the elderly woman watching them as they drove off.

“Ladies, young and old, can’t resist Vinnie Garlucci when he turns on the charm,” Tony teased.

Vinnie stopped at the corner, waiting for traffic to clear. “Well?” he asked. “What’s the verdict? Do you want to keep driving around? We have a full tank of gas.”

“Nah.” Tony waved dismissively. “We’ll be wasting our time. I don’t think we’re going to find the white BMW. Whoever took the car is long gone.”

“You could call the rental place, just to make sure,” Paulie said.

“I already did. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to ask again.” Tony placed the call and the person who answered confirmed the car had not been returned. He thanked them and waved his phone

in the air. “Nope. No car. It’s probably on the other side of the country, sporting a new license plate.”

“Before we head home, let’s go back to the scene of the robbery,” Vinnie said. “It might jog your memory and you’ll remember something about that night.”

“Good idea,” Tony said. “It happened so fast. All I could think about was making sure they didn’t get to Shelby, who was waiting in the car. Those kinda things can go downhill fast. He could’ve shot me and gone after her.”

“And it could’ve been bad with you out of commission and them finding a pretty woman all alone,” Paulie grimaced.

“Exactly. She kept a level head and called the cops as soon as they jumped me and she stayed in the car, which is what I told her to do. Now, if they had actually shot me in front of Shelby, all bets were off. I’m proud of her for keeping her cool and doing what she needed to do.”

Vinnie circled the block, peering out the window. “We’re going in circles. I remember seeing that blue and gold striped awning a few minutes ago.”

“You’re right.” Tony studied the street. “We’re getting close. It was pretty dark. Let me see if I can find the address on my phone.”

Vinnie pulled into a parking spot.

“We need to go down one more block, toward the river,” Tony said.

“You got it.” Vinnie waited for a car to pass and pulled back onto the street. “Out of curiosity, how much was the side hustle paying?”

“How much was Ma paying me or how much was I making in tips?” Tony asked.

“Tips. I know when I order food for delivery, I give at least six bucks or try to round it up to twenty percent of the cost of the meal,” Paulie said.

“Which is about what I was getting. About seven or so bucks per delivery.”

Vinnie let out a low whistle. “Doesn’t seem like a lot of money.”

“No one should have to risk their life to earn a few bucks,” Tony said. “Another reason why I’m gonna take these lowlifes off the street and make Savannah a safer place.”

“Maybe you should run for public office,” Paulie teased. “Your slogan could be ‘Making Savannah a Safer Place to Live.’”

“No thanks. I’m perfectly happy running the pawn shop and dealing with the sketchy people who come in there trying to sell fenced goods or people with rap sheets trying to convince me to sell them a gun under the table,” Tony joked.

“I bet you see all kinds come through the doors.”

“You know it,” Tony said. “This is it. This is the building I was delivering to.”

Vinnie crept along until he found an empty spot. The trio exited the car and met on the sidewalk.

“Which building was it?”

“The one with the sign in the window.” Tony jabbed a finger toward the building.

“Was it a legit delivery?” Vinnie asked.

“Yeah. Ma told me later the people called, wanting to know what happened to their food.”

Vinnie shoved his hands in his pockets and spun in a slow circle. “They didn’t hear anything? I mean, they had to be on the lookout for the delivery.”

“Now that you mention it, I’m not sure.” Tony removed his cell phone from his pocket and tapped the screen. “There was a phone number on the order ticket, but it’s gone now.”

“Because they mask the numbers,” Vinnie said. “The phone number disappears when the order delivers.”

“Really?” Tony arched a brow. “How do you know?”

“I checked it out. I don’t like giving out my personal cell phone number considering my line of work and don’t want my number floating around out there.”

“I never knew that.” Paulie shook his head. “Makes sense.”

“I hadn’t quite made it to the building. I suppose it’s possible they didn’t hear anything.” Tony showed them where he’d parked the car, left it running, grabbed the food and started toward the building.

Paulie pivoted, gauging the distance between where Tony had parked and the location of his attack. “How come they didn’t steal your car?”

“Why would they? I would’ve called the cops and told them they took it. They never would’ve made it out of town,” Tony said.

“So instead, they headed over to the car rental place, got hooked up with a sweet ride and drove off into the night,” Vinnie said.

“In a nutshell.” Tony kicked at the step he’d hit on his way down. “This is where I busted my arm.”

“Where did they come from?” Paulie asked.

“From this direction.” Tony approached the side and stepped into the narrow space separating the condo and the building next to it. “They were probably waiting right about here until I walked by. They came up behind me, jumped me and knocked me down. One of them pulled a gun and stuck it in my face while the other one emptied my pockets. They even stole my gold bracelet.”

Vinnie slowly circled the area, listening to his brother. “Were they talking to each other?”

“No. They were too busy yelling at me.”

“Which direction did they go after they robbed you?” Paulie asked.

“Back that way, which makes sense if they came out of the alley.”

“Let’s check it out.” With Vinnie leading the way, they walked single file between the buildings. It opened to an alley on the other side. “They were probably parked back here.”

“Makes sense,” Paulie agreed.

The trio backtracked and began walking toward the car.

“I’ve been thinking about it, trying to remember if they said anything, a name or something,” Tony said. “It happened so

fast, it kinda went by in a blur. Next thing I know, the cops are there. Shelby's freaking out and I'm getting loaded into the back of an ambulance for a ride to the hospital."

"I still think whoever ordered the food would've noticed the cops and ambulance," Vinnie said.

"Maybe when we get back, Ma can track down the number, give them a call and ask them if they remember hearing or seeing anything," Tony said.

"Good idea."

Tony abruptly stopped. "There was one more thing. After they took my stuff, one of them wanted the food. The other one was telling him to leave it."

"They were arguing about taking the food?" Paulie asked.

"Yeah. They probably worked up an appetite, robbing a man, shoving a gun in his face, and scaring the crap out of his wife," Tony said.

Vinnie gave his brother's arm a light tap. "I know you're ticked off and Paulie and I are here to help. Our next step is to see if we can drum up a witness or two by finding out who the order was delivering to."

"And see what Ma and her restaurant group have come up with."

Chapter 16

Carlita finished ringing up the customer's purchases and dialed Tony's cell phone.

"Hey, Ma."

"How's it going?"

"We just pulled into the parking lot and are on our way in."

"Sounds good." She hurried to the back and caught up with her sons. "Any luck finding the BMW?"

Paulie gave a thumbs down. "No luck on the rental, but a little old lady who was driving a similar car tried setting Vinnie up with her granddaughter."

"She did not." Vinnie playfully slugged his younger brother in the arm. "Well...maybe she did."

Carlita made a choking sound. "You chased after a little old lady, thinking she was the robber?"

"We didn't know it was her until we followed her to the gas station." Tony dangled his mother's car keys. "Vinnie filled your gas tank while we were there."

"Thanks, Son. You didn't have to do that," Carlita said. "Have you tried calling the rental place again?"

"Yeah. The car hasn't been returned. It's probably sporting a new license plate, maybe even a new paint color, and is in another state by now," Tony said. "We stopped by the place

where I was robbed. We were thinking maybe we should give the customer a call to see if they heard or saw anything.”

“We already asked when we stopped by the police station to report the car rental,” Carlita reminded him. “The cop said according to the file notes, there weren’t any witnesses.”

“What he said was that no one talked to the cops or answered the door,” Tony said. “It doesn’t mean there weren’t any witnesses.”

“True.” Carlita’s eyes lit. “I have an idea. Follow me.”

She motioned her sons to follow her out of the pawn shop and down the alley to the restaurant’s rear entrance.

The kitchen crew greeted them and the manager on duty made his way over. “Hello, Carlita.”

“Hey, Ty. Did Arnie mention I needed some meeting space for a group of other restaurant owners who are coming in around two?”

“He did. You’ll be meeting in the side room, just off the main dining area.”

“Perfect. Do you mind asking the servers to set up for...” Carlita mentally calculated the number who confirmed they were attending. “Ten, make that twelve in case a couple of extras show up.”

“You got it. I’ll get right on it.”

“Thank you.” Carlita led her sons to the small office area at the end of the hall. Her fingers flew over the keys as she accessed the online delivery system. It didn’t take long to locate the name and telephone number.

“I found the delivery customer’s contact information.” Carlita jotted the number down and waved the slip of paper in the air.

“If they’re not talking to the cops, I doubt they’ll talk to us,” Tony said.

“We’ll see.” Carlita slid the office phone forward and dialed the number. “Good afternoon. This is Carlita Garlucci. I own Ravello’s Italian Eatery over in Walton Square. I’m calling to apologize for you not receiving your delivery Saturday night. The charge should have already been refunded. I would also like to offer you two free meals. It would be dine-in only. I’ve temporarily suspended deliveries.”

Carlita reached for her scratchpad. “You’re welcome. I’ll need to let my staff know you’ll be coming in. What name should I put it under?” She grabbed a pen. “Dale and Karen Coolidge. We hope to see you soon. Before you go, my driver was robbed not far from your building. I was wondering if you may have seen or heard anything.”

“I see. Yes, I understand. How awful. Have you had any other incidents? No kidding. How scary. Is there anything else you can remember or think of?” Carlita nodded. “You’re right. You never can be too safe. We look forward to seeing you soon.”

She ended the call and waved the receiver in the air. “That was enlightening.”

“What did they say?”

“I spoke with Karen Coolidge. She said she didn’t see anything until after the cops showed up, but made an

interesting comment. There was another robbery in their neighborhood last week.”

“Who got robbed?” Vinnie asked.

“Another delivery driver. She’s understandably freaked out and said she’s trying to convince her husband to move.”

“Can’t say that I blame her,” Tony said. “She didn’t see the robbers or me being attacked.”

“Nope. She’s taking us up on the free dinners though, which reminds me, I need to send a note to the staff to let them know.” Carlita typed up a quick message and pressed send. “Done.”

“Good job, Ma.” Tony shifted his feet. “What time is the restaurant group’s meeting?”

“At two.”

“We need a downtown area map.” Vinnie rubbed his beard. “If you have a map, you can mark where the robberies took place and maybe come up with a common denominator.”

“Reese keeps maps on her trolley for the tourists. It’s almost time for her scheduled stop out front.” Carlita ran out the front door and crossed the street, joining a small cluster of riders who were waiting for the trolley.

She didn’t have to wait long.

Ting-a-ling-ting-ting. The downtown trolley appeared.

Reese gave Carlita a friendly wave as the Big Peach reached its stop.

She stood off to the side waiting for passengers to exit and the new passengers to board.

“Hey, Carlita. I haven’t seen you around in a while.”

“I’ve been busy. Business is booming and now with the holidays, it’s been even busier.” She changed the subject. “I was wondering. Do you still stock those super-size maps of the downtown area?”

“Sure do.” Reese opened the storage compartment, pulled out a crisp, folded map and handed it to Carlita.

“Thanks. I’m hosting a restaurant association meeting and need the map to track the recent string of robberies.”

“I heard about it.” Reese glanced in the rearview mirror and lowered her voice. “They’ve been targeting the Second Street River District. It’s scaring the locals half to death. I hope the cops get them.”

“They robbed Tony this past Saturday night.”

Reese’s jaw dropped. “You got hit too?”

“Yeah. They stole his wallet, his gun, and even took the food he was delivering.”

“How awful. I hope he’s okay.”

“He broke his arm and got banged up.”

“I bet he’s an unhappy camper.”

“Unhappy is an understatement,” Carlita said. “He’s determined to track them down.”

Carlita took a step back. “I know you gotta keep moving. Thanks for the map.”

“You’re welcome. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know,” Reese promised. “Tell Tony to hang in there.”

“I will.” Carlita waited for the trolley to pull away before making her way back across the street and to her office area, where her sons were waiting. “Reese had maps.”

“Do you remember the questions we came up with?” Paulie asked.

“To find out how many other delivery drivers were robbed, the time of day, the location, how many robbers there were and if they have a description.”

