



Shakedown in Savannah

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Category: Thriller, Action, Suspense

Description: Carlita is up in arms after two men claiming to be members of the Sicilian “family” show up to collect a debt Vinnie senior owed before his death. Meanwhile, Elvira is counting the minutes until she can begin chipping away in Pirate Pete’s tunnel looking for lost treasure. Will the mobster’s shakedown along with Elvira’s quest for riches finally be the end of the Garlucci family in Savannah?

BONUS: RECIPE INCLUDED!

Savannah’s spring season is in full swing. Thanks to the success of Carlita’s food truck at a downtown festival, there’s been an uptick in Ravello’s Italian Eatery’s business. The new Mrs. Pete Taylor’s life is finally settling down and she couldn’t be happier. Until two strangers show up at Ravello’s, asking to speak with her.

Carlita is immediately suspicious of the pair. Her suspicions are confirmed when they claim they’re from the “family,” there to collect a debt Vinnie senior owed before his death. In a panic, she calls her son, Vinnie, to try to find out what is going on, and if he knows who the men might be.

After a little checking, Vinnie calls back with deeply concerning information. The men are from another “family,” this one recently immigrating from Italy. Who are these people...and did her husband really owe them money?

And if having the Sicilian mafia breathing down Carlita’s neck isn’t enough, Elvira is counting the minutes until the engineer she and Pete hired gives the green light for them to begin chipping away at his tunnel wall.

Will the mobster’s shakedown along with Elvira’s quest for riches finally be the end of the Garlucci family in Savannah?

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Chapter 1

“I can’t get over how much busier we are these days.” Carlita tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, smiling at a trio of customers who were passing by on the way to their table inside Ravello’s Italian Eatery. “I’m not complaining, but you would think we were giving food away.”

“Setting up our food truck for the local festivals has helped a ton,” Mercedes said. “Think of it, Ma. If we had more seating, we could serve even more people.”

“I’m happy with things the way they are.” Carlita craned her neck, taking note of the new bistro seating area on the sidewalk out front, recently added to accommodate their growing business. “I’m gonna run outside and take the drink orders for the people who were just seated.”

Grabbing a notepad, Carlita hustled out and approached the nearest table. Two men, dressed in pinstripe suits, sat perusing menus. “Good afternoon.” She rattled off the specials. “Your server will be with you shortly. Can I get you drinks while you wait?”

“Yeah. You could.” The man closest to her carefully placed his menu on the table, giving Carlita his full attention. “You look familiar, like I mighta seen you around before. Are you the owner?”

Their eyes met, and a flicker of uneasiness settled over Carlita. It was the way the man looked at her, the way he asked if she was the owner. And his accent. It was very distinct. Not a southern drawl but more of an Italian accent. Authentic Italian at that. “Who’s asking?”

“Me.” He jabbed his thumb at his chest. “Is it a problem to know if you’re the owner?”

She bristled. “No. It isn’t a problem. My children and I own Ravello’s. I’m Carlita Taylor.”

“Taylor?” He arched a brow. “I thought this joint was owned by the Garlucci family.”

“Garlucci-Taylor,” Carlita said. “What can I get you to drink?”

“A caffè Americano.”

“I’ll take the same,” the second guy said.

Carlita scribbled on her notepad. “Two Americanos coming right up.” She took the drink order from two others seated behind the men and ran back inside.

Mercedes caught up with her mother near the coffee machine. “I can take over now.”

“Thanks.” Carlita shot a glance over her shoulder toward the sidewalk. “The Americanos are for the men in suits. The spritzers are for the women behind them.”

“Got it.” Mercedes placed the drinks on her tray. “Don’t forget we gotta head over to the Parrot House as soon as the lunch rush is over.”

“How could I forget?” Carlita rolled her eyes. “Elvira called me three times already this morning. Something tells me she didn’t sleep a wink last night.”

Today was the big day. Pete’s structural engineer had finally given them the green light to bust through his tunnel wall to see what was on the other side. Elvira, Carlita’s former tenant and former neighbor, was convinced they were on the verge of

finding something big.

Pete was the complete opposite, certain there was no lost pirate treasure waiting to be found.

Carlita was on the fence. Part of her wanted to believe it was there, that her husband's ancestors had stashed oodles of pirate plunder right beneath their feet. The other part of her suspected there was a good chance they were wasting their time.

How would Elvira handle the outcome? It was hard to tell. The woman ate, breathed and slept treasure. Finding a big fat nothing burger could be the final blow. Perhaps this was what she needed...to put the countless hours, not to mention money spent on her endeavors into check.

"I bet she stayed up all night." Mercedes finished fixing her tray and turned to go.

Carlita stopped her. "Keep an eye on the men. They're acting a little weird."

"Weird?"

"Asking questions. Getting defensive. They're a little too nosy, if you ask me."

"Maybe it's our competition. The more popular our restaurant becomes, the more we're going to draw attention."

"True." Carlita watched her daughter make her way outside. She delivered the spritzers to the women first before heading to the other table. Through the window, she could see Mercedes smile. She pulled her notepad from her pocket and jotted down their order.

Back inside, she hustled to the server's station and began tapping the order screen.

Carlita caught up with her. “Well?”

“They were okay. A little flirty but not snoopy.”

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“They didn’t want to know who you were?”

“Nope.”

“Hmm. Maybe it was an innocent question, and I’m making too much out of it.” Carlita pushed her nagging uneasiness from her mind and made her rounds, stopping by each table to make sure diners were enjoying their meals as well as handling a few minor issues. An hour later, she passed by the front window. The table where the men in suits had been seated was now empty.

The lunch crowd finally died down. The dinner prep staff arrived, which meant it was time for Mercedes and her mother to clock out.

“I wanna change before we head over to Pete’s restaurant.” Mercedes sniffed the front of her work blouse. “I smell like a loaf of bread with a dash of garlic mixed in for good measure.”

“I don’t blame you.” Carlita followed her daughter to the apartment building next door and up the stairs to her place. She waited by the door while Mercedes swapped out her clothes. Grayvie, their rescue cat, stalked over and began rubbing against her legs.

“There’s my little buddy.” Carlita scratched his ears. “I need to bring Rambo over soon to visit.”

“I’m ready.” Mercedes waltzed into the living room and twirled around. “What do you think?”

Carlita let out a wolf whistle. “Fancy schmancy. Why did you get all dressed up?”

“Autumn mentioned Elvira has been bugging her to cover the story. I want to look good in case a news crew shows up.”

Autumn Winter, Carlita’s tenant and Mercedes’ neighbor, was the local Channel 11 news station’s field reporter. Snagging one of the best jobs in the business, she covered most of the touristy and historical happenings in and around Savannah, Georgia.

“That woman.” Carlita chuckled. “Her wheels never stop turning.”

“Never.” Mercedes grabbed her house keys and followed her mother down the steps.

“Hang on. Let me see if Tony is gonna meet us there.” Carlita popped into the pawn shop to track her son down, only to find out he’d already left. She caught up with Mercedes, who stood waiting in the alley. “Josh said he and Shelby were already on the way to Pete’s tunnel.”

“We better get a move on.”

“Even if we’re a couple minutes late, he promised he would wait for us.” Carlita linked arms with her daughter. They meandered along, making their way to the other end of Walton Square. “How’s Sam?”

“Okay. Good.”

“Okay and good?” Her mother arched her brow.

Mercedes shrugged. “I still can’t stop thinking about Sam and Natalie.”

“But you forgive him. He apologized, admitted he’d made a mistake, and it’s time to get past this. Natalie is gone. There’s no sense in dwelling on it.”

“I know. I’m working on the forgetting about it part. It’s gonna take a little time.”

“Sam still needs to earn your trust again.”

“Yep.”

“You are a Garlucci. We can be a stubborn bunch.” Carlita and her daughter rounded the corner. Up ahead was Pete’s restaurant.

Elvira’s EC Investigative Services van sat parked alongside Pete’s pickup. Next to it was her sister Dernice’s motorcycle. Pete’s daughter, Kris’s car, was on the other side.

“It looks like everyone is here,” Carlita said.

“Everyone except for Autumn and the Channel 11 news crew,” Mercedes said.
“Maybe she told Elvira they weren’t going to cover the story.”

“Could be.”

The women stepped into the lobby. Turning right, they passed through the first and second dining rooms, circling around until they reached the center steps leading to Pete’s tunnel.

Savannah’s tunnel system could best be described as a labyrinth of passageways branching out in all different directions. A portion of it connected to Carlita’s property and Pete’s property, as well as to Elvira’s.

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Over the past few years, the woman had spent countless hours digging, excavating, and tearing down walls, searching for treasure. Which could have been an enormous waste of time if not for the fact the Garluccis had found treasure hidden in their basement not long after moving to Savannah.

Admittedly, the pirate lore was intriguing. There was no denying the markings Elvira found in her tunnel matched the ones found in Pete's. Not to mention the fact the structural engineer confirmed there was a hollow space behind the tunnel wall, only steps away from the Savannah River.

As fascinating as the idea of gold doubloons and treasure being found was, it hadn't kept Carlita up at night. It was either there, or it wasn't. Once again, she only hoped Elvira wouldn't have a total meltdown if they didn't find anything.

Halfway down the main corridor, Carlita could hear voices. One in particular stood out amongst the hushed murmurings.

"...because the lighting is terrible," Elvira complained. "We need to put the tripod at this angle."

"This is ridiculous," Pete snapped. "Why do we have to illuminate the wall? It's old. It's dirty, and soon it will have a hole chiseled out."

"To record the momentous moment. This is a day for the history books."

"You hope," Tony warned. "It could be empty."

“Bite your tongue.”

Mother and daughter rounded the corner. Tony, Shelby, Elvira, Dernice, Luigi, Pete, Kris, and Stuart Wempley, their structural engineer, gathered in a semi-circle smack dab in between the support posts, recently installed to ensure the structure remained secure.

“There they are now.” Elvira clapped her hands. “Finally.”

“Finally?” Carlita glanced at her watch. “We’re right on time.”

“Let’s get to it.” Elvira dragged a large duffel bag past the tripod. Attached to the top of the tripod was a big round spotlight.

“Nice light,” Carlita commented.

“Thanks. I figured if Channel 11 wasn’t going to show, I would record this myself.”

A familiar figure appeared, only steps behind Carlita and Mercedes. It was Autumn.

“The crew is on standby. I’m here to see if there’s anything worth reporting.”

“Smart move.” Elvira winked. “I was about to call your competitor and give them the inside scoop.”

“Again, there might be nothing behind the wall,” Carlita warned.

“Such a Debbie Downer.” Elvira hummed under her breath. She began unzipping the duffel bag and removing various tools. “We’ll need to proceed with caution. I figure our best strategy is to start small and expand the opening as needed.”

Carlita and her husband exchanged a glance.

Pete shook his head and briefly closed his eyes. This would either be the end of Elvira driving him nuts—or merely the tip of the iceberg. He'd never come right out and said it, but Carlita could only imagine how many times he regretted letting the obsessed woman talk him into chipping away at his tunnel wall.

Engineer Wempley cleared his throat. "You're not starting with the sledgehammer, are you?"

"No, I'm not." Elvira frowned. "Did you listen to what I said? I'll start with a cold chisel and a crowbar and work my way up to the bigger tools."

"Hang on. Let me snap a picture." Carlita coaxed Pete into standing next to Elvira. They posed for a photo, shaking hands. Elvira beaming brightly.

Pete? Not so much. His look was more along the lines of "let's get this over with."

He grabbed a hand tool and he and Elvira began chipping away at the concrete wall, an equal distance from the end and where it "t'd" off from the main tunnel.

Chip. Chip. Chip. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Half an hour.

Elvira rocked back on her heels and tugged at her hardhat. "This is going to take forever. We need to move onto bigger and better tools."

"I agree," Pete said. "We'll be here for days at this rate."

They swapped out the smaller tools for sledgehammers. Positioning themselves between the designated spot, they began whacking away. Bits of concrete flew everywhere, striking them, the floor, the onlookers.

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Despite Pete's obvious advantage, being both taller and stronger, Elvira held her own. Whack. Whack. Whack. Another fifteen minutes passed.

"Let's see what we have." Elvira set her sledgehammer aside, pulled a flashlight from her pocket, and turned it on. "I'm getting close."

Pete picked at a chunk of concrete. "I'm making progress as well."

With renewed vigor, they swung and chipped, creating a sizeable hole.

Elvira, with beads of perspiration dotting her forehead and dripping down the sides of her face, tossed the tool aside. "I can work with this opening." She rummaged around inside her bag and pulled out a stick of dynamite.

Pete stopped swinging and propped his sledgehammer against the wall. "What is that?"

"A stick of dynamite. We can save some time by setting this baby off."

He shook his head. "No way."

"I agree," Wembley chimed in. "We never discussed using explosives."

"You guys are afraid of this little bitty stick?" Elvira taunted.

"Put it away or leave," Pete warned.

She mumbled under her breath and reluctantly placed it back inside the bag. “This is gonna take forever doing it the hard way.”

“Hand Luigi your sledgehammer.”

Luigi, a bulky bruiser, flexed his muscles. “Let me at it.”

“My pleasure.” Elvira stepped aside.

With both men working together, it didn’t take long for them to finish carving out a sizeable hole. Pete, now breathing heavily, dropped the hammer. “Let’s have a look.”

“Me first.” Elvira elbowed Luigi out of the way.

Anticipating the move, Pete easily blocked her. “You are getting on my last nerve.”

“Sorry. I’m just excited.”

“Let’s have a look.” Pete motioned for Carlita to join him.

She gingerly picked her way over the piles of rubble and grasped his hand.

Adjusting Elvira’s spotlight so it beamed into the opening, the couple ducked down and peered inside.

Carlita blinked rapidly, giving her eyes time to adjust to the lack of light. “Will you look at that?”

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“What is it?” Elvira, completely disregarding Pete’s warning, muscled her way in

next to them.

The others all gathered around, gazing into the opening.

“We need to take a closer look.” Elvira turned her headlamp on and made a move to climb over the wall.

“Hold on.” Wempley stopped her. “You need to use caution.”

“Caution smaution,” she said. “I’ve been patient long enough. It’s time to get to the good stuff.”

The others followed her, crawling over the wall and entering what could only be described as one of the largest entirely enclosed spaces Carlita had ever laid eyes on.

“It’s huge.”

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“It’s incredible.” Pete beamed his flashlight along the perimeter. To the left was what appeared to be a brick wall covered in a thick layer of mud. Straight ahead and to the right were more layers of concrete and brick, similar to the materials used to build the city’s tunnel system.

Luigi let out a low whistle. “It’s nothing but a huge empty space.”

“Man, what a letdown.” Elvira kicked at a pile of rubble, disappointment clearly etched on her grimy face. “I was so sure we were onto something.”

“It was a longshot,” Carlita said. “We knew there was a chance we wouldn’t find anything. At least there are solid support beams in place.”

“Poor Elvira,” Dernice tsk-tsked. “It’s a good thing you didn’t sign on the dotted line for the new business loan, thinking you could pay it off with the riches.”

Stuart Wempley eased past Carlita and shined his light along the perimeter. He cautiously crept toward the wall facing the river. Balancing the flashlight in one hand, he removed his cell phone from his jacket pocket and knelt on the ground.

Curious to find out what he was doing, Carlita made her way over. “What is it?”

“It looks like something was dragged through the dirt.”

She followed his gaze. “You’re right. Whatever it was went that way, toward the river.”

Pete caught up with them. “It’s consistent with the shape of a boat keel.”

“From an old wooden pirate ship?” Carlita asked.

“It’s possible.”

Elvira ran over. “Did I hear someone say ship?”

Pete’s arm shot out, almost clotheslining her. “Stay back. We don’t want to disturb the area.”

“It appears something big was dragged out of here toward the water,” Carlita said.

Elvira’s eyes lit. “Seriously? Like a pirate ship or treasure chest?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news.” Wempley shifted his feet. “It’s going to take some time to analyze what this might have been.”

“Time? How much time? Hours? Days? Weeks?” Clearly, Elvira was becoming unhinged.

Carlita stepped in front of her, forcing her to meet her gaze. “It will be all right,” she said in an even tone. “Tromping around here will destroy any clues about what it may have been.”

“I was so sure we were onto something.”

“And we still may be, but it might take a little longer.” Carlita led the distraught woman back toward the tunnel. The others exited and gathered near the opening, leaving Pete and the engineer inside.

She could hear them talking in low voices, but not what was being said.