“You could also forward a copy of the picture Shelby took with her cell phone,” Tony suggested.

“Good idea. I’ll do that.” Carlita scrolled through her messages. “I don’t think she sent me a copy.”

“I have it on my phone.” Tony winced as he shifted his broken arm. “The least they could’ve done was bust my other arm.”

Carlita opened her mouth to offer to forward the picture and changed her mind. The last thing Tony wanted was to appear helpless. He would have to figure out how to manage with one arm until the other healed.

And if she was being completely honest, she would probably feel the same way her son did, with a burning desire to make the thugs pay. They needed to be taken down. The only problem was, Carlita wasn’t sure she wanted her son... her sons to be the ones to do it.

“I forwarded it.”

Ting. Carlita clicked on the message. “I got it.” She tapped the screen and enlarged the picture, once again feeling sick to

her stomach at the image of the man in dark clothing standing over Tony and pointing a gun at him.

“Can you send me a copy?” Vinnie asked.

“I’ll forward a copy to both you and Paulie.” Carlita forwarded the text. “There’s some sort of logo or something on the one guy’s jacket.”

“Yeah. It looks like a reflective emblem,” Paulie said. “Too bad we can’t make out what it is.”

Ting. Carlita’s cell phone chimed again. It was a message from Pete.

I’m here for the meeting. Where are you?

In Ravello’s kitchen.

On my way.

Pete arrived moments later. “A few of the other local restaurateurs are already here. Looks like we’re meeting in the side room.”

“We are. I figured we’ll have close to a dozen.”

“The more input we can get, the better.” Pete shook Vinnie’s hand. “Good to see you again.”

“Same here,” Vinnie said. “When Mercedes told us what happened, Paulie and I figured we would head down to see if we could help.”

“Have you had any luck finding the BMW?” Pete asked as he shook Paulie’s hand next.

“No. I called the rental place again. It hasn’t been returned,” Tony said. “The car is long gone, exactly like I

figured it would be.”

Carlita told Pete about the call to the delivery customer who mentioned another robbery in the neighborhood. “I’m hoping this meeting will shed some light on how these robbers are operating. If we can come up with some sort of common denominator or a profile, we might be one step closer to figuring out who it is.”

“And track their next move,” Vinnie said. “Our best bet is to see if we can figure out who they’re going to target next.”

“So we can be there waiting for them,” Tony said.

“Remember, they’ll be armed,” Carlita reminded them.

“And so will we,” Paulie said.

“I want to come face to face with them and let them know I didn’t appreciate having a gun pointed at my head.”

“And then call the cops to come get them,” Carlita said.

“Yeah, right after I punch them in the face.” Tony’s jaw tightened. “They haven’t seen the last of Tony Garlucci.”

Chapter 17

“Is this everyone?” Carlita set her laptop on the table as she greeted the other members of the local restaurant group. “I don’t see Tierney, the owner of The Ghost Roast.”

“Tierney couldn’t make it,” one of the other restaurant owners replied. “She gave me the information about her delivery driver’s robbery.”

“Thank you all for coming here on such short notice. As I mentioned in my message, my son, Tony, was robbed at gunpoint Saturday around eight-thirty in the Second Street River District.” Carlita gave them as much information as she had. “We spoke with the police, and I also saw a report on the local news that Tony wasn’t the only one.”

“One of my drivers almost got robbed,” Sandy Sue, the owner of the barbecue joint across the street, chimed in. “He had just finished his delivery and caught someone coming toward him. He took off and managed to make it back to his car.”

“Did you report it to the police?” Pete asked.

“Sure did, not that they could do anything, since a crime hadn’t actually been committed,” Sandy Sue said. “It freaked him out and he quit the next day.”

There was some discussion, and Carlita discovered two other local drivers had recently been robbed, both in the same area of town.

“There have to be more common denominators besides targeting the river area.” Carlita grabbed her notes. “What about the time of the robberies?”

“Evening for my guy’s incident,” Sandy Sue said.

“Same for my driver,” another owner said. “It was the last delivery of the night.”

Sandy Sue made a choking sound. “Mine too.”

Carlita’s expression grew grim. “Same for Tony. It was his last delivery of the night.”

“Because they have more cash on them,” Pete theorized. “This is too much of a coincidence.”

“Agreed.”

The group discussed the timing of the robberies and Carlita began assembling the information:

Time: Late evening. Last delivery.

Location: Second Street River District.

Description of suspects: Two robbers, dressed in dark clothing.

Method of robbery: Robbed at gunpoint.

“We’re getting somewhere. My daughter-in-law was in the car when Tony was robbed. She took a picture. I’ll forward a copy to each of you so you can show it to your drivers.”

“Mine is long gone,” Sandy Sue reminded her. “I can try to reach him to have him take a look at it.”

“You’ll see from the photo that one of them has some sort of reflective logo on his jacket. They stole Tony’s wallet, his

credit cards, his gun. They even took the food.”

“Scumbags,” Sandy Sue growled.

“I can’t help but wonder how they’re figuring out which deliveries are the last ones of the day.” Pete circled the room. “It’s almost as if the robbers have specific information about the delivery and/or the drivers.”

Carlita motioned to Sandy Sue. “How is your delivery system set up?”

“It’s all online.”

“Ours too,” Carlita said. “The system is pretty slick. The customer places the order. One of our kitchen employees monitors the orders and sends a confirmation. Once the order is ready, they notify the customer it’s out for delivery.”

“Same here. DOT is worth every penny,” one of the other restaurant owners chimed in.

Carlita’s heart skipped a beat. “You use DOT, the Delivery on Time software program?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Sandy Sue echoed.

“What if...” Carlita’s mind whirled. “What if the robbers somehow managed to hack the system? They’re tracking the deliveries and attacking our drivers?”

“Or one of our employees who is tracking the orders has partnered with the robbers and is behind it,” Sandy Sue said.

“It’s a possibility.” Pete tapped his chin. “Based on what we’ve learned, I believe it’s the same two people. There are too many similarities.”

“How can we prove it and, more importantly, how can we stop it?” Carlita slipped her reading glasses on and grabbed her cell phone. “I still have Jared, the DOT system sales guy’s phone number in my contact list. Let me call him. Maybe he can tell us exactly how someone could access the system remotely or hack it.”

She dialed his number, and it went directly to voicemail. Carlita left a message, asking him to give her a call, and rattled off her cell phone number. “He didn’t pick up. If I hear back, I’ll let you know what he said.”

The group threw out several ideas, all reaching a similar conclusion. There was only one way to prove their theory—that the robberies were an “inside job” being plotted and planned out by an employee or employees who had figured out a way to hack the system, track the local restaurant deliveries and target the drivers.

“There could be even more area restaurants involved,” Sandy Sue pointed out. “Owners who aren’t a part of this group.”

A cold chill ran down Carlita’s spine as the realization of what needed to be done became increasingly clear. “We need to set up a sting.”

“Yep.”

Tony’s words echoed in Carlita’s head. *They haven’t seen the last of Tony Garlucci.* Her son would be more than willing to help, but did she want to put him in harm’s way again?

“I might have an idea, someone who can help us try to nail these guys.”

“Tony,” Pete said.

“Tony, along with Vinnie and Paulie.” An uneasiness settled over Carlita. The robbers, at least for now, were content to rob and run, but things could go south quickly, putting her sons’ lives in grave danger. The thought of it made her queasy.

The meeting ended with Carlita promising to email the group a copy of the notes she’d taken, Shelby’s photo and, hopefully, a plan.

Pete waited until they were alone, and Carlita followed through on her promise to forward the information to the others in the group. “Do you really want Tony to become involved?”

“He’s already involved,” Carlita said. “He won’t stop until he pays these guys back for what they did. Maybe if we’re pro-active, we can limit the level of danger.”

“The robbers have a gun.”

“So do my sons.”

“The decision would be yours. It would be a tough one, if you ask me.”

“Don’t I know it.” Carlita blew air through thinned lips. “Not only would it be Tony, but also Paulie and Vinnie.”

“I suppose if you knew how much time Vinnie spent around the criminal element and the level of danger and difficult situations he’s involved in on a daily basis, it might not be as scary to you.”

“True. I don’t want to know.” Carlita cast a concerned look toward the door. “What should I do?”

“As you pointed out, Tony won’t stop trying to find these two. Maybe playing offensively isn’t such a bad idea.”

Carlita watched as a police car cruised past the restaurant’s front picture window. “I wonder what’s going on.”

“Going on?”

“A cop car just went by.” Carlita eased past Pete and made a beeline for the front door. The car sat idling at the corner. The driver did a U-turn and stopped in front of the pawn shop.

Her scalp tingled as the uniformed officer made his way inside.

Pete slipped in next to her. “Where did he go?”

“Inside the pawn shop. I’m getting a bad feeling.” Carlita hurried out of the restaurant and onto the sidewalk, with Pete close behind. “Maybe they have a break in the case.”

“I’m not holding my breath.”

The couple entered through the pawn shop’s front door and walked to the back, where the cop stood talking to Mercedes.

“What’s going on?”

“This officer is here to talk to Tony,” Mercedes said.

“I’ll try to track him down.” Carlita turned to go. Her daughter stopped her. “I think he’s in the alley with Vinnie and Paulie.”

She ran out the back door and glimpsed her sons standing behind Tony’s car. “Hey!” Carlita waved her arms and Paulie waved back.

She began motioning them toward her.

Vinnie took a drag on his cigarette, trailing after his brothers, who were heading in her direction.

“What’s going on? Any luck with your restaurant group?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. I’ll fill you in later. A cop is inside the pawn shop looking for you.”

“Maybe they found some hot goods and traced it back to our place.”

Carlita pressed a hand to her chest. “True. I never thought about that.”

“I’ll go see what’s up.”

Vinnie caught up with them. “How did the meeting go?”

“I have some interesting information. I’ll fill you in after Tony talks to the cop who is inside the pawn shop asking to speak to him.”

“Maybe they have the thugs who robbed him and are looking to get a positive identification,” Paulie said.

“Wouldn’t that be something? There’s only one way to find out.”

With Tony on his way in, Carlita trailed behind her other sons, offering a quick prayer there was a break in the case, that the cops had found the robbers and she wouldn’t have to worry about her sons putting themselves in a potentially dangerous situation.

Carlita hung back while Tony approached the cop.

“I’m Tony Garlucci. My mother said you were looking for me.”

“I am.” He flipped his notepad open. “You were recently robbed in the Second Street River District.”

“Correct,” Tony confirmed. “It was Saturday evening around eight-thirty.”

“And injured during the robbery.”

Tony lifted his arm sling. “Yep. I busted my arm, got a nice little shiner on the side of my face and cut my lip.”

“During the robbery, certain items were stolen from you,” the officer said.

“My wallet, some cash, credit cards, my driver’s license.”

“And a handgun.”

“Yes, a handgun.”

Carlita began to feel lightheaded. What if her son’s gun had been used in another robbery...or worse yet, someone had been shot?

“My Ruger G2. They also took the food I was getting ready to deliver.”

The cop flipped the page. “I have some information here on a vehicle. A white BMW four-door sedan was rented using your stolen information.”

“From Coastal Car Rentals. We spoke to Teri the other day. I’ve called several times to see if the car was returned, although I don’t know why I even bother. I doubt we’ll ever see it again. It’s probably sporting a new license plate and is halfway across the country.”

“No.” The cop shifted his feet. “We found the car, or in this case, what’s left of it.”

Chapter 18

“What do you mean...you found what’s left of the rental car?” Tony asked.

“We found it during a chop shop bust,” the cop said.

“Great,” Carlita groaned.

“From what we can piece together, whoever robbed you rented the BMW and drove it to the chop shop. They disassembled it and the parts were sold off.”

Carlita and her son exchanged a quick glance. “I guess this means we’re going to have to file an insurance claim.”