“It’s gonna be okay.” Dernice patted her sister’s shoulder. “There could be more to this than meets the eye.”

“Meaning it could be buried under the soil.” Elvira brightened. “Yeah. I mean, if I was a pirate and wanted to hide my treasure, I wouldn’t leave it sitting on top of the ground. Pirates bury stuff.”

Carlita wagged her finger. “We need to excavate the area in an orderly fashion.”

“What we need is an expert in archaeology. I have a possible connection to a famous Biblical archaeologist. Maybe she could point us in the right direction,” Elvira said. “Her name is Randi Colbane. I met her at a treasure hunting convention.”

“The same convention where you met Damon Wells and Jamie Grift from your Agamerian fiasco?” Carlita pointedly asked.

“Nah.” Elvira waved dismissively. “She has nothing to do with those two clowns.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Seriously, we need to call in an expert. I’ll get right on it.” Elvira began shoving her tools back inside the duffel bag.

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Pete and Wempley emerged.

“Although some of us are gung-ho to start digging, we need to figure out what was behind this wall before we excavate,” Pete said.

“You’re right.”

His jaw dropped. He stared at Elvira. “You’re agreeing with me? Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine. I know an archaeologist. I’ll get on the horn as soon as I leave here to see if I can convince her to come down and check it out.” Elvira repeated the woman’s name.

“I’ve heard of Randi Colbane,” Wempley said. “She’s well-respected in the archaeological field.”

“We definitely need an expert opinion,” Pete said.

“You can bet I’ll get right on it. Have you ever heard of the Shifting Sands Medallion? Colbane helped authenticate it.”

“Actually, I believe I may have heard something about it recently in the news,” Carlita said.

“Which means she might be hard to reach. If not, I have a few other people in mind.” Elvira zipped her bag shut. “In the meantime, you might want to secure the tunnel

door.”

“To prevent someone like you, who might be tempted to swing back by, from sneaking down here?” Pete teased.

“I’m gonna do my best to rein myself in. Who knows? This could be the find of the century.” Elvira elbowed Autumn. “You need to keep this under wraps until we figure out what we have.”

Autumn made a zipping motion across her lips. “My lips are sealed.”

“Good. I’m heading out now. I’ll send a group text as soon as I have confirmation.” Elvira scurried off.

Carlita motioned to Dernice. “Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“Yeah. Elvira will be fine. At first, I thought she was going to have a major meltdown, but I think she realizes this could be even bigger than her finding a little treasure.”

“Perhaps much bigger,” Wempley said. “A piece of Savannah's history could be behind the tunnel wall. We need to be good stewards and go about this with the utmost care.”

Luigi swiped at the dust on the front of his shirt. “I’m not saying she would do this, but you might want to triple lock the door just in case.”

Mercedes finished Luigi’s sentence. “Elvira changes her mind. The temptation is too great, and she sneaks down here.”

“I completely agree. You never know with her.”

Pete and Carlita accompanied the others through the tunnel, up the stairs, and out into the parking lot. “I’m sorry to drag all of you over here for nothing,” he apologized.

“I don’t think it’s nothing,” Pete’s daughter, Kris said. “I think there’s a good chance something significant took place beneath the Parrot House Restaurant, which only adds to the charm and character.”

“True.” He scratched the stubble on his chin. “This might work to my advantage, helping attract new customers who are curious about the potential find.”

“The Parrot House is already a legend. I have to admit, I’m intrigued.” Carlita changed the subject. “How’s the apartment, Kris? Have you and Monty the python settled back in?”

“Yes. Thanks again for letting us stay with you during my apartment repairs. Although I think Monty misses you.”

“How can you tell?”

“Every time I mention your name, he hisses at me.”

Carlita wrinkled her nose. “Hissing is a good thing?”

“It’s what he does when he gets excited. We’ll swing by soon to visit,” she promised.

“We would like that.”

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Autumn turned to go. Carlita stopped her. “I haven’t seen your brother, Steve in a while. How’s he doing?”

Autumn tipped her hand back and forth. “The tattoo business has been a little slow lately. In fact, his girlfriend, Paisley, is looking for work. If you know of anyone who needs help, please send her their way.”

Carlita thought about her food delivery business and food truck, both of which had picked up, thanks to Autumn featuring it on her Divine Eats in Savannah show. Perhaps she could return the favor. “I’m always looking for drivers for my delivery service. Not to mention the music festival is starting and we have a spot reserved for our food truck.”

Autumn jotted Paisley’s cell phone number on a slip of paper and handed it to Carlita. “She might not have a lot of experience in food service, but she’s a fast learner.”

“I’ll definitely keep her in mind.” Carlita tucked the piece of paper into her pocket.

The others headed out while Stuart Wempley lingered. He shook Pete’s hand. “Thank you for entrusting me with this project. If it’s all right with you, I would like to remain in the loop.”

“Absolutely. If not for your sharp eye, we might have trampled over the top of what could be a significant historical discovery.” Pete escorted him to his vehicle while Carlita hung out on the porch.

She waited until he got back. “I think we should heed Luigi’s warning to triple lock

the tunnel door.”

“I have several I think will do the trick.” Pete and Carlita made a beeline for the workshop out back. It took a little searching, but he finally found two more sets of locks. The second was a heavy-duty deadbolt that no amount of hairpins or twisty ties could bypass.

“We should also check to make sure Elvira’s floodlight is unplugged,” Carlita said as they made their way back downstairs.

“Good idea. We don’t need the cord shorting out and setting the place on fire.”

“Bite your tongue.” Carlita picked her way along the uneven floor, trying to imagine what it had been like hundreds of years ago when pirates roamed the river, lived in the restaurant, plundered and pillaged.

It was hard to envision her husband being a direct descendant of such a rowdy bunch. Although it was one of the things she loved about Pete. He was, at least in her mind, a charming swashbuckler.

Perhaps Carlita was attracted to bad boys. Her first husband, Vinnie, had been a mafia shylock. Mafia men, pirates. Despite her deceased husband’s less than legal or legitimate line of work, he had loved his family, his wife and children. Had loved them until the day he died.

Pete was the same. A devoted husband and father. Carlita remembered the saying, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” It fit the two men who had captured her heart perfectly.

He slid the lock in place and tested the combination. “After all these years, I still remember the combination.”

“Which is?”

“My birthdate.”

Carlita tapped the side of her head. “As long as Elvira doesn’t figure it out.”

“We have two more locks in case she does.” Pete started to pull the door shut.

“We were going to make sure the spotlight was unplugged,” she reminded him.

“You’re right.” Pete, with Carlita close behind, trekked along the narrow corridor. They reached the gaping hole and found the spotlight unplugged. “We’re good to go.”

She lingered, curiously peering into the dark abyss.

He followed her gaze. “I have to say, I’m intrigued.”

“Me too. Do you think some sort of pirate ship was dragged through here?”

“It could be.” Pete plugged the light back in and turned it on. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt for us to take another quick look around.”

“As long as we steer clear of the markings in the dirt.”

“Yes.” Pete climbed over the wall and turned back to give his wife a hand.

She let him help her reach the other side, shivering involuntarily at the shadowy walls and dark corners. “It’s kinda creepy down here all alone.”

“Can you imagine being a Savannah local, having a big night at the bar? You pass out

only to discover when you finally wake up you're on board a pirate ship bound for who knows where?"

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Carlita placed her palm against the wall, feeling the cool, damp bricks. “If these walls could talk, I’m sure they would have tons of interesting tales to tell.”

“Without a doubt.” Pete began walking along the wall, careful to steer clear of the disturbed earth several feet away. “I suppose it’s possible a pirate boat got marooned and was eventually dragged back out into the river.”

The couple reached the wall, the one facing the water. “How far away is the river?” Carlita asked.

“Literally only a few feet. If the wall was gone, you could take a stone and toss it in the water.”

“So, it’s only a stone’s throw away,” Carlita said.

“Correct.”

“I hope we can get an expert down here to check it out.”

“We will. I have someone in mind,” Pete said.

“Other than the person Elvira mentioned?”

“Of course. I have no doubt she would love for me to let her handle this. However, this is my property, which means I control who does what.”

“But you’re letting her try to get her expert over here.” Carlita chuckled. “To keep

her busy and out of your hair.”

“Precisely. I’ll have an expert here days before she does,” Pete predicted.

Creak. The ceiling made a loud creaking sound.

Carlita stumbled back, clutching her chest. “That was loud.”

“The support beams in here are solid. The ceiling isn’t going anywhere. I’ve seen enough for now. Let’s head back up.” Pete motioned for Carlita to go ahead of him, both of them mindful to stay as close to the wall as possible.

Reaching the opening, Carlita shifted to the side, intending to hop up on the ledge and swing her legs over.

She twisted her foot. A loose pebble became wedged in her shoe. “Crud. I picked up a rock.” Carlita plucked the pesky pebble out and started to toss it on the ground.

“Wait.” Pete stopped her. “Let me see it.”

She handed it to him.

He pinched it between his fingers and held it up to the light. “My dear, it looks like you found our first clue about what may have been behind the tunnel wall.”

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Carlita’s eyes squinted. “Our first clue is a pebble?”

“This isn’t a pebble.” Pete pinched it between his fingers and rubbed it against his shirt.

A faint glimmer caught the light. “It appears to be a gem.” He stepped in front of Elvira’s spotlight. “A ruby, no less.”

Carlita’s heart skipped a beat. “A ruby in the dirt. I wonder if there are more.” She turned her cell phone’s light on and began searching the area near the wall.

Pete tucked the nugget in his pocket and joined her. Within minutes and only scratching the surface, the couple found two more gems. “I think we may be onto something.”

“It’s a good thing Elvira isn’t here. She would be hauling equipment down here faster than you can say treasure.”

“Mum’s the word, at least until we can figure out what the markings in the dirt mean.”

“Maybe there really was a boat here at one time,” Carlita said.

“If I had to guess, it was a jolly boat.”

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“A jolly boat?”

“A boat used to carry crew ashore.”

“Ah.” Carlita snapped her fingers. “Because they couldn’t bring the big pirate ships close to shore, they used jolly boats.”

“To transport crew, supplies.”

“Treasure chests and gems,” she added.

Pete pulled up the photo of the ruts he’d taken with his cell phone. “Based on the shape, it would be about the right size. If it was a jolly boat, I’m guessing there might be more clues when we start digging around.”

“I think we should give it a rest,” Carlita said. “Disturbing much more of the ground might hinder whoever shows up to figure this out.”

“Agreed.” Pete helped his wife scoot back over the wall and exited after her, turning the spotlight off on his way out.

The couple reached the solid metal door and paused long enough for him to secure it with the new array of locks. Back upstairs, they trekked to his office.

Pete’s parrot, Gunner, greeted them. “Ahoy matey.”

“Ahoy Gunner.” Carlita grabbed a grape from the small fridge in the corner and fed it

to him. “How’s the pirate’s life?”

The parrot puffed up his chest. “Yo ho, yo ho...a pirate’s life for me. I strut on my perch, watchin’ the pretty girls...the pirate’s life for me,” he sang.

Pete emptied his pocket, placing the gems on top of his desk. Carlita made her way over and picked one of them up. She ran her thumb over the top. Small bits of dirt fell off. The more she rubbed, the shinier the gem became.

“This could be an incredible find,” she said. “Imagine if hundreds, maybe even thousands, of these nuggets are sprinkled around waiting to be found.”

“After all these years.”

They finished cleaning them off, and Pete placed them inside his safe. “I need to head over to The Flying Gunner. A large group of developers booked the ship for an event today.”

“Flying Gunner,” the bird squawked.

“I’ll take Gunner with me,” Pete said. “What does your schedule look like?”

“Mercedes and I are gonna finish sorting through the last few boxes I have stored up in the apartment attic.” Carlita patted her purse. “After we’re done, I’ll grab some dinner on the way home.”

Pete smacked his lips. “From the restaurant? Lasagna, or fettuccine, sounds delicious,” he hinted.

“I’ll surprise you.” She bounced on the tips of her toes and kissed his lips. “I’m proud of you. You showed the patience of a saint with Elvira earlier.”

“She certainly knows how to push my buttons. Believe it or not, I understand what makes her tick, which helps put her antics and actions into perspective.”

“Money. Treasure. Something tells me she won’t waste a second trying to get someone over here to figure out what we have,” Carlita predicted.

“Without a doubt. I must admit I’m pleasantly surprised you and I found something.”

“Me too. Only time will tell if there is more.” Carlita parted ways with her husband in the parking lot, taking the shortcut to her old apartment, now occupied by Mercedes. She let herself into the lower-level hall and climbed the stairs.

The faint strains of classical music echoed. Carlita rapped loudly. The door flew open, and her daughter appeared. “Hey, Ma. I was getting ready to send you a text. I thought maybe you forgot about cleaning out the attic.”

“Nah. Pete and I got sidetracked.” Carlita started to tell her daughter what they’d found but caught herself. Although she trusted Mercedes implicitly to keep quiet, the find wasn’t hers to share. It was Pete’s. Instead, she told her they’d installed triple locks on the tunnel door.

“I wouldn’t put it past Elvira to sneak down there again.”

“All it would be is a hop, skip and a jump, seeing how our tunnels are all connected,” Carlita said. “Hopefully, three sets of locks will deter her.”

“We’ll see.” Mercedes rubbed her hands together. “Are you ready to get to work?”

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Mother and daughter exited the apartment, climbing the stairs to the attic. Having already tackled most of the cleaning, the only things left were a few odds and ends, pieces they'd inherited along with the property.

Working together, the women made two piles—the first for the trash bin and a second for items Carlita planned to donate to a local non-profit thrift store. It took several trips back and forth for them to empty what was left.

After finishing, they grabbed brooms and swept the space spic and span.

Mercedes dumped the last of the debris in the trash bag and propped the broom against the wall. "This is bigger than I thought now that it's empty. What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know." Carlita slowly circled the room. "It's not big enough to add another apartment unit. It seems a shame to have it sit here doing nothing."

"We could add closets and assign a closet to each of the tenants—Luigi, Cool Bones, Sam, Autumn and me for additional storage."

Carlita warmed to the idea. Each of the apartments boasted ample storage, but who would say no to more? "I'll see if I can get Bob Lowman over here to give me a quote."

Checking one last time to make sure they hadn't missed any nooks and crannies, she started to shut the light off when a 2x4 nailed to the wall caught her attention. Carlita traipsed across the room and studied the board.

Mercedes, curious to find out what her mother was looking at, wandered over. “What is it?”

“A board nailed to the wall.” On closer inspection, she could see papers tucked behind it. Carlita slid the papers out and unfolded them. “It looks like a set of blueprints.”

“Cool.” Her daughter peered over her shoulder. “I thought you already found prints for this place.”

To say Carlita’s property had an interesting history was somewhat of an understatement. Originally a casket company, the place was eventually purchased by a man named Smythe, who operated a supply store for sailors and sea faring companies.

Smythe had also added the apartment units. Although Carlita couldn’t recall the details, somewhere along the way, George and Louise Delmario had purchased the buildings.

After Vinnie’s death, Carlita stumbled upon a key to the property. She and Mercedes drove down from New York to check it out and the rest was history. He had inadvertently left his wife a wonderful gift—a way to support not only Carlita but also their children. The pawn shop. The restaurant. The rental units.

“I did. These appear to be the originals from when this place was first constructed.” Carlita unfolded the paper and slipped her reading glasses on. “Wow. This is for our buildings and Elvira’s property across the street. I wonder if she ever found blueprints for her place.” She rolled the prints back up and sent a text to her former neighbor, telling her they’d found something of interest.

Elvira promptly replied. I have some good news. Where are you?

At Mercedes' place.

Come on over. I'm home, Elvira texted back.

With a quick stop by the apartment to wash up, Carlita and Mercedes crossed the alley to Elvira's back door.

They reached the stoop. The door opened and Elvira appeared. "Hey, Carlita. Let me guess...you and Pete found treasure."

Carlita waved the rolled prints in the air. "Mercedes and I found blueprints for our block tucked away in the upstairs attic."

"Prints for this place?" Elvira reached for them.

"Not so fast." Carlita snatched her hand back. "I'll let you see them, but they belong to me."

"Sheesh. It's not like I plan on stealing them."

"I know how you are. What's yours is yours and what's mine is yours." Carlita handed them to her. "I'm not sure if there's anything new to see or if you already have this set."

Elvira unrolled them and leaned in. "Good find. These are the originals."

"Yep."

She grew quiet, studying them. "Thanks for bringing them by." She pulled her phone from her pocket and snapped a picture before rolling them back up. "I have some good news."