“Good luck.” The way the cop said it made Carlita think they were going to have anything *but* “good luck” having the theft covered by insurance.

Half the battle would be determining who was responsible: Ravello’s liability insurance, their car insurance or the credit card company’s insurance. “Are you any closer to figuring out who the robbers are?”

“There are a lot of moving parts and our investigation into the chop shop is ongoing. We believe there’s a professional group of people involved. So far, no one we picked up is talking and...” The cop paused.

“And what?” Tony asked.

“We think it’s part of a bigger operation.”

“Bigger operation,” Carlita echoed.

“Linked to others across the country, although it hasn’t been confirmed.” The cop excused himself to run back to his patrol car and grab the paperwork for Tony to sign.

Vinnie, who was standing nearby listening in, spoke. “Those guys won’t talk.”

“You mean the crooks who were tearing the cars apart?” Paulie asked.

“Yeah. These kinds of operations have deeper ties, if you know what I mean.”

“The chop shop is a front for other things,” Carlita guessed.

“Exactly. They don’t randomly pop up. I’m sure an entire network of people is involved. The robbers are the low men on the totem pole. The chop shop workers aren’t much higher.” Vinnie rubbed his thumb and fingers together. “This is a bigger operation involving a lot of money. Naming names would be a good way to end up floating in the river face down.”

Carlita pressed her palms together. The glimmer of hope that the car would be recovered was long gone. What if the insurance companies refused to reimburse the car rental company? Would she and her businesses be on the hook for a new BMW?

“Don’t worry, Ma.” Tony adjusted his sling. “We’ll figure out how to file a claim on this one. Although it might take a little time.”

“You’re right. That’s what insurance is for. I’m guessing if this happened to us, we aren’t the only ones,” Carlita said.

“Which means our best bet is to figure out who the little guys are at the bottom and work our way to the top,” Vinnie said.

Pete reluctantly consulted his watch. “I hate to meet and run, but I need to get going.”

“Thanks for coming,” Carlita said. “It was worth the effort.”

“Definitely,” Pete said. “Hopefully, we’re onto something.”

Vinnie waited for Pete to leave. “So you got some good stuff out of the meeting?”

“We did. We compared notes on the robberies and are pretty sure the same two guys are behind them.” Carlita told her children she’d shared the picture Shelby took. “There’s one more interesting link.”

“Between the robberies and the other restaurants?” Mercedes asked.

“Yeah. We all use DOT.”

“What’s DOT?” Paulie asked.

“It’s the name of the restaurant’s delivery system. Delivery on Time.” Carlita briefly explained how it worked.

“Let’s say I’m placing an order for food,” Paulie said. “I log onto Ravello’s website, click on the delivery button and fill out my order.”

Carlita motioned them toward the back and the pawn shop’s computer. She pulled up her restaurant’s website and went through the steps to place an order. A screen popped up.

Deliveries are currently unavailable.

“If the system was up and running, you would complete the order, request a delivery time, enter a phone number and an address. The last step is making the payment and adding a tip.”

Mercedes leaned in. “If all of you are using the same system, someone could have hacked it and accessed this information.”

“Except for the payment information,” Carlita said. “The payment part is encrypted and secure.”

“They have the delivery information, wait for the driver to show up and bam!” Paulie smacked his hands together. “Easy pickings.”

“Do you think it’s an inside job?” Mercedes asked.

“I dunno. Someone who is savvy at hacking sites could have found a way into the DOT system. As you pointed out, it’s also possible an employee at one of our restaurants is working with employees at other restaurants who are monitoring incoming orders.” Carlita stared blankly at the screen. “This makes the most sense to me.”

Vinnie shoved his hands in his pockets. “Figuring out who it is will be almost impossible.”

“Which is why we should go with the plan to set up a sting,” Tony said.

Despite Carlita’s misgivings, her son was right. The best way to catch the perps would be to catch them in the act. “I hate the thought of this.”

“I know you do.”

“They have a gun, remember? They also have your gun,” Carlita said.

“You’re leaning toward just rolling over, giving up on your delivery service and hoping they eventually go away?” Tony asked.

Mercedes tapped her cell phone screen. “Sam’s back. If you don’t need me to cover down here any longer, I’m running upstairs.”

“I think we’re all set,” Carlita said. “Thanks for minding the store and tell Sam we said ‘hi.’”

“Will do.”

Mercedes ran out the back door while two familiar figures passed by the front window. It was Elvira and her sister, Dernice.

Elvira gave a quick wave as they stepped inside. The cop was close behind.

Dernice, noticing the officer, nudged her sister aside to let him pass.

Tony met him at the counter, and they began talking in low voices.

Carlita circled around and met her neighbors by the door. “Hey Elvira, Dernice.”

“What’s going on?”

“The cops found the rental car, or at least what’s left of it,” Carlita said.

Elvira’s eyes grew round as saucers. “It ended up in the chop shop.”

“You heard?”

“On our ham radio. Everyone is talking about it,” Dernice said. “That’s why we’re here. We were thinking maybe after the car left the rental place, the robbers drove it to the chop shop.”

A customer entered the store. Carlita greeted them and waited for them to walk away. “Vinnie seems to think it’s part of a larger operation.”

“These things usually are.” Elvira glanced over her shoulder. “There’s something the cops aren’t admitting yet.”

“What?”

“These guys are targeting people who drive luxury vehicles.”

Carlita blinked rapidly. “They’re no longer just going after delivery drivers?”

“Nope. I guess they can’t keep up with the demand for the high-end vehicles, so they’re resorting to carjacking.”

“How awful.” Carlita’s eyes flashed with anger. “It looks like no one in this town is safe.”

“Especially if you’re cruising around delivering food or driving a fancy set of wheels,” Dernice said.

“My sons want to set up a sting, to flush them out.” Carlita told them about her restaurant meeting and the common denominator, the DOT system.

“You’re going to put the system back online and hope the robbers take the bait and try to rob your sons?” Dernice asked.

Carlita placed a light hand on the back of her neck. The image of Tony lying on the ground with a gun pointed at him filled her head. “I can’t help but think this is going to end badly.”

The trio threw out different scenarios about how Carlita might be able to pull it off. “The bottom line is this could take weeks, even months.”

“Unless you narrowed it down.” Elvira squared her shoulders. “Security, safety and surveillance are my field of expertise. I might be able to help, but I’ll need a little time.”

“My number one concern is making sure my sons stay safe.”

Dernice cleared her throat but kept quiet.

“What were you going to say?” Carlita asked.

“Nothing.”

“No,” she persisted. “I would like to know.”

“At the risk of stating the obvious, your sons have probably been in harm’s way more times than all of us put together.”

“True, but not because of me.” Carlita lowered her gaze, wishing for the hundredth time she’d never done deliveries, never let Tony volunteer to take on the side hustle.

The fact the police and even Vinnie were certain the robberies were part of an even larger operation made her want to throw up. She didn’t have much of a choice. Her sons were determined to find the thugs and it appeared the robbers had no plan of stopping, which meant not only were delivery

drivers no longer safe, but anyone driving a vehicle that fit the chop shop's criteria was a potential target.

“I'm willing to be open to what you come up with,” Carlita said. “How much will it cost me?”

“Depends on if you need my hands-on assistance.” Elvira rattled off her hourly rate. “The price includes the use of my equipment.”

Carlita's eyes drifted to her sons, who had accompanied the officer to the front door. “If it keeps my children safe, I'm open to whatever you come up with.”

Chapter 19

Carlita parted ways with Elvira and Dernice, heading out to start her shift over at Ravello's. In between greeting guests and seating them, she mulled over the recent developments.

A group of criminals had spent some serious time putting together a system of robbing drivers, stealing identification and credit cards, renting vehicles, and then taking them to chop shops in the area.

The officer had hinted at a bigger operation, which meant they were no longer dealing with low-level criminals. The thought of becoming involved and possibly hunting down a group of professionals with deep pockets and ruthless operations made her blood run cold.

By the time she ended her shift, her feet hurt, and she was convinced no matter what plan Elvira might come up with and her son's willingness to execute said plan, someone else, someone she loved, would once again get hurt.

She swung by the pawn shop and found Paulie, Tony, and Vinnie were getting ready to close for the day.

"You want me to fix something for dinner?" Carlita asked.

"We were thinking about running down to the Thirsty Crow to grab dinner and a drink and listen to Cool Bones and his band," Tony said.

"You're going to go grab dinner?"

“Sure. I mean, it’s not often I get to hang out with my brothers,” Tony said.

“And then what?” Carlita placed her hands on her hips, pinning her middle son with a stare.

Vinnie placed an arm around his mother’s shoulders. “You think we’re going to take to the streets and try to track down the bad guys?”

“The thought had crossed my mind. Are you?”

Paulie grabbed the stress ball off the desk and tossed it in the air. “We might cruise up and down a few blocks.”

Carlita pressed a hand to her chest. “You’re gonna be the death of me.”

“You worry too much. I promise we’ll be home by eleven,” Vinnie teased.

“Very funny.” Carlita elbowed him, feigning a scowl. “I’m a mother and it’s my right to worry.”

“We’ll be fine,” Paulie said. “Do you want to go with us?”

“Paulie.” Tony shook his head.

“Maybe it’s better if you stay here,” Vinnie said. “I promise, we won’t engage in any behavior we believe will cause us bodily injury.”

“That’s not very comforting.” Carlita hovered in the hallway while Tony finished locking up. “Please be safe.”

“We will.” Tony placed a light kiss on her forehead. “Love you, Ma.”

“I love you too. I love all of you.” With a heavy heart, Carlita followed her sons to the back door. She peeked through the peephole, watching as they sauntered to the end of the alley.

They climbed into Tony’s car, and seconds later his taillights disappeared into the early evening night.

Carlita was up and waiting for Paulie who arrived promptly at ten forty-five. “You didn’t find anyone?”

“Nope.” Paulie sank onto the edge of the sofa and kicked his shoes off. “We even drove down by the river to have a look around. It’s gonna take more of a direct effort to find these guys.”

“I’m glad you’re safe.” Carlita headed to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. “Can I get you anything? A hot tea or maybe a snack?”

“I’m good. We grabbed a bite to eat at the bar,” Paulie said. “Cool Bones has a hot band. They were packing ‘em in tonight.”

“He’s also a great guy.” Carlita chatted with her son for a few minutes, texted Vinnie and Tony to tell them goodnight and then offered to whip up a breakfast the next morning before the pawn shop opened.

She also texted Mercedes to invite her and Sam to join the rest of the family and then headed to bed. Despite knowing her

sons were safe, she tossed and turned.

Part of her wanted them to catch the robbers. Eventually Paulie and Vinnie would have to leave, which meant if they didn't track them down, Tony would keep going, keep searching on his own.

Near midnight, Mercedes arrived home. She could hear her in the other room talking to her brother. The bathroom door shut and then Mercedes' bedroom door closed before it got quiet.

Carlita finally drifted off and woke with a start. She flipped over to check the clock. It was almost six. She flung the covers back, slipped on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt and tiptoed into the living room.

Her son was already up, his bed made and a cup of coffee in his hand. "Morning, Ma. I hope I didn't wake you."

"No. I didn't sleep too good last night." Carlita poured a cup and leaned her hip against the counter. "I'm worried."

"I know you are," Paulie said. "Tony's got it in his head that he wants to get these guys, and I don't think there's any way to stop him from trying."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"The Garlucci men are a stubborn bunch," he joked.

"Like your father."

"Pops was one of a kind," Paulie said. "It's sometimes hard to believe he's gone."

"There are days it seems like it was yesterday, while others it seems a long time ago."

“Pete’s a good guy.”

“The best,” Carlita said. “I never envisioned me remarrying, and to be honest, I would have been perfectly content with my life.”

“Because you found your place.” He sipped his coffee, eyeing her thoughtfully.

“I found my place *and* my passion.”

“I have a confession.”

“A confession?”