“About the archaeologist?”

“Colbane is interested in what we found, and is trying to rearrange her schedule to get down here to check it out. I told her the sooner the better.” Elvira lowered her voice.

“I put the fear in her that we weren’t going to wait too long before excavating.”

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“If it was left up to you, you would have already started digging.” Carlita told her what Pete suspected, that the drag marks were from a jolly boat.

“It makes sense. What’s more important is...what was inside the boat. Gold, coins, gems, treasure.” Elvira promised to let her know as soon as she had a definite date. “If I don’t hear from her by tomorrow morning, I’ll follow up.”

“I’m sure you will.” Carlita grabbed the prints and she and Mercedes turned to go.

“Hang on. Before you head out, I thought I should mention Dernice noticed something on the surveillance cameras this morning.”

“Noticed what?”

“I’ll show you.” Elvira motioned for them to follow her through the living area of the apartment, to EC Security Services which shared space with her investigative services office in the front. She settled in behind the desk, turned her computer on and pulled up a new search screen.

With a couple of clicks, she accessed surveillance footage of the back alley. Elvira’s cameras covered every square inch of the alley, the sidewalk, the parking lot. In other words, the entire area was monitored twenty-four hours a day.

“Here it is.” Elvira pushed the pause button and scooped out of the way.

Carlita leaned in and studied the image, her breath catching in her throat. “I knew it. I knew something was off.”

Chapter 4

“Do you know who these guys are?” Elvira asked. “Because it looks to me like they were casing the joint.”

Carlita studied the men from Ravello’s, who had been sitting outside at the bistro table during lunch. One lit a cigarette as they casually strolled down the alley.

“Ma, these are the two men you said were giving off weird vibes earlier today,” Mercedes said.

“Yep. They were seated at a sidewalk bistro table. I took their drink order, and they wanted to know if I was the owner.” Carlita told Elvira what she could remember about the conversation. “They were acting oddly, at least to me.”

“And then when I went out to wait on them, they were fine,” Mercedes said.

The images, thanks to the state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, were crystal clear. They appeared to be, as Elvira pointed out, casing the joint. Not her building, but Carlita’s. At one point, the man who was smoking looked directly at the camera and smirked.

“He knows he’s being recorded,” Mercedes said.

“It’s almost as if he wanted to be seen.” Carlita grew quiet until the recording ended.

“Do you have any other recordings of them?”

“Nope. This was it. They walked along the alley checking your place out and then they left.”

“Like I mentioned earlier, maybe they’re interested in buying it,” Mercedes said.

“Could be.” Over the past several months, a handful of local real estate agents who were working with buyers looking for commercial real estate had approached Carlita wondering if she might be interested in selling.

But this was different. Carlita would bet money they weren’t there to buy her property. Maybe it was the accent. Or it could have been the tone. Or perhaps she was slightly paranoid after all she’d gone through with the mafia and her haunting past that kept surfacing.

She asked Elvira to text a still frame of the men to her phone.

“You got it.”

Carlita tapped the message, confirming she’d received it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Elvira clicked out of the screen. “I know you’re not asking for my two cents, but they look like mob men to me.”

“I suspect the same.” Carlita sighed heavily. “I hope we’re wrong.”

Elvira promised to monitor the camera’s recordings and let Carlita know if they showed up again.

After Mercedes and she left, they meandered to the end of the alley. What were the men doing? Clearly, they were scoping the place out, but why?

“I want to show Tony the picture to see if he recognizes these two.”

“Good idea.”

Carlita, with Mercedes by her side, entered the pawn shop through the rear entrance. Tony stood near the front, talking to a customer. After finishing, he made his way over. “Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, Son.” Carlita noticed several shoppers milling about. “Business is brisk.”

“Yeah. We get quite a few people swinging by here after eating at Ravello’s.”

“Dual stop shopping is music to my ears.” She changed the subject, briefly filling her son in on the two suspicious strangers. Carlita showed him the photo. “Do you recognize either of them?”

Tony studied the snapshot. “Nope. Never seen them before in my life.”

“Maybe it was a weird coincidence. Maybe they were checking the place out, thinking we might be interested in selling,” Carlita said. “Either way, it wouldn’t hurt to keep an eye out in case they come back.”

“You got it.” Tony folded his arms. “Has Elvira lined up her expert archaeologist yet?”

“She has a call in and is waiting to hear back. I have no doubt she’ll stay on top of it.”

“And in the meantime, she’ll sneak into Pete’s place on the sly,” he said.

“She’ll have to figure out a way to get through the three sets of locks Pete installed.”

Tony grinned. “She almost gave up a little too easily. I figured she would throw some sort of tantrum.”

“And have Pete kick her out? They’ve gone around a couple times. I think Elvira knows she’s treading on thin ice and needs to be on her best behavior.”

An employee appeared with a question about a set of golf clubs, and Carlita and Mercedes headed out, stopping when they reached the back hall.

“What are your plans for tonight?”

Mercedes shrugged. “Hanging out at home. I invited Autumn over for dinner and movie night. I found a recipe for lasagna chips and dip I’m gonna make.”

“Lasagna chips and dip? It sounds yummy.” Carlita checked her watch. Pete was still working at The Flying Gunner and wouldn’t be home for a couple of hours. “Would you like some help?”

“I would love it.”

Back inside the apartment, Mercedes turned her classical music on. She loaned her mother an apron, and the two got to work. It was like old times—mother and daughter whipping up an Italian feast in the compact yet well-appointed kitchen.

Because Pete had more than his share of culinary gadgets, Carlita passed all of hers on to her daughter. Mercedes hadn’t taken the time to rearrange the cupboards, which meant her mother had no trouble finding what she needed. “What’s first?”

“Making chips out of lasagna noodles.” Mercedes boiled the noodles while Carlita

prepped for the dip. The first step was browning the Italian sausage. After cooking, she crumbled the meat. She stirred in ricotta, yogurt, spaghetti sauce, garlic and seasonings before bringing the contents of the saucepan to a boil.

As soon as the sauce thickened, she set it aside and began helping Mercedes with the noodles now draining in the sink.

Working as a team, Carlita stabbed the cooked noodles with a fork and Mercedes took over, frying them to a golden brown.

They finished frying the last batch and set them aside to drain. The last step was sprinkling a parmesan cheese mixture over both sides.

“Now all we gotta do is add some cheese to the sauce.” Mercedes poured the sauce in a microwavable bowl, added an Italian cheese blend, and popped it into the microwave.

After the cheese was melted, she gave it a good stir and set it on the counter.

Carlita’s mouth watered. “This looks delicious.”

“It’s time for a chef’s sample.” Mercedes reached for a crispy lasagna chip. She dipped it in the cheesy sauce and took a big bite.

Her mother did the same, savoring the Italian flavors. The small bites of spicy sausage added texture. She polished off the first chip and reached for another one. “I need to make this for Pete.”

“You can take some with you,” Mercedes generously offered.

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“Nah. This is your dish. Save it for you and Autumn, although I wouldn’t mind getting the recipe from you.”

Mercedes promised to forward it to her. They had just finished cleaning up when the doorbell rang. “I bet that’s Autumn.”

She hustled to the door and found her friend standing on the other side, a small platter of mixed fruit in hand. “Something smells delish.”

“Ma and I made homemade lasagna chips and dip.”

“You’re in for a real treat.” Carlita hugged her daughter and then Autumn. “I gotta run by Ravello’s and grab something for dinner before heading home.”

After leaving the apartment, Carlita strolled to the end of the alley. She slipped into Ravello’s kitchen through the back door and found the dinner rush was in full swing.

Arnie, her head restaurant manager, noticed her and hurried over. “Hey, Carlita.”

“Hey, Arnie. I thought I would grab two leftover lunch specials on my way home.”

“Yeah. Sure. Help yourself.”

Carlita placed to-go containers on the counter and began filling them with food.

“You said you were on your way home?”

“I am.”

“I had a couple of guys stop by a few minutes ago asking to speak to you.”

An icy chill ran down Carlita’s spine. She set the spoon down, giving the manager her full attention. “Two men?”

“Yeah. They asked to speak with Carlita Garlucci.”

“What did they look like?”

Arnie described the two men in suits.

“What did you tell them?”

“I told them you weren’t here and asked if they wanted to leave a message.”

“Did they?”