While Tony and Vinnie had been a handful growing up, Paulie had never given Carlita and her husband much trouble. He’d always been a dutiful son, got good grades, stayed out of trouble, had ambitions about becoming a politician, and she was proud of all he’d accomplished.

“Let me guess. You were the one who hit the ball and busted out Mrs. Robinson’s garage window when you were twelve.”

Paulie chuckled. “Guilty as charged. I thought Pops was gonna beat my butt, so I fibbed and told him it wasn’t me.”

“He could be a hard man, but he loved you. He loved all of you. Family was everything to him.” Carlita gave her son a lopsided smile as she remembered the incident. Her husband had been livid and even suggested renting a lie detector machine to question each of their sons.

Carlita’s expression sobered. “What’s your confession?”

“After Pops died, I was worried about you and Mercedes.”

“About what would happen to us.”

Paulie nodded.

“Because we didn’t know how to drive. I couldn’t balance a checkbook. I was utterly and completely lost.”

“Yeah. When you told me you planned to move down here, I was surprised. Shocked.”

“I felt I had something to prove to myself. I was also worried about Mercedes.”

“Daddy’s girl,” Paulie said.

“Yes, she was. I was determined to lead by example and somehow found the strength to pick up the pieces and start over.”

“And you knocked it out of the park.”

“Thank you, Son.”

Their chat turned to family, Gina and the triplets and they talked until they ran out of coffee.

“I guess we should start another pot, seeing how we’re having a big family breakfast this morning.”

“Let me help.” Paulie started another pot of coffee while Carlita assembled the eggs, loaves of bread, and packs of bacon and sausage. She found a coffee cake she’d recently purchased from Colby’s Corner Store and let him set the table while she cooked the food.

Vinnie arrived first, followed by Shelby, Violet, and Tony. Mercedes made an appearance, her hair sticking up all over the place, and finally ran back to the bathroom to get ready after being mercilessly teased by all three of her brothers.

It was a loud, chaotic, happy mess of family, all crowding into the cozy kitchen and dining area. The meal was equally as lively with friendly arguments about sports, politics and even some playful ribbing about who was the best dancer.

“You can have a dance-off at the wedding,” Carlita suggested. “We’ll let Violet be the judge.”

Violet clapped her hands. “You can dance with me. Everyone can dance with me.”

The meal ended all too soon, and Carlita reluctantly stood. “This was the best breakfast I’ve had in a long time.”

“Agreed,” Tony said. “We should have at least one family crisis a year so we can get everyone together more often.”

Carlita wagged her finger. “Bite your tongue.” She reached for a dish, and Shelby quickly took it from her. “You made breakfast. We’ll clean up.”

Her children insisted she relax in the living room while they cleared the dishes and cleaned up. She flipped through the local channels searching for the weather forecast when she glimpsed a headline that caught her eye, a news story recorded from the previous evening.

Actually, it wasn’t the headline that got Carlita’s attention, but the photo of a white BMW sedan with a Savannah-Burnham police car parked next to it.

Chapter 20

“Hey! You gotta check this out!”

Carlita’s children dropped what they were doing and ran into the living room. They all grew quiet as they watched the senior citizen with a dog by her side chat with a news reporter.

“It was right around eight o’clock,” she said. “I took my dog for a walk down by the river. I noticed someone following me and kept driving around until I thought I lost them.”

She explained as soon as she pulled into the parking garage of her riverfront condo complex, two men came at her from the stairwell.

“Dozer, my dog, saw them first.” She patted the boxer’s head. “He took off after them and latched onto one of their pant legs. The guy started yelling like crazy. Once Dozer latches on, it’s nearly impossible to get him to let go. A car pulled into the parking garage and scared them off.”

She shivered involuntarily. “I can’t imagine what would’ve happened if Dozer hadn’t been with me. I heard about the string of robberies and am almost certain I was next.”

“That’s her,” Tony whispered.

“Her who?” Carlita whispered back.

Vinnie pressed a finger to his lips.

“This all started earlier today when a young man driving a late seventies Lincoln Town Car followed me to the gas

station. There was something about him I can't quite put my finger on. I'm almost positive he was following me."

"Have you told the police about it?" the reporter asked.

"I have, and I believe the officer is over in his car writing up the report. I got a good look at the man and was able to give a detailed description of him and the car."

The reporter sympathetically patted her arm. "Perhaps your run-in with the men will assist the authorities in tracking down at least one of them."

She tapped the side of her forehead. "I'll never forget his face. He even told me his name, although it probably wasn't his real name."

"Which was?"

"Benny. His name was Benny."

"And you're sure the man at the gas station is also one of the men who came after you in your parking garage?" the reporter persisted.

"I..." The woman hesitated. "I can't be certain, but it seems a little too coincidental I was being followed the same day this happened."

The reporter wrapped up his interview and the screen switched from the woman and reporter to the news station and an anchor seated behind a desk. "Thank goodness the woman's dog scared the men off," she said.

"If not, we could be reporting on a completely different story this morning." The male anchor leaned over and spoke to someone off-screen. "We've received news the authorities are

working on a composite sketch and plan to release it to the public.”

“Great.” Vinnie shoved his hands in his pockets. “Ten bucks says the composite sketch is going to look a lot like me.”

“And if they release something on the car, it’s going to look like Ma’s car,” Paulie said.

Mercedes lifted her hand. “Hang on. I’m missing something.”

“When we were scoping out the scene of Tony’s robbery, we started driving around. We saw this woman driving a BMW. It was almost identical to the one the robbers rented using Tony’s name.”

Vinnie picked up. “I followed her to the gas station and used the pump next to her. We struck up a conversation, and she asked me if I was following her.”

“Which you had been,” Carlita pointed out.

“Yeah. I did a little sweet talkin’ and convinced her she was imagining things. She asked me if I was a local. I told her I was from Jersey and in town visiting family.”

“So, you run into this woman driving a car similar to the one the robbers rented?”

“Close to where it all went down,” Tony added.

Carlita switched the television off. “The interview was from last night. I’ll see if there’s anything online.”

While her children finished cleaning up, she logged onto the computer and began searching several sites. Only one of

them mentioned the woman's story. Frustrated, she finally gave up.

"Autumn almost always has the inside scoop and early information from the news station," Mercedes said.

"You're right."

"I don't think she's left for work yet." Mercedes set her dishtowel on the counter and took off.

She returned a short time later. "Autumn heard about the woman's potential attack. Her name is Rita something. While I was over there, she made a quick call to the station. The cops are planning on holding a press conference at ten to release a sketch of the guy at the gas station and a description of the car."

"Meaning me and Ma's car," Vinnie said.

Carlita wrinkled her nose. "This is a flimsy match. Seriously, just because you ran into this woman at a gas station and hours later, would-be robbers or attackers came after her doesn't mean it was you."

"We were following her," Paulie pointed out.

"And maybe she's paranoid," Mercedes said.

"Paranoid or not, the cops will look into it, especially if they think they can link what happened to her to the delivery drivers' robberies," Tony said.

A horrifying thought occurred to Carlita. "What if the police trace the car back to me? They come by here, discover we're already linked to the robberies, and think we're behind it?"

Mercedes stared at her mother. “Ma is right. She...we have access to the DOT system. Ravello’s started making deliveries around the time the robberies started happening.”

Tony picked up. “And they think we set up some sort of scam to steal the car and were working with the chop shop.”

“All they gotta do is run a check on me, find out about my past, and bam! Perfect profile suspect.” Vinnie stepped onto Carlita’s balcony and lit a cigarette.

“Vinnie was in the pawn shop yesterday when the cop showed up to tell us the rental ended up in the chop shop,” Paulie said in a low voice. “Once the sketch comes out, it won’t take long for them to connect the dots.”

Carlita’s head spun. The implications of what might happen now the authorities had a description of not only her son but also her car, were frightening. “Last night.”

“Last night what?” Tony asked.

“The three of you went down to the Thirsty Crow for dinner and drinks.”

“Yeah.”

“Which is only a couple of blocks from where this woman was confronted.”

“True, but we have witnesses, receipts. We were there eating and drinking,” Paulie said.

“But you also left.”

“Around eleven,” Tony said. “We took a quick drive through the area, but we also have several receipts and can prove we were there.”

“The woman wasn’t robbed or attacked,” Mercedes reminded them. “She thought she was going to be. No crime was actually committed.”

“Except for the fact the robberies are happening near there,” Carlita said. “If the robbers are going after more than delivery drivers, we’ll never be able to figure out who it is.”

“I gotta get to work. I’m also gonna start working on filing an insurance claim for the car.” Tony reminded his mother he needed to leave around lunchtime for a doctor’s appointment to swap out his splint for a cast before he and Paulie headed downstairs.

Vinnie lingered on the balcony. Through the window, Carlita could see him talking on his cell phone.

The clock was ticking. Vinnie and Paulie would be leaving soon. They weren’t any closer to figuring out who might be behind the robberies and now they had to worry about the elderly woman’s potential attack and police report.

Perhaps she had a very vivid imagination and *thought* she was about to be robbed or attacked but wasn’t. Rita, the woman, hadn’t mentioned anything about a gun. What if she was wrong?

Regardless of what happened next, they needed help and they needed it fast.

Chapter 21

Carlita gathered up the information from her restaurant group's meeting and spread it out on the dining room table. She opened a new search screen on her computer and found the local news story about Rita's potential attack, narrowing down the exact location of where it had occurred.

Using the map Reese had given her, she marked the location of Rita's incident and compared it to the delivery drivers' robberies.

As suspected, all had happened close to the river district area. She placed her notes next to it, confirming the robberies happened on a Friday or Saturday night, and all were the last delivery of the evening.

Yet the woman with the white BMW claims her dog prevented an attack the previous evening, which was during the week.

Perhaps the woman wasn't being targeted by the same people. Perhaps it was a completely unrelated incident. Not to mention the elderly woman hadn't actually been robbed or attacked. She just *thought* she was going to be.

Vinnie finished his phone call and slipped back inside the apartment. "Whatcha doing?"

"Going over what we have." Carlita showed him the map of the confirmed robberies, noting the similarities. "These happened on a Friday or Saturday night, all in the same area."

“Which means if they strike again, it will probably be in an area they’re familiar with.”

Tap. Tap. Carlita darted to the door and found Autumn standing on the other side. “Hey, Mrs. G.”

“Hello, Autumn. C’mon in.”

“I can’t stay long. I thought I would let you know the police confirmed they’ll be releasing Rita’s composite sketch and description at ten.”

“Thank you. We’ll be keeping an eye out for it.”

“The cops aren’t having much luck tracking the robbers down.”

“Robbers who may be involved in a chop shop, which is where the car that was rented using Tony’s ID and credit card ended up.”

“A chop shop?” Autumn’s eyes narrowed. “I heard someone around the news station mention a chop shop, but I didn’t know it was tied to the robberies.”

“Crazy, huh?”

“I’m surprised they don’t steal the delivery drivers’ cars and do the same.”

“It’s a thought. Maybe they’re picky about what types of cars they’re stealing,” Carlita said.

“Anyway, I gotta run. I hope they find them soon.”

“Me too.”

Vinnie waited until Autumn was gone. “I talked to Brittney. She’s packing up and heading to New York to spend a couple

of days with her mother. The casino is runnin' smoothly, so I figured I would hang out here until Sunday. If we can come up with a plan to get the robbers to make another move, we'll have a little time to set things up."

"Are you sure, Son? I hate to keep you away from your work and family."

"It's all good."

Paulie strolled into the apartment with Elvira close behind him. "I hope it's all right that I let Elvira in."

"Of course it's all right. Carlita and I are tight," Elvira said. "I've been thinking about your situation and believe the only way to get to the bottom of the robberies is to go with your plan to set up a sting."

"Timing and location are key." Carlita led Elvira to the table and showed her what they had so far. "The robberies all occurred in the same vicinity, on either a Friday or Saturday night and later in the evening."

"Using the online order system you told me and Dernice about," Elvira said.