“Nope.” Arnie shook his head. “Last time I saw them, they were near the front talking to the hostess.”

“Great.” She finished filling the containers and snapped the lids shut. “This happened a few minutes ago?”

“Yep. In fact.” Her manager held up a finger. “Let me check to see if they’re still out there.” He slipped out of the kitchen, returning moments later. “They’re still out front.”

“Seated at a table?”

“Hanging out near the hostess station. Do you want me to get rid of them?”

“No.” Carlita placed the containers on the counter and sucked in a breath. “I’ll find out what they want.”

Chapter 5

Carlita marched through the restaurant to the front lobby area where the men she’d encountered earlier, the same ones who were caught on Elvira’s surveillance recordings, stood chatting with the hostess.

“My restaurant manager told me you were looking for me.”

The taller of the two spoke. “Carlita Garlucci?”

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“Carlita Garlucci-Taylor,” she corrected. “We had this conversation a few hours ago.”

“Former Queens, New York resident and wife of Vincent Robert Garlucci?”

“My former husband is deceased. He died several years ago.” Carlita suspected they were toying with her. She was in no mood for games. “And you are?”

“I’m Costanza. This is my associate Enzo.”

“What do you want?” she bluntly asked.

“We’re here to discuss a past debt you and your husband owed.”

“Owed who?”

“The family. We’ve been sent here to negotiate a deal.”

“I don’t know who you are or where you’re from, but I know nothing about a past debt. I’m going to ask you to leave. If not, I’m calling the police.”

“I don’t think you want to call the cops,” Enzo said. “Things could get real ugly real fast. The boss has instructed us to try to reach an agreement.”

“You’re talking in circles. What debt did I and my former husband owe?” she demanded.

“He was a shylock,” the man explained. “I’m not sure how much you know about that...end of the family business.”

“I’ve heard the term.”

“He collected money, but also owed some at the time of his death.”

Carlita’s mind whirled. She felt sick to her stomach. Vinnie had, once again, left her holding the bag. “How much money?”

“Two hundred and fifty thousand. With interest, the figure is closer to half a million.”

Her jaw dropped. “Half a million dollars?” she gasped. “I don’t have that kind of money lying around.”

“You got a nice little setup here. Pawn shop. Popular restaurant. Apartment building. I’m sure it all brings in a tidy sum of money.” The taller of the two men, the one with a toothpick sticking out of his mouth, began rolling it around.

Carlita watched him roll it...side to side, side to side. Using his tongue, he flipped it over. She thought he was going to choke on it. Instead, he spit it on her floor.

It took all her willpower not to demand he pick it up and throw it in the trash. “These businesses belong to me and my children. We’ve worked hard to get them up and running.”

Both fear and anger coursed through Carlita’s veins. If what these men were saying was true, the “boss” had sat back, all this time waiting for her to work her tail off building successful and profitable businesses, only to swoop in and try to take it from her.

“Our boss...he’s a fair man. He figured you might not be open to paying this debt off right away. He’s willing to strike a deal,” Costanza said.

Her eyes narrowed. “What sort of deal?”

The man, the one who appeared to be in charge, pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. “I have two other names. Mercedes Garlucci and Anthony Garlucci.”

“Those are my children. Both work at the family businesses.”

“I see.”

“Their names are also on the property deeds.” Carlita suspected from the look on their faces they were already aware of the fact. “I don’t make any decisions without my family’s input.”

“There’s nothing to decide. You’ll either accept the offer or not.”

“And if I don’t?” Carlita asked.

“It would be in your best interest not to reject it.” Enzo shifted his feet.

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She lifted her chin, defiantly meeting his gaze. “I won’t know until you tell me what it is.”

“You will. Tomorrow.”

“What time tomorrow?”

Costanza rocked back on his heels. “In the morning. How about nine, right here?”

“How do I know you’re legit?” Carlita asked. “I need proof Vinnie and I owed your...boss money.”

“We’ll have proof.”

“And names. As in, who exactly we owed money to.”

“Danny Lombardo.”

“Danny Lombardo,” Carlita repeated. “I’ve never heard the name in my life. I don’t ever remember signing a loan agreement.”

Enzo shrugged. “I believe he may have inherited the debt from another lender. You and your husband failed to hold up your end of the agreement. Thus, the reason for our visit.”

“What other lender?”

“We’re not privy to that information. The debt is legit.”

“Fine. Bring proof tomorrow. I’ll see you at nine.”

“See you at nine.”

“It will be my son, my daughter, and me.”

Costanza looked as if he was going to say something, but didn’t. “Suit yourself.”

Carlita watched the men exit the restaurant. They passed by the front window and disappeared from sight.

“Is everything all right?”

She turned to find Arnie standing behind her. “It looked like you were having an intense conversation.”

“We were.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Unfortunately, no.” Carlita returned to the kitchen, grabbed the food, and trudged out into the back alley.

The pawn shop had closed. She could see Mercedes’ living room lights were on and thought about stopping by to fill her in on what had happened, but didn’t want to ruin her evening. She would wait until later, after she discussed the matter with Pete.

Back home, Carlita left the food on the counter and took Rambo for a walk while she waited for her husband, who sent a text to let her know he was on his way. During the

stroll, she replayed the conversation. Had Vinnie and she owed an original lender and now Danny Lombardo money?

If so, why had he waited years to collect? To charge her outrageous interest? Had he been watching all along...waiting for the Garlucci family businesses to become profitable so he could swoop in and demand repayment?

The men had pretty much come right out and told her she would have to accept the offer. What would happen if she didn't? How would she know if the loan was legit? It could be bogus. It was possible the men were bluffing, attempting to get money from her through intimidation and deception.

A sick feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Something told her these men—and their boss—had no intention of going away. The fact they'd waited all this time to come forward was also a concern.

Her businesses were doing well...exceptionally well. In fact, Carlita had recently given each of her employees a raise.

Despite doing well, she didn't have half a million dollars sitting around. And even if she did, was she responsible for the debt...a debt she knew nothing about? Apparently, Danny Lombardo thought so.

She and Rambo made it all the way to the River Street steps before turning back. She was halfway there when Pete texted he was home.

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Carlita hightailed it back to their apartment. She found him in the kitchen warming the dinner she'd dropped off earlier.

"Any news from Elvira and the archaeologist?"

"The woman is trying to rearrange her schedule. We should have news soon." Carlita hung Rambo's leash on the hook by the door and moped across the room.

Pete did a double take. "Are you okay? You look like you lost your best friend."

"I'm not sure. I'll know more by tomorrow morning."

"Does this involve Elvira?"

"I wish," she sighed.

Pete turned, giving his wife his full attention. "What's wrong?"

Carlita filled him in on what had transpired, starting with the men showing up at Ravello's during the lunch hour and ending with them telling her they'd be back the following day. "So tomorrow morning, Mercedes, Tony and I are going to meet with these two mafia goons to find out exactly what sort of deal this Danny Lombardo mobster wants."

"It sounds like a shakedown," Pete said.

"We take the deal or else. The 'or else' is my concern."

“Have you talked to Mercedes or Tony about it?”

“No. I wanted to run it by you first.”

“I want to be there with you.”

“There’s nothing you can do. Even if they are mobsters, they’re not going to gun us down at the restaurant.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, I hope not.” Carlita briefly closed her eyes. “I’m not getting a good feeling about this.”

“Why don’t you run it by Vinnie? He might know who this Lombardo character is.”

“What a great idea. Why didn’t I think of that?” Carlita snatched her cell phone off the counter and dialed her son’s number.

She thought the call would go to voicemail, but then he picked up. “Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, Son. You got a minute?”

“Sure.”

Carlita could hear loud voices and laughter in the background.

“Can you hang on for a sec?”

“Sure.”

His voice grew muffled, and Carlita knew he was on the move. It got quiet. For a second, she thought they'd been disconnected. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here. I'm in my office. What's up?"

"I had two visitors stop by Ravello's tonight. They claim your father and I owe money to their boss."

"Pops and you owe someone money?"

"To the tune of two hundred and fifty thousand. I'm not sure if they're pulling my leg, but they said the amount we owe is now over half a million with interest tacked on."

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“Scumbags. The lender is obviously compounding the interest.”

“Is this legal?” Carlita asked.

“Is anything the mafia does ever legal? What’s the deal? I mean, what do they want?”

“I don’t know yet. They’re meeting with me, Tony, and Mercedes tomorrow morning.”

“Because the properties are jointly titled,” Vinnie said. “Do you think they’re legit? I mean, do you think you owed someone money?”

“It’s possible I signed for something blindly, having no idea what it was. I asked for proof. They said they would have it in the morning.”

“I can put some feelers out,” her eldest son said. “Try to figure out what’s going on.”

“I would appreciate it. The offer is basically a take it or leave it.”

“Take it or you’re gonna pay for it in some other way,” Vinnie said.

“Right. The possibilities are cause for concern.”

“Blowing your place up. Setting it on fire. Filling it full of bullets.”

“Pete seems to think it’s gonna be a shakedown.”

“I have to agree. A good old-fashioned mafia shakedown.”

Carlita could hear tapping on the other end.

“What time tomorrow morning?”

“Nine.”

“There’s no way I can make it there in time.”

“You don’t have to come down here. Besides, I’m not sure what you’ll be able to do to help.” Carlita suggested he hold off until they had more information.

“It’s a deal. In the meantime, like I said, I can do a little digging around. Did they give you a name?”

“They did. Danny Lombardo. Does his name ring a bell?”

“Nope. I’ll see what I can find out.” Vinnie promised to call his mother back as soon as he had more information.

Carlita thanked him. She ended the call and waved her phone in the air. “Vinnie’s going to try to figure out who Danny Lombardo is.”

“Are you going to call Mercedes and Tony?”

“I might as well. There’s no sense in prolonging it. Something tells me these two aren’t leaving town until they give the Garlucci family a good, old-fashioned shakedown.”

Chapter 6

Carlita rubbed the back of her neck and stared out the window. “We all gotta be on the same page when these two guys show up at nine.”

“Before we agree to anything, I want to make sure the debt is legit,” Tony said. “For all we know, these could be a couple of mafia wannabe scammers who are trying to make a quick buck.”

“What about Vinnie?” Mercedes asked. “Have you heard back?”

“He called first thing this morning and said he was still working on it,” Carlita said. “Unfortunately, we won’t have much information going into this.”

“Like I said, we’re not agreeing to anything right off the bat. We’re going to tell them we need to look into it, which will buy us some time.”

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“I can’t believe your father left another mess for us to clean up.” Carlita pivoted. “All this time, we’ve been working hard to get our businesses profitable. We’re finally bringing in good money and now this.”

“Which may have been by design,” Mercedes said. “This Lombardo guy could have been sitting back, waiting for us to get to this point so he could swoop in and take it.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Ma, we’re talking mobsters here. You never wanna tell them over your dead body. Most of ‘em would be happy to oblige,” Tony said.

“It’s almost nine.” Carlita glanced at the clock. “The plan is to insist they give us proof of the debt. We tell them we need time to verify and then go from there.”

“Yep. I’m gonna grab some coffee while we wait.” Tony headed to the back while Carlita nervously paced. Thank goodness the restaurant wasn’t open. Only a few key employees were in the kitchen prepping for lunch.

Hopefully, the meeting would be brief. The trio would collect whatever potential proof the men had, regroup and figure out their next move. Despite having a plan in place, Carlita’s gut told her the boss’s offer wouldn’t be fair.

Vinnie was working on obtaining information. More than anything, Carlita needed to know who they were dealing with. The fact her son had no idea who Danny Lombardo was caused her more than an inkling of concern.

Tony returned, three to-go coffees in hand, and handed one to his mother and sister. The clock hit five past nine, and there was still no sign of the men. Carlita began to think perhaps they weren't legit and wouldn't show up after all.

Her glimmer of hope was dashed when the men appeared, casually strolling to the front door. "I see them."

"Stay here." Tony made his way to the entrance. After a brief word, he ushered them inside, where Carlita and Mercedes stood waiting.

"Mrs. Garlucci." Costanza greeted her.

"Taylor," she coolly replied. "This is my son, Tony and daughter, Mercedes. I presume you brought the proof about the loan my deceased husband and I signed and your boss, Mr. Lombardo, acquired."

"Of course." Costanza pulled a plain white envelope from his pocket and held it out.

Carlita grudgingly took it from him. She flipped the flap, removed several sheets of paper, and studied the first page. "This is for another property here in Savannah."

"Correct," Enzo said. "Your husband borrowed money to purchase it. As you can clearly see, you also signed."

Carlita dug through the papers. There, on the second to the last page of the agreement and directly below Vinnie's signature was her own.

"The debt was inherited by Mr. Lombardo. Not only did your husband borrow money, but he also left the property in less than ideal condition."

Carlita's mind whirled. Vinnie had her sign documents over the course of their

marriage. She'd naively done so without giving them a second thought.

What sort of property was it? So many questions. Once again, she'd been blindsided, like she'd been when she discovered her husband owned the property she was standing on. Not even an inkling of knowing it existed until she and Mercedes found a safe deposit key from their bank.

"You're telling me all this time, a property still in my husband's name has been sitting there. Meanwhile, Mr. Lombardo has been lurking in the background, waiting for what? To send you two here to make good on the money owed? Did Vinnie make any payments at all?"

"The last sheet is a ledger, a record of the payments made before your husband's death," Enzo said.

"Can I talk to Mr. Lombardo? I have questions," Carlita said.

"He's not available."

"Not available right now, or not available ever?" Tony asked.

"It won't be possible to meet with him," Costanza said. "The contract is legit."

"We need time to review it." Carlita tidied the stack of papers. "For all we know, the city seized the property because the taxes haven't been paid."

"Feel free to contact them," Enzo said. "The taxes are current."

"Paid by who and why?"

"Mr. Lombardo. He ain't a fan of the government and would hate to see them take

something he has a vested interest in, even if it's trashed."

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“How has it been trashed?” Mercedes asked.

“We suggest you go check it out. Like I said, Mr. Garlucci left it in less than ideal condition.”

Tony took the papers from his mother and began reading them. “I say let Mr. Lombardo have the property and we call it a wash.”

“I can present the offer,” Costanza said. “However, I believe he’ll decline accepting the property as payment and the contract will remain intact.”

“But Vinnie is dead. Surely, your boss won’t hold me to this agreement, an agreement made without my knowledge,” Carlita said.

“You signed for it, Ma.” Tony made an unhappy sound. “And, according to this, the debt passes to Pops’ heirs.”

“As you can see by the purchase price, plus expenses and added interest, a five hundred thousand dollar payment is reasonable. On top of the loan and interest, there is the issue of the taxes which, as I already stated, have been kept current.”

“Reasonable?” Mercedes gasped. “Half a million bucks for a property we haven’t seen and had no idea even existed?”

“And if we refuse to pay?” Tony asked.

Costanza cracked his knuckles, his expression growing grim. “It won’t end well. Mr.

Lombardo will ensure his business dealings are satisfied, no matter what the cost.”

“Meaning, if we don’t agree to the terms, bad things could happen to me or my family.” Carlita’s voice was barely above a whisper, the implications of what might happen starting to sink in.

“You. Your family.” Enzo shoved his hands in his pockets. “You got a really nice place here. It would be a shame to have something bad happen to it.”

Tony clenched his fists, his eyes flashing with anger. “I wouldn’t try it.”

Enzo arched a brow, an amused look on his face. “Are you threatening us?”

Carlita, afraid her son and Enzo would start throwing punches, held up her hand. “What exactly does Mr. Lombardo want?”

“He wants his money, all cash. The second option is to make payments.”

For a moment, Carlita thought maybe there was a way out of this. She could handle payments, depending on the terms. “A contract with terms clearly spelled out?”

“Yes. In fact, I have a copy.” Costanza handed her a second envelope.

Carlita slipped her reading glasses on and pulled the papers out. Her heart plummeted. “Fifty percent of profits off the top.”

“For all three businesses combined,” Enzo said. “Until the debt is paid in full. Of course, every day it’s not paid in full adds additional interest. Again, there is also a separate amount due regarding taxes paid.”

“This is downright robbery,” Mercedes said. “We would never pay the loan off.”

“Eventually.” Enzo shrugged. “And then we need to discuss the matter of offering our services to protect your current income-producing properties.”

Carlita’s throat went dry. “Offering your services?”

“For a fee, of course.” Costanza smiled. Not a friendly smile, but more like an evil grin.

“My family and I need to discuss this.” Carlita, thinking she could take out a business loan, using the restaurant or pawn shop as collateral, would solve their problem. Lombardo would get his money and go away.

She could take the property, sell it and help pay off the debt. Maybe there was a way out after all. “Give us a few days to figure this out.”

“There’s no figuring it out. You have twenty-four hours to come up with the cash or sign the agreement, paying 50% of your profits,” Costanza said. “As already mentioned, Mr. Lombardo has also generously offered personal protection for your businesses.”

“I don’t need personal protection, not to mention I can’t get this kind of money in twenty-four hours. I mean, maybe I can.” Perhaps her friend Tori Montgomery could loan her the money. But then, Tori would have her cash tied up as well. Would any bank on the planet give her a half a million in a day?

Lombardo was offering terms no one could meet unless they had piles of cash just lying around. Obviously, his plan was for her to pay him a large, ridiculous sum. If not, something told her they were in trouble. Big trouble.

Chapter 7

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Tony escorted Costanza and Lorenzo out of the restaurant and locked the door behind them. He returned to where his mother and sister stood. The look on his face said it all. “This ain’t good.”

“It’s awful.” Carlita’s hand trembled as she studied the paper. “He wants five hundred thousand PLUS taxes paid, which is another hundred, if this is accurate. What are we gonna do? I can’t get a legitimate loan in this short of an amount of time.”

“We still have a little cash from the gems,” Mercedes said. “We also have the money from our share of the Marshland Isles Diamond.”

“We could pay up. It would take everything we have, but I can get it all together and pay them off.”

While Carlita talked, Tony wandered to the window, staring out.

“What is it, Son?”

“I’m almost a hundred percent certain if we come up with the cash, Lombardo is gonna change his mind and not accept it.”

“But his henchmen said he wanted his money. Adding taxes, principal and interest, I figure six hundred thousand and they’re gone.”

“Unfortunately, this isn’t how these kinds of people work. I guess I could be wrong. Lombardo has kept quiet and held onto this property for a reason.”

“To accumulate a ridiculous amount of interest,” Carlita said.

“I dunno, Ma. I say we work on getting the money, but my gut is telling me this isn’t the end, especially when they kept mentioning personal protection.”

“I’m still waiting on a call from Vinnie.” Carlita told them she would run down to the bank and start working on getting the cash.

“Most banks don’t have substantial sums of money on hand. I’m almost certain you’ll have to wait,” Tony said. “It’s also gonna trigger a notification to the IRS and other federal regulatory commissions.”

“Seriously?” Carlita grimaced. “Great. All I need is to put our businesses on the IRS’s radar.”

“Which could be the least of our worries,” Mercedes said. “We need to check this place out. What’s the address?”

Carlita rattled it off.

“I gotta get over to the pawn shop. Here’s the plan. Ma, you get the ball rolling to get the now six hundred thousand dollars. I’ll find someone to cover for me and then this afternoon we can go check out the place.”

“For all we know, it could be an empty field, although they did say something about it being in rough condition.” Carlita’s cell phone chimed. It was a text from Vinnie.

I’m still working on figuring out who Danny Lombardo is. How did the meeting go?

Not good. Lombardo now wants six hundred thousand in twenty-four hours. Carlita finished tapping out a reply text, telling him about the alternative to making

payments.

Moments later, her phone rang. It was Vinnie.

“This sounds like a straight up racket. I’m still workin’ on it on my end. All I can say is they must be new to the area.”

“New to the mafia business?” she asked.

“Nope. New to the States. Could be another outfit all together. Are you sure these two are legit?”

“Not yet. We need to find out.”

Vinnie promised he would have something soon and hung up.

Carlita waved her phone in the air. “Vinnie should have something soon. I’m heading to the bank.”

“Before we pay them a red cent, we need to do some serious digging around,” Tony said. “We’re gonna be sure Pops entered into this and owes before we do anything.”

“Still, to err on the side of assuming, once again, your father left us in a mess, I’ll put the wheels in motion to come up with the money.”

With a plan in place, the trio split up. Mercedes, who needed to cover her early lunch shift, and Tony to rearrange his schedule. Meanwhile, Carlita ran back home to go over her bank accounts and make sure she had the cash available.

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It took more than a little finagling and paying a penalty for removing money from several CDs she'd invested in some months back. She hated the idea of being penalized and losing out on the interest, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

Carlita finally had her financial ducks in a row and drove down to the bank. As soon as the teller found out what she was trying to do, she escorted her to the manager's office in the back.

A woman in her fifties, if Carlita had to guess, waited for her to be seated. "Your withdrawal request is for a substantial amount of money. Has someone asked you to send them money over the internet, perhaps a family member who called and is claiming to be in trouble?"

"Oh no." Carlita's eyes widened. "My deceased husband owned a property. He borrowed the money and now the lender is demanding repayment."

"I am sorry for your loss." The manager pressed a hand to her chest.

"Thank you. He died almost five years ago."

The woman's jaw dropped. "And the lender is only now asking for repayment?"

"It's a long story," Carlita muttered. "The bottom line is I need six hundred thousand dollars within the next twenty-four hours."

"It will be nearly impossible for us to get this amount that quickly." She suggested

initiating a wire transfer. “A wire transfer is the safest way to move large sums of money.”

“I’m not sure Mr. Lombardo is open to this.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what sort of business deal was your husband involved in?”

“Unfortunately, a terrible one.”

The woman reached for her mouse. “I’ll get the process started, but please be sure you’re not being tricked into paying a debt you don’t owe.”

“I assure you I won’t.”

The process was tedious and confusing. By the time Carlita left the bank, she wanted nothing more than to grab Rambo and take a long walk. First things first. Back home, she tracked Pete down in his office and filled him in on what had transpired.

He wholeheartedly agreed with the consensus. The very first thing they needed to do was to make sure the claim was legit. And if so, to pay it ASAP. “What time are you heading over there to look around?”

“At three, after Mercedes’ shift ends. Rambo and I are gonna get some fresh air.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

Carlita smiled, her heart doing a small flip-flop when their eyes met. “Thank you for the offer. I’m all right. To be honest, there are times I still can’t believe Vinnie left me with piles of problems.”

“Because he didn’t plan on dying.” Pete ran a light hand across her cheek. “Even more than the messes, you’re disappointed.”

Sudden tears welled up in her eyes, and she nodded. Her husband had hit the nail on the head. After decades of marriage, not to mention raising four wonderful children together, Vinnie hadn’t trusted her enough to tell her about Savannah. She’d been completely in the dark.

Granted, it was the mafia culture. Never involve the wives in a man’s world. Still, it didn’t excuse him from what could have, should have, been an honest, open marriage. But because of his wheeling and dealing, Carlita was still, after all these years, cleaning up messes he’d left behind. Not only for her, but for their children too.

Hopefully, this was the last of it. Only time would tell.

Pete pulled her into his arms.

Carlita closed her eyes, thanking God for giving her such a wonderful, thoughtful, loving husband. And honest. There were no secrets between them. No business dealings she didn’t know about.

She snuggled closer. “I love you, Pete Taylor.”

“And I love you more, Carlita Taylor.”

Feeling better after talking it over and knowing Pete agreed, she and Rambo headed out. They took their usual route down by the river before turning around and meandering back toward her properties.

They passed by Cricket Tidwell’s bookstore, Colby’s Corner Store, and finally Steve Winter’s tattoo shop. The lights were off. At first Carlita thought the place was closed

until she saw movement near the cash register.

It was Steve. Carlita waved.

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He waved back and hurried to the door. “Hey, Carlita. How’s it going?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve had better days. How about you?”

“Same here. Things are a little slow right now. Actually, they’re really slow.”

“I noticed your lights were off. Did you turn them off to save electricity?” Carlita had meant it as a joke until she saw the look on his face. “Things must be really slow.”

“They are. I’ve never seen it like this. I guess tats are a luxury item a lot of my regular customers can no longer afford.”

“Because they need to spend what money they have on food and putting gas in their cars.” Carlita switched Rambo’s leash to her other hand. “I’m sorry to hear it.”

“Hopefully, it won’t last long.” They made small talk until Steve’s cell phone rang and he excused himself.

She and Rambo kept going and noticed her friend, Annie Dowton’s car was parked in front of Riverfront Real Estate’s office. Annie, who was a whiz at local real estate, would be the perfect person to ask about the property.

Carlita had left the papers in her purse, which was home, but had already memorized the property address.

Annie’s robot Tinker rolled over as soon