"DOT—the Delivery on Time system."

"So, you set up some DOT deliveries, prepare to be robbed, and turn the tables."

"You make it sound so easy." Carlita sucked in a breath. "We're talking city blocks. We can't set up one delivery and expect it to work."

"You're right. You'll need a team of delivery people for both Friday and Saturday night." Elvira grabbed Carlita's

yellow pad. “Mind if I borrow a piece?”

“Be my guest.”

Elvira ripped off a clean sheet and set it on the counter. She reached for a pen and hopped onto the barstool. “First, you’ll have to open up the delivery system again.”

“Correct. My biggest issue is I don’t want to put anyone else in harm’s way.”

“No risk, no reward,” Elvira said. “Get the system online again and modify it so you only accept orders for weekend deliveries. My suggestion is to pick a few other key restaurants who are willing to either help or allow us to put drivers in place.”

Vinnie folded his arms. “If you want my two cents, we need tighter control.”

“Tighter control,” Carlita echoed.

“Meaning we do all the deliveries. We can’t have rookies out there trying to make a name for themselves. The more people involved, the greater the chance someone gets hurt.”

Vinnie motioned to his mother. “How many of the restaurant people in your group suspended their deliveries?”

“All of them, at least as far as I know.”

“Not all the restaurants in Savannah are a part of your group,” Elvira pointed out.

Carlita snapped her fingers. “The DOT system. The DOT system has a nifty page where you can see how many other restaurants are using the software and if the accounts are active.”

“So, you can pinpoint DOT, but what about the other local delivery systems?”

“DOT is the largest, most integrated system, not to mention the most widely used one in almost the entire East Coast of Georgia. It was one of the reasons the rep sold me on it. They’ve been around for a long time.” Carlita settled in front of her computer, accessed the program, and pulled up the delivery site. “Not everyone has opted out of the delivery service.”

“Cuz it makes money, Ma,” Paulie said. “Have you ever thought it might be one of your competitors trying to drive you and some of the others out of the delivery business?”

“Good point, Paulie,” Vinnie said. “It could be a competitor.”

“I hate to think someone in the same line of business would stoop that low.”

“Happens all the time,” Elvira said. “What about your boyfriend, Pete?”

Carlita arched a brow. “You think Pete was behind Tony’s attack?”

“No. What I meant was...would he be willing to work with us?”

“He isn’t my boyfriend. He’s my future husband,” Carlita said. “I’m sure he would.”

“How does this system work?”

Carlita scooped over and made room for Elvira, explaining how the DOT system operated.

“Just for giggles, can you access previous deliveries?”

“Sure.” Carlita accessed the records, and the screen began populating with order after order. “This is a snapshot of the last three weeks.”

Elvira reached for the mouse. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” Carlita moved out of the way.

“If you were going to rob a driver, you would do it during the most lucrative time periods.”

“Correct, which is the reason they’re happening on the weekends,” Carlita said.

Elvira began humming under her breath as she scrolled through the previous order screen. “Deliveries nearly double and triple during the weekends. The good news is you have a fairly narrow window of delivery hours.”

“For my own sanity,” Carlita joked.

Elvira slid out of the chair and approached the table, still covered with Carlita’s notes and the map. She slid her reading glasses on. “I’m noticing something.”

Carlita peered over her shoulder. “There’s a pattern to the robbery locations.”

“Yeah. Check it out. The first one was up here on a Friday night. The second was directly below it, but on Saturday.”

“The third was a straight line across the following Friday,” Carlita said.

“And the fourth, a straight line across the next night.” Elvira tapped the top of the map. “Why are they hitting four corners but not the center?”

“Good question,” Carlita said. “Maybe it’s a logistics issue.”

The door flew open, and Mercedes appeared. “What’s going on?”

“We’re trying to figure out how to set up a sting that won’t be a waste of time or too dangerous,” Carlita said. “Both of which seem to be our biggest obstacles.”

Elvira clicked the end of her pen. “We’ve narrowed it down to Fridays or Saturdays. We’ve also narrowed it down to a small geographic area and specific timeframe.”

“Correct.”

“What we need is a lay of the land,” Elvira said. “You know, to scope it out ahead of time.”

“Sam,” Mercedes said. “Sam knows Savannah like the back of his hand.”

Carlita’s eyes lit. “Maybe he can help by giving us a VIP tour of the river area.”

“I’ll check.” Mercedes ran back out, returning within moments, with Sam close behind.

“Hello, Carlita. Elvira.”

“Hello, Sam. You remember my sons, Paulie and Vinnie.”

“Sure do.” Sam shook their hands. “Good to see you again.”

“Same here.”

“How was your trip?” Carlita asked.

“Good. It was nice to decompress and hang out.”

“You look relaxed. I’m glad you enjoyed your time off.”

“Thanks.” Sam changed the subject. “Mercedes said you were trying to nail the guys who robbed Tony and have come up with a general plan.”

“A very loosely planned general plan,” Carlita corrected. “We were thinking maybe if we were more familiar with the targeted area, it would help us put something together.” She showed him what she and Elvira had figured out, how the robbers were targeting very specific locations.

Sam studied the map. “I’m familiar with this area. It’s up-and-coming. Some interesting businesses have set up shop.”

“Interesting?”

“Questionable,” Vinnie guessed.

“In a nutshell.” Sam stepped back. “Would you like a tour? I can point out some of the more unique establishments.”

“I say we take Sam up on the offer,” Paulie said.

“The more information we have, the better,” Mercedes chimed in.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Carlita said. “I know you’re busy, just getting back in town and all.”

“I don’t mind.” Sam glanced at his watch. “I have a few errands to take care of, but could meet you after one.”

“Sounds good.” Elvira folded her sheet of paper. “I have a few errands of my own. Two would be perfect.”

“I appreciate your help, Elvira, but you don’t...”

Elvira lifted a hand and cut Carlita off. “No need to keep thanking me. Rampant crime is good for my businesses, but not good for the community as a whole.”

“So you should love the fact Savannah is being targeted,” Mercedes said.

“You didn’t let me finish. I appreciate a timely food delivery as much as the next person. If all the local restaurants get spooked and shut down, I’ll be forced to start picking up my own food which is way more inconvenient.”

Carlita patted her on the back. “At least you’re consistent.”

“Consistent?”

“Meaning there was a personal benefit to you for offering your assistance.”

“You make me sound so...cutthroat.”

“If the shoe fits...”

Elvira ignored Carlita’s comment. “If we visit in person, we can assess the situation and I can figure out if you’ll need any special equipment.”

“As in renting it from EC Security Services,” Paulie chuckled.

“Hey, I gotta make a living too. It’s a win-win. Catch the thugs and you can crank up the delivery service again. I make a few extra bucks in the process.” Elvira tucked her sheet of paper in her pocket. “I’ll meet you in the alley at two.”

“Carlita?” Sam shot her a questioning look.

Carlita rolled her eyes. “Two is fine.”

Elvira ran out of the apartment, her footsteps echoing on the stairs. Seconds later, the alley door slammed shut.

“She’s a trip,” Vinnie laughed. “Talk about horning in on a situation.”

“That’s Elvira.” Carlita sighed heavily. “On the one hand, I believe deep down she wants to help. Unfortunately, her biggest flaw is she continually gets tripped up on her other half—the one rife with greed and blunt opinions.”

“That about sums her up.” Sam said goodbye and headed out, leaving Carlita and her children alone.

Carlita glanced at the clock. “It’s past ten. Let’s see what Rita gave the police for a description of her potential robber.”

“Also known as a sketch of Vinnie,” Paulie said.

Chapter 22

Mercedes, Paulie, and Vinnie circled around behind Carlita while she accessed the Channel Eleven News' site.

The first link to pop up was titled, *Are the local authorities closing in on whoever is behind the rash of delivery robberies?*

Carlita held her breath as she clicked on the link.

Paulie burst out laughing. "What the..."

"This has to be a joke." Mercedes clamped a hand over her mouth.

Composite sketch of Benny, last seen at the Pop 'n Stop gas station / convenience store on the corner of Berwyn and Metley yesterday. He was driving a late seventies black Lincoln Town Car. There may have been other individuals inside the car.

A snapshot of a vehicle, similar to Carlita's Lincoln Town Car, appeared next to the photo of "Benny."

"Check out the scar on the side of your chin." Paulie doubled over, clutching his gut.

"This ain't even close to lookin' like me." Vinnie slugged his brother in the arm. "Check out the comb-over she gave me."

"It's a mile high and very shiny," Mercedes teased.

Carlita zoomed in on the composite sketch “Rita” had given the authorities. “She got the five o’clock shadow right.”

“That’s about it. I look like a clown,” Vinnie grumbled.

Carlita swallowed hard, looking away from the slightly cartoonish, angular jawline, square forehead, beady eyes and pointed ears staring back at her.

“I look like Chucky married the Wicked Witch of the West.”

“It’s not that bad,” Carlita said. “The good news is that this doesn’t even remotely resemble you.”

“Benny the chucklehead.” Vinnie made an unhappy sound. “Here I was thinking she was a sweet little old lady. Meanwhile, she thought she was chatting with a gremlin.”

Carlita clicked away from the photo, but not before Paulie grabbed his cell phone and snapped a picture.

“What are you gonna do with that?” Vinnie demanded.

“Show it to Tony.”

Vinnie lunged forward, attempting to grab the phone. Paulie was too fast and easily moved out of his older brother’s reach. “Where’s your sense of humor?”

“I left it over on Creepy Street.”

“Enough.” Carlita did a timeout. “This looks nothing like you, Vinnie. There’s no way anyone would confuse you for being this person.”

“True.”

Carlita read the story aloud, which was a repeat of what had appeared on the news station that morning. “Police are asking for the public’s help. If you know anyone who matches this description or has seen this vehicle, they would like you to contact them.”

Mercedes dusted her hands. “At least we have one less thing to worry about.”

“Unless they try tracing the car,” Carlita said. “All it would take is a quick run through of the state’s car registrations to get a match.”

“Late seventies is a pretty broad description. It will take days to sift through them. Besides, I think the cops have their hands full,” Paulie said. “Rita wasn’t robbed. In fact, if the two guys were legit, they could go after her for her dog attacking them. She’s probably nervous like everyone else and overreacted.”

“I have to agree with Paulie,” Mercedes said. “The parking garage was dark. Rita probably had trouble seeing. She did the best she could from memory, remembered Vinnie and got confused.”

“Whatever. I’m gonna go see if Tony wants to head out early for his doctor’s appointment.” Vinnie trudged out of the apartment.

“Vinnie’s a little sensitive about his looks,” Paulie said after he left.

“That’s cuz he’s used to having women swoon and fall all over him.” Mercedes clasped her hands and batted her eyes.

“It’s hard on the ego for a little old lady to describe him as looking like...”

“A mix of scary Halloween movie characters and an old witch.” Carlita smiled as she studied the image. It was a horrible and an almost grotesque caricature—not even close to resembling her oldest son. “I’m taking Rambo out.”

She grabbed the pup’s leash, and they headed out for a long walk, giving her a much-needed break to clear her head. Timing was going to be of utmost importance. Paulie and Vinnie were leaving soon, and if their hunch was on target, the window of opportunity to set up a sting was limited. In other words, they would have to act fast.

While Carlita walked, she thought about what she needed to do. Reactivating the delivery system was first. Nothing would happen without that. She added it to her mental to-do list and then wondered how they would put all the moving parts into place.

She and Rambo finished their walk and as soon as Carlita arrived home, she added the link so customers could use the online order system. She also removed the note stating the service was currently unavailable.

She finished some of her other chores, placed her food order for the week and checked the delivery system screen again. Several orders had already been placed. “That was fast.”

Carlita left the link open and joined Sam and Mercedes, who were already waiting in the alley. Elvira caught up with them moments later and then Vinnie, Paulie, and finally Tony, who was sporting a black cast, appeared.

“I figured we could walk since there are so many of us and it’s a beautiful day,” Sam said.

“I have a bunion on my foot,” Elvira winced. “Maybe I could meet you there.”

“You don’t have to go with us,” Carlita said.

“I want to.”

“We’ll be making a few stops along the way,” Sam warned. “It will be hard to keep up in a car.”

“Fine. I’ll walk, but I might be a little slow.” Elvira pursed her lips and fell into step, quietly listening while the others discussed a potential plan.

They reached the outskirts of the Second Street River District and paused at the intersection.

Sam rattled off the various points of interest. While certain streets were bustling, others were noticeably quieter and the word “revitalization” popped into Carlita’s head.

With their official tour guide leading the way, they continued walking, and Carlita and Elvira pointed out the locations of where the robberies had occurred. Tony’s was the last.

“It’s been almost a week now,” Tony said. “A week of nothing but bad news, trying to sort through this mess, figure out who is responsible for the BMW, deal with my busted arm and learn to write with my wrong hand.”

“At least you’re alive,” Carlita said. “I can’t help but think it could’ve been so much worse.”

They lingered near the spot of Tony’s attack.

Mercedes half-listened to them discuss the incident as she wandered away from the group, peering down the long alley which ran between the buildings.

Curious to find out what she was up to, Carlita followed her. “What are you thinking?”

“I was wondering what these are.” Mercedes tapped the tip of her shoe on top of a metal manhole cover.

“These are manhole covers.”

“I know that. I’m wondering what’s beneath them.” Mercedes shifted her gaze, staring down the sidewalk. “Tony was attacked right over there.”

“Correct.”

“Which is a straight shot from here.”

Carlita slid in behind her daughter. “You’re right.”

Elvira caught Carlita’s eye and meandered over. “Did you find something interesting?”

“Maybe,” Mercedes said. “We were wondering what’s beneath the manhole covers.”

“Tunnels.”

“Tunnels?” Carlita asked.

“Yeah. They’re smaller than the ones in Walton Square, but still large enough to access.” Elvira’s jaw dropped. “You think the tunnels are related to the robberies?”

“Possibly.” Carlita circled the manhole. “Tony said the guys came out of nowhere and I heard similar comments from the other restaurant owners.”

“You think they accessed the underground tunnels to target their victims?”

“It’s a thought. Hey!” Carlita motioned to the others.

They made their way over.

“Did you find something?” Vinnie asked.

“These.” Mercedes nudged the cover. “Elvira said there are tunnels below us.”

“I mean, I think there are,” she backtracked. “I’m not one hundred percent certain.”

“We need something to pry it open and check it out.”

“I have a pocketknife.” Paulie pulled a knife from his pocket and flicked it open. He wedged the tip under the cover and pried it off before carefully sliding it to the side and peering into the opening. “I can’t see anything. It’s too dark.”

Elvira fumbled inside her purse, pulled out a flashlight and handed it to him. “You can borrow my super bright tactical flashlight.”

“Thanks.” Paulie turned it on and beamed the light into the hole. “She’s right. There’s some sort of passageway down there.”

“And a ladder,” Carlita said. “It’s not very big.”

“But big enough to get some thugs up and down it so they can surprise their victims,” Tony said.

“Do you mind if I take a look?” Sam asked.

Paulie handed him the flashlight and the others stepped back while Sam dropped to his knees. He leaned in and spent

several long moments shining the light into the opening.

“I think I know where it leads.” Sam rubbed his chin, focusing his attention toward the streetcorner. “Remember when I mentioned there were a few questionable establishments setting up shop in this area?”

“Yeah,” Carlita said.

“One of them is a speakeasy, an illegal liquor joint,” Sam said.

“And...” Elvira prompted.

“It’s a popular hangout for local chefs and employees.”

Chapter 23

Carlita could feel the blood drain from her face. She stared at Sam in disbelief. “There’s an illegal bar around here where restaurant employees hang out?”

“Yeah, and the only reason I know about it is because I was still on the beat when we raided it a few years ago. It closed shop, reopened again and now the cops kinda look the other way,” Sam said. “It was, and most likely still is, a popular hangout for service industry people.”

“Restaurants, hotels, that kinda thing?” Vinnie asked.

“Exactly. The booze is cheap, more along the lines of moonshine and bootlegger stuff,” Sam said. “I can show you where it is.”

Paulie replaced the manhole cover, and the group followed Sam away from the location of Tony’s attack. He turned right, and they strolled roughly a full city block before stopping in front of a brownstone building. Concrete steps led to a lower level.

As they drew closer, Carlita noticed a small sign, *Beats*, hanging on the front of the door. “This is it?”

“It doesn’t look like much, but it’s a happening place, especially on the weekends,” Sam said.

“How do you know the tunnel leads us to this spot?” Tony asked.

“Because when we raided the place, we discovered they were bringing their stash in through the tunnel.” Sam pointed in the direction they’d just left. “Right down there. At the end of the alley is a loading dock. They would bring the liquor down the alley at night, transport it through the tunnels and right in Beats’ back door.”

Vinnie let out a low whistle. “It sounds like they have a slick operation set up.”

“Slick and rough. Fights and brawls are a common occurrence,” Sam said.

“What if whoever owns the chop shops came here to hire people to rob, steal, and supply them with vehicles?” Carlita asked. “They’re targeting this area...”

“Because they know their way around,” Sam said. “They probably found a couple stiffys who got a cut of what they stole in exchange for getting their hands on cars. They knew the tunnels and had access to your restaurant’s delivery system.”

“DOT,” Carlita said.

“They would hang around, wait for the delivery, head through the tunnel, surprise the driver and Voila! Free money, credit cards, cash and a way to get chop shop vehicles.”

“I think we’re finally onto something,” Mercedes said. “How can we confirm these tunnels connect to the robbery areas?”

Elvira cleared her throat. “I have access to that information.”

“Let’s head back to our place, put a plan together and nail these guys,” Tony said.

Back in Walton Square, the group gathered in the EC Investigative Services front office. Elvira tracked down the online tunnel system and zeroed in on the Second Street River District.

“Just what I thought.” She traced the tunnel system, marking each robbery location. “This was a piece of cake. Easy pickings.”

Tony’s jaw clenched. “Not any longer. I’m ready to deliver a little justice, Garlucci family style.”

“Let me check to see if any more orders have come in for this evening.” Carlita pulled the DOT app up on her phone and clicked on the link. Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed the screen was almost full. “We’re back in business. I have orders from opening to closing. Friday is a good day for deliveries, right behind Saturdays, which is our best day.”

Tony peered over his mother’s shoulder. “When is the last order?”

Carlita scrolled down to the last order of the day. “Eighty-three this evening.”

“Where is it?”

She swiped the confirmation and pulled up the map. “Only a block away from where you were attacked. We need to get back to the house and figure out who is going to be doing what.” Carlita began making her way to the door.

Tony, Paulie, Vinnie, Sam, and Mercedes followed her out while Elvira was hot on their heels. “Do you need any help? Maybe a police grade stun gun?”

“No need.” Vinnie patted his pocket. “I got the real thing.”

“Ditto,” Tony said.

“We’ll all be armed,” Paulie said. “Thanks for the offer.”

“What about surveillance equipment?” Elvira persisted.
“You could catch them in action.”

“It’s going to be an active sting,” Vinnie said. “The equipment won’t do us any good because we don’t have the exact location of where they’re going to strike.”

“Or if it will even be today,” Carlita added. “They might wait until tomorrow, or next week.”

Elvira’s face fell. “What you’re saying is you don’t need me.”

“Not this time,” Carlita said. “At least, not yet.”

“You’ve been a big help,” Paulie said. “Helping point out the spots where the tunnels intersected.”

They reached the corner of the building and Carlita spotted a temporary barricade surrounding Elvira’s parking lot. “I thought you were done excavating.”

“I am.” She quickly stepped in front of her, attempting to block her view.

“Why is the area barricaded?”

“I ran into a minor problem.”

“Oh?” Carlita inched closer, curious to find out what Elvira didn’t want her—want them to see.

“Seriously.” Elvira held out her hands. “There’s nothing to see.”

“In other words, move along,” Mercedes joked.

“Which makes me want to see whatever it is even more.”
Carlita made a mad dash past Elvira.

“Good gravy.” She stared at the large hole, dead center in the middle of Elvira’s gravel parking lot. It was filled with water. “What happened?”

“I hit a water line.” Elvira hurried on. “I’ve already fixed it and am waiting for the water to drain before filling it back in with dirt.”

Mercedes squeezed in next to her mother. “I hope you found something good for all your trouble.”

“Not really. Actually, I’m having better luck excavating my basement.”

“If the city finds out...”

Elvira cut Carlita off. “They’re not going to. I’ll have this filled back in by morning.”

“I hope you do. I wouldn’t even want to guess how much the city would fine you if they found out you dug this hole without a permit.”

“Again, it was an honest mistake. I was almost certain the permit was as good as mine.”

Carlita placed her hands on her hips, pinning Elvira with a stare. “Did you check on the permit?”

“They denied it,” Elvira blurted out. “As soon as I found out they weren’t going to approve my request, I started filling it back in. I got in a hurry and that’s when I hit the pipe.”

Sam placed his hands over his eyes. “I’m not even going to touch this and will pretend I never heard this conversation or

saw what's behind there. I have some free advice. Fix this fast before the public works department makes their monthly rounds and finds it."

Elvira clutched her throat. "When...when is that?"

"The first of the month."

"Tuesday. I gotta get a move on." Elvira was clearly panicked as she rushed off, muttering under her breath. She disappeared inside her building.

Mercedes shook her head. "She has it in her head she's going to strike it rich one day."

Carlita eyed the mess that was once her neighbor's parking lot. "Or die trying."

Tony adjusted his sling. "We got enough on our plate without worrying about what trouble Elvira might have gotten herself into."

"With any luck, someone who thinks they're gonna make a few more quick bucks is about to have a very bad day," Vinnie said.

Chapter 24

“It’s almost game time.” Paulie rubbed his hands together. “Let’s go over the plan again.”

“Which may or may not work,” Mercedes pointed out.

“It’ll work.” Vinnie held up a finger. “First of all, Ma confirmed with the others in her group they’ve suspended deliveries for the time being. If we’re the only game in town as far as deliveries in the area and someone is monitoring the orders, we’ll be targeted.”

Carlita refreshed the DOT order screen. “We’re booked solid from five until nine. Almost all the deliveries are in the Live Oaks Neighborhood, Second Street River District and...” Her eyes squinted as she studied the list. “...one of them is on the same street where Tony was robbed.”

“The odds are in our favor,” Tony said. “Think about it. All the other restaurants suspended deliveries. If you were itching to get your hands on more credit cards and cash, our deliveries would be the perfect target. If you ask me, the temptation will be too great.”

“Unless they know the cops are looking for them,” Carlita said. “They may decide to hold off and wait for things to cool down.”

Paulie tapped the side of his forehead. “Most criminals don’t think too far ahead.”

“All they’re concerned about is the next hit,” Vinnie said.

“I would like to help.” Pete grasped Carlita’s hand. “Even if all you need is a lookout.”

“We appreciate the offer, but I think we have it covered, at least for tonight,” Vinnie said.

“If we can’t get the job done, we might have to regroup.” Tony shifted his feet. “Maybe tweak our game plan, depending on how tonight goes.”

“I hate to think about it.” An uneasiness settled in the pit of Carlita’s stomach. She was knowingly, willingly placing not one, not two, but all three of her sons in harm’s way. It went against every instinct as a mother.

“Tony won’t give up until he nails these guys,” Mercedes reminded her. “His odds are much better—and safer—with Paulie and Vinnie’s help.”

“I know, but I can’t stop being a mother and worrying,” Carlita confessed.

“We’re gonna be fine,” Vinnie said. “If anything, you should be worried about what’s going to happen to these clowns when we catch them.”

Carlita triple-checked the last batch of Friday evening deliveries, the knot in the pit of her stomach growing by the minute. It was crunch time. If the thugs were waiting for a target, they would have one.

Tony gave his mother a one-armed hug. “The earlier runs helped us iron out our operation. Paulie makes the delivery. Vinnie is trailing his every move. I’m in the car with my Glock by my side. If these guys show up, they won’t know what hit them.”

“It won’t be a repeat of what happened to Tony,” Vinnie promised. “We’re ready for them.”

“I’ll be right here, waiting for you to come back.” Carlita gritted her teeth, determined to remain calm. Freaking out and begging her sons to call it a day and forget about catching the crooks wouldn’t help. Regardless of how she felt, Tony planned to track them down with or without his brother’s help.

Arnie waited until they were gone and made his way over. “You have some good sons.”

“The best.”

“They’ll be all right.”

“I hope so. Paulie isn’t accustomed to this kind of activity. Tony is at a disadvantage with his broken arm. Vinnie isn’t even breaking a sweat. I know he’s seen worse, much worse than this.” Carlita parked herself in front of the computer screen, going over all the deliveries, including the ones her sons were currently making.

There were only two left. The most concerning was the one that was in almost the exact same location as Tony’s robbery.

Unable to sit still, Carlita hustled into Ravello’s dining room, helping clear the tables and ring up the meal tickets.

An hour dragged by. She checked her cell phone for the umpteenth time, but there were no messages.

Finally, she made her way to the alley.

Five minutes passed, and then ten. Carlita thought about texting her sons and shoved the phone back in her pocket. The last thing they needed was for her to distract them.

Bright headlights bounced off the side of the building. It was Tony's car. She ran to greet them as they pulled into the parking lot.

"Well?" she asked as soon as they climbed out. "How did it go?"

"They must've gotten spooked," Vinnie said. "During our last delivery, I could hear clanking, like metal, and then footsteps hoofing it in the opposite direction."

"And nothing happened," Carlita said.

"Nope," Tony said. "It's possible they spotted Vinnie and decided not to go after Paulie."

"Or maybe they didn't show."

"We got one more night." Paulie pulled the pile of delivery tickets from his front pocket. "One more night and if nothing happens, I'm not sure what we'll do."

"I was telling Tony and Paulie, I think we need one more person," Vinnie said. "I can cover one side of the street, but we need someone to cover the other."

"Pete offered to help," Carlita said. "I can't think of anyone else."

"Luigi," Vinnie and Tony said in unison.

"He offered to help," Vinnie added. "If we can get Elvira to find someone to cover his work schedule tomorrow night, we

might have a shot at wrapping this thing up.”

“I’ll track her down first thing tomorrow morning,” Carlita promised.

Despite the fact her sons were safe, Carlita spent a restless night tossing and turning. Vinnie was sharp, always on guard, aware of his surroundings and ready for potential danger. He had sensed someone was there.

Had whoever it was gotten spooked? What if they’d noticed Tony’s car and remembered it from their previous robbery? Maybe they needed to use a different vehicle for the deliveries.

Early the next morning, when her sons showed up for breakfast, she shared her thoughts. “It might’ve been Tony’s car. They could have remembered it from before.”

“True. What were you thinkin’?” Paulie asked.

“You could take my car.” Carlita tapped Vinnie’s arm. “Did you ask Luigi about helping tonight?”

“He’s on board, although he’s scheduled to work until eleven. According to Luigi, Elvira doesn’t like to switch her employees’ schedules around.”

“I’ll handle Elvira,” Carlita said.

They discussed the evening’s plan—a repeat of the previous night, but with the addition of Luigi.

Not long after her sons left, the rumbling of heavy equipment shook Carlita’s floor. She grabbed Rambo and his

leash and trekked down the alley to the parking lot.

As suspected, she found Elvira seated atop the excavator. Carlita watched as she swung the bucket around, scooped up a large mound of dirt, and dumped it in the hole. She did this several times before noticing Carlita standing on the sidewalk.

She shut the engine off and climbed down. “Hey, Carlita.”

“Good morning. You’ve almost finished filling the hole.”

“Yep. I’ll have this done within the hour. I already scheduled the equipment to be picked up by the rental company and it will be like it never happened.” Elvira unclipped her hard hat. “How did it go last night?”

“Nothing happened. Vinnie thinks they were lurking nearby, but got spooked.”

“Whoever it is, is probably watching the news and being cautious.”

“I agree, but they’re also probably itching to get more cash and cards seeing how most of the other restaurants have suspended deliveries for now.”

“Except you,” Elvira said.

“We’re the only game in town, or at least in that area of town.”

“So what’s your plan?”

“To try again tonight.”

Rambo attempted to investigate beyond Elvira’s barricade, and Carlita tightened her grip on his leash. “Vinnie seems to think they need one more person to cover the other side of the street.”

Elvira's eyes lit. "You want me to help?"

"We were thinking more along the lines of Luigi."

Her face fell. "Luigi?"

"They need muscle and brawn."

"Luigi already has a full schedule. I'll have to confirm, but I'm almost positive he's working until eleven."

"I was hoping you could find someone to cover for him."

Elvira grew quiet, and Carlita could almost see the wheels spinning. "I'll reimburse you for his time."

"I don't like to switch up schedules. It makes my employees cranky, especially on the weekends. They look forward to their weekends off."

"Just this once."

"You'll have to pay him for his time."

"I will."

Elvira blew air through thinned lips. "I suppose I could cover his shift."

"I would appreciate it. How much do you want?"

Elvira scratched her forehead. "I don't want money." Her eyes slid to the side, toward the back of Ravello's. "You have the best Italian food in town."

"I do."

"I love Italian."

"And..."

“How about we negotiate? I cover Luigi’s shift tonight in exchange for...”

“Food,” Carlita prompted.

“Dinner for six months.”

“Six months,” Carlita gasped.

“Two?” Elvira asked hopefully.

“How about a month.”

“Fine. A month of any meal of my choosing.”

“It’s a deal.” Carlita extended a hand.

Elvira shook it. “Luigi’s a force to be reckoned with. I almost feel sorry if they nail these guys tonight.”

“I’ll just be glad when it’s over.”

Chapter 25

“We’re down to the wire.” Vinnie tapped the top of his Rolex. “We gotta nail these guys tonight or it’s over.”

“It’s not over,” Tony said. “Even if we don’t get them, I’m gonna keep coming back and coming back until I do, even if it’s on my own.”

“I’ll be your side hustle partner whenever I can,” Luigi promised.

“I appreciate the offer, but I can’t expect you to help me. This is my fight. I already feel bad about having all of you here tonight.”

“No one twisted our arm,” Paulie said. “We want to help.”

“Let’s go over the setup one more time.”

The group discussed their plan with each delivery following the same sequence of steps. They followed it to a “t” for the first half of the evening, returning multiple times to the restaurant to restock and grab more orders.

As the evening wore on, the schedule ran like clockwork. Paulie drove to the delivery site, dropped off and then verified Vinnie’s and Luigi’s positions before delivering the food. All the while Tony remained inside the vehicle monitoring the situation.

With each delivery, Paulie slowed his pace, giving potential robbers ample opportunity to come after him.

Keeping an ear tuned in for danger, he casually strolled to his second to the last delivery location. The hair on the back of his neck prickled, and he could sense someone nearby.

Paulie started whistling loudly, his signal to Luigi who was behind him on the opposite side of the street, and Vinnie, who was monitoring his brother's activity from up ahead. He rang the doorbell.

The customers appeared, and they briefly went over the order. They thanked him and handed him a generous tip. Paulie began making his way back to his mother's car, slowing as much as he dared without it appearing suspicious.

He climbed behind the wheel and started the engine.

"Did you see anything?" Tony whispered from his hiding place in the backseat. "I saw you kinda stop, like someone was around."

"I'm pretty sure there was someone coming up behind me. Maybe I'm getting spooked," Paulie said. "We got one delivery left."

"It's up the street and on the same side," Tony said. "Don't forget to give Vinnie and Luigi time to get into position."

"Right." Paulie grabbed the order ticket and pretended to go over it. Minutes passed. "I think they've had enough time."

Ting. Ting. Tony's phone chimed twice. "They're ready for the last delivery."

"Cool." Paulie shifted into drive and crept along the side of the street, stopping in front of his final delivery location. "Here goes nothing."

He climbed out of the car and walked around to the passenger side. He opened the door and spent several moments going over the delivery ticket again. "I can hear someone behind me, between the buildings," he said in a low voice.

Tony slowly lifted his head just enough to peer out the back window, where he caught a flit of movement to the right of them. "I saw it too. Watch your back."

"You know it." Paulie grabbed the bags of food, slammed the passenger door shut and shoved his keys in his pocket. He forced himself not to look in the direction of where the noise had come from and began sauntering toward the apartment building.

Fast, hard steps echoed behind him.

Paulie started to turn and glimpsed someone dressed in black coming at him.

He made a move to sidestep his attacker and ran right into a second guy, who delivered a hard blow to his midsection.

"Oomph!" The bags flew out of Paulie's hands. He stumbled forward and collided with the corner of a fire hydrant.

The thug came at him again. In slow motion, Paulie watched in horror as he started reaching into his front jacket pocket.

In the same slow motion, the man's eyes widened in surprise. He did a half turn.

In a flash, Vinnie knocked the guy off balance. He pulled his gun and pointed it in the thug's face.

Luigi bellowed loudly as he flung himself at Paulie's second attacker. The man went down with the former mobster, pinning him to the pavement.

Tony flew out of the car, gun in hand, and pointed it at the men, now dazed and lying on the ground. "Put your hands where we can see 'em, both of you."

The attackers lifted their hands above their heads.

Vinnie motioned to Paulie. "Let's see what they have."

Paulie reached inside the man's jacket pocket and pulled out a handgun. He checked the other pocket where he found a cell phone. He emptied his pants pockets and found two wallets, a wad of cash and a watch.

"Out for an evening stroll?" Luigi taunted. "Collecting wallets and cash while you were at it."

The man let out a string of cuss words, struggling to break free.

"Where do you think you're going?" Vinnie stuck the heel of his shoe in the middle of his back and pressed down. "Move again and I'll blow out your kneecap."

Luigi reached into the other man's jacket pocket and pulled out a set of brass knuckles, a handgun, two more wallets, and a flashlight. "This is almost like Christmas. You two bozos have been busy."

"Is this everything?" Vinnie asked.

"Unless he's hiding something in his underwear." Luigi reached for the man's belt and he started shrieking in a loud

voice. "I'm clean. I'm clean. I ain't got nothing in my pants! I swear!"

"I dunno. He's a little too freaked out about it." Luigi rubbed the stubble on his chin. "I'm not sure if I believe him."

"Me either." Vinnie played along. "You wanna run back to the car and grab a pair of rubber gloves? This might get kinda messy."

"No!" The man's voice raised an octave, and he began begging Luigi not to strip search him.

"What about you, loser?" Vinnie nudged Paulie's second attacker with his foot. "You hiding anything else?"

"Find out for yourself," the man growled. "It'll be the last thing you do."

Vinnie laughed. "Big words for a little man who is on the ground with a gun pointed at his head."

Tony, who had been standing nearby watching, stepped under the streetlight. "Remember me?"

Luigi grasped the nape of the man's neck and swung him around. "Someone is talking to you."

The man let out a whimper and fearfully turned toward Tony.

"You too, tough guy." Vinnie nudged the former gunman again. "Someone is here who wants to say 'hi.'"

He muttered something unintelligible under his breath and forced himself to look in Tony's direction.

"I have no idea who you are," the would-be robber whimpered.

“Let me refresh your memory.” Tony motioned down the street toward the spot where he’d been attacked. “You jumped me a week ago right there. One of you stole my gun and took my wallet. You rented an expensive car using my ID and credit card and then turned it over to a chop shop.”

He leaned in, their eyes locking. “Wait until the big guys find out you got caught, narked them out about the chop shop and they come after you. There won’t be a prison secure enough to keep you safe.”

“We don’t. We didn’t,” he stammered.

“Liar,” Tony gritted out. “You’re lying.”

“Okay. Yeah, we rented the beemer. We took it on a joyride and abandoned it.”

“You rented it and drove it to a local chop shop,” Tony said.

“We call clowns like you babbo,” Luigi chuckled.

“Wh-what’s a babbo?”

“A useless and expendable soldier. In other words, an idiot,” Vinnie said. “It’s a mafia term.”

“Mafia?” he scorned. “You ain’t no mafia. Don’t let them try to scare you, T.”

Luigi began cracking his knuckles, a gleam in his eye.

The second man shrank back and whimpered again.

The former gunman told him to shut up. “You’re gonna be sorry you messed with us.”

“More like the other way around,” Paulie said.

“Let’s get this over with.” Vinnie grabbed hold of the man’s arm and hauled him to his feet.

Tony clenched his jaw, his eyes dark with fury. All he could think about was Shelby waiting for him in the car, watching him get attacked, seeing the lowlife knock him down and point a gun at him. How she’d spent the last week begging him not to track down the robbers.

It wasn’t good to hang onto that kind of rage, that kind of anger. It would eat at a person, day in and day out. Tony needed to release his rage and let it go, but first...

“This cast reminds me every minute of every day what you two babbos did to me and I’m going to repay the favor.” Tony flung the sling off, pulled his injured arm back and smashed the rock-hard cast into the thug’s face, knocking him out.

Chapter 26

“It’s a beautiful day to be out on The Flying Gunner.” Pete pulled the mainsail and the pirate ship moved effortlessly through the water. “I’m glad Paulie and Vinnie were able to book flights a little later so we could enjoy an early afternoon together.”

“Thanks for inviting us.” Carlita leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. “It has been one of the most stressful weeks I’ve had in a long time.”

Vinnie meandered over to the bar, ordered a drink from the man behind the counter, and stepped over to the railing. “This is going to be one heck of a wedding venue.”

“If ours goes off without a hitch, I might consider adding weddings to my list of events,” Pete said.

“We finally managed to whittle down our list. We’ve only invited a couple hundred people,” Carlita joked.

“I thought it was gonna be smaller,” Paulie said.

“And I thought it would be bigger,” Vinnie said.

“We’ve gone back and forth so many times. But the list is final and the invitations are in the mail.”

“It’s gonna cost some big bucks,” Mercedes said.

“Which is why I decided I’m going to dip into the diamond fund.”

“Diamond fund?” Paulie asked.

“From the Marshland Isles Diamond we found hidden in the basement wall. Tony thinks he has a buyer. We’re splitting the proceeds between Tori, Pete, and me. I even plan to put some money aside to give to Louise Delmario, George’s widow.”

Vinnie coughed loudly. “You’re thinking about giving her money?”

Carlita shrugged. “George lost his life because of the diamond. The least I can do is give her a little something to get by on.”

“You got a bigger heart than me, Ma. George and the Walton Square place have caused you a lot of grief,” Paulie said.

“And also given me a lot of joy. I can say one thing for certain. It’s been one heck of a ride.”

A loud screeching echoed from the lower deck. Elvira appeared, a plate of snacks in hand and a fearful expression on her face. “Crazy bird.”

“Where’s Gunner?” Pete made a move toward her.

“He’s down one deck, making a racket.”

Pete ran down the stairs and returned moments later with Gunner perched on his arm.

Carlita made a cooing sound as she approached the parrot. “Hello, Gunner.”

“Gunner is handsome.”

“Yes, you are,” Carlita agreed.

He began singing, “Yo ho. Yo ho. A pirate’s life for me. I strut on my perch, watching the pretty girls, the pirate’s life for me.”

“Gunner is hungry.”

Pete fed him a chunk of banana.

“Yum. It’s delectee-delicious.”

“Sing your new song.”

“New song,” Gunner mimicked.

“No. *Sing* your new song,” Pete said.

Yo ho. Yo ho. A pirate’s wife for me.

Carlita chuckled. “Is he singing a pirate’s wife for me?”

“Yeah. He came up with it on his own. I figured you could walk down the aisle...err, down the plank to his song.”

“Gunner can sing.”

Elvira muscled her way in. “I haven’t gotten my wedding invitation yet.”

“I just sent them out,” Carlita said.

“Did you invite Dernice, too?”

“I’ve already told you. I’ve invited you, Dernice and all of my tenants. There are two hundred people on our list.”

“Good, because I already have your wedding gift.”

“I can’t wait to see what it is.”

“It’ll knock your socks off.”

“I’m sure it will be unique.” Carlita changed the subject.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. How is the Agamerian project

going?”

Elvira pressed a finger to her lips. “It’s on the back burner, but I think things are starting to heat up again.”

Tony sauntered over. “Ma’s giving you a run for your money in the private investigator field,” he teased.

“All along, I kinda thought it was an inside job. Little did I know Jared, the nice young sales guy who sold me the DOT system, was involved,” Carlita said. “No wonder he never returned my call.”

“And when the cops found out the delivery drivers all used the DOT system and the two thugs we took down started naming names, including Jared’s, it didn’t take long for them to nail him as the person who had hacked into a system he knew inside and out and used it to commit crimes,” Tony said.

“Targeting hard-working drivers, knowing they probably had a chunk of cash on them,” Mercedes added.

“And stealing identification, credit cards, using the driver’s license and cards to rent vehicles at local car rental places, driving them to the chop shop and making even more money,” Carlita said.

“What about the woman who thought she was being robbed in her condo parking garage?” Elvira asked.

“According to Autumn, who heard from the reporter who interviewed her, Rita recanted her story after discovering the two men she thought were going to rob her were actually moving into the building.”

“Those two thugs didn’t stand a chance against the Garlucci brothers,” Mercedes boasted. “I would’ve loved to have seen

the look on their faces when Tony showed up and knocked one of them out with his cast.”

“The one was squirming and cryin’ like a baby when he thought Luigi was gonna treat him to the mobster’s special search,” Paulie chuckled.

“How many wallets and stolen stuff did you find in their pockets?” Carlita asked.

“Too many,” Paulie said. “Along with a wad of cash, Tony’s gun and another stolen gun.”

Luigi rubbed his hands together. “It was like the good old days. There’s nothing like a good, old-fashioned shakedown to get the adrenaline pumping. I have to admit, it was fun.”

“Because you did it for the right reason.” Carlita handed him an envelope. “This is for you.”

Luigi began shaking his head. “I didn’t do it for money, Mrs. G. I did it for the family. For your family.”

“I know you did, and we all appreciate it more than you know.” She waved the envelope. “Please. I insist.”

“All right.” Luigi reluctantly took the envelope and shoved it in his pants pocket. “I can’t wait for the next time you guys blow into town and decide to start bustin’ some heads.”

“Literally, at least for Tony,” Mercedes said.

“I’m not one for violence too much anymore, but it felt good to give them back a small taste of their own medicine,” Tony said. “Now, all we gotta do is wait for our insurance company to battle it out with Coastal Car Rentals’ insurance

company to figure out how they'll recoup the loss of the BMW."

"We can't forget how Sam helped. If not for him giving us the tour and us finding the manholes that ran underground and connected the river district, we never would've pieced this all together," Carlita said.

"And how he told us about the illegal bar the service industry locals hang out at," Mercedes said. "I hope the city finally shuts it down."

"Now that they have a link between the bar and the chop shop, I think things will move pretty fast," Tony predicted. "We took down two crime rings at once."

"A two for one," Mercedes quipped. "And Ma has finally found someone who might actually stick around and run the deliveries for her."

Carlita crossed her fingers. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed. Arnie, the restaurant manager, knows him. He's delivered before, so he knows the drill."

"I'm glad it's over." Paulie gave a thumbs up. "When we get back to the house, I gotta pack up my things and hitch a ride to the airport. Gina said the kids are driving her nuts, and she's ready for me to come home."

"I bet you miss them." Carlita could feel her throat clog. Despite the seriousness of the situation, it had been good to have all her children under the same roof again, even if it was only for a few days. "I miss them. Give Gina and the triplets a hug from Nonna."

“You’ll see ‘em soon,” Paulie promised. “We’ll be back for the wedding.”

“Same for me, Brit and little Vinnie,” Vinnie said. “We can’t wait to have Pete as a part of the family.”

“Something tells me I might be in for more adventures, courtesy of the Garlucci family,” Pete joked.

“At least you know what you’re signing up for,” Carlita said.

Tony eased in between his brothers, his expression growing solemn. “Thanks for dropping everything and coming down here to help.”

“That’s what family is for,” Vinnie said. “Sometimes you just need a little extra help.”

“I appreciate it.”

Pete glanced at his watch. “I suppose we should turn around and head back to shore so you can pack up and get ready to leave.”

“My flight leaves right after Paulie’s so I figured we would only have to make one trip to the airport,” Vinnie said.

“I’ll ride along with Mercedes when she drops you off,” Carlita said.

Shelby, who had stood off to the side while Violet chatted with Gunner, made her way over.

Tony placed a light hand on his wife’s back. “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” Carlita asked.

“In a minute.” Shelby hugged Paulie and then Vinnie. “You both win best brothers of the year awards, at least in my book. I’m sure I echo Carlita’s sentiment when I say it’s a relief to know those two are behind bars and Savannah is a little safer.”

“Tony would do the same,” Vinnie said.

“You know it.” Using his good arm, Tony reached out and pulled Violet toward them. “We have an announcement to make.”

“An announcement?” Carlita’s brow furrowed. “Don’t tell me you’re moving away.”

“No way, Ma. Savannah is our home.” Tony squeezed his wife’s hand. “You tell ‘em.”

“I’m gonna be a big sister,” Violet abruptly announced.

There was a moment of silence and then everyone began talking at once.

Tony received a round of congratulatory slaps on the back while the others hugged Shelby.

Carlita stood off to the side, tears burning the back of her eyes as her heart filled with emotion. Family. Her family...was growing and she couldn’t wait to welcome another Garlucci into it.

She was living her best life and Carlita’s future looked bright.

The end.

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Meet Hope Callaghan



Hope Callaghan is an American mystery author who loves to write clean, fun-filled women sleuth cozy mysteries with a touch of faith and romance. She is the author of more than 90 novels in nine different series.

Born and raised in a small town in West Michigan, she now lives in Florida with her husband. She is the proud mother of 3 wonderful children.

When she's not doing the thing she loves best - writing mysteries - she enjoys cooking, traveling and reading books.

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Stuffed Pesto Turkey Meatballs Recipe

Ingredients:

3 pounds ground turkey
1 cup chopped scallion
4 garlic cloves, minced
1 egg
1 cup Italian-style bread crumbs
½ cup grated parmesan cheese
½ cup chopped (fresh) basil
¼ cup prepared pesto
¼ cup milk (or heavy cream)
1 tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
1 tablespoon salt
2 teaspoons fresh ground black pepper
1 pound fresh mozzarella, cut into small cubes
2 (24 ounce) jars marinara sauce

Directions:

- Preheat an oven to 375 degrees F (190 degrees C).
- Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
- Place the scallion, garlic, egg, bread crumbs, parmesan cheese, basil, pesto, milk, Worcestershire sauce, salt, and black pepper in a bowl. Blend.
- Add ground turkey. Blend.
- Roll meat mixture into 1-3/4-inch meatballs.
- Place on parchment lined baking sheet.
- Make a hole in the center of the meatball.
- Place a small cube of cheese inside and seal it shut.

-Bake in the preheated oven until the meatballs are no longer pink in the center, about 30 minutes.

-Remove from oven.

-Heat the marinara sauce in a saucepan over low heat.

-Simmer and then place the baked meatballs in the marinara sauce.

-Heat for 2-3 minutes.

*3 lbs. of ground turkey = 3 dozen meatballs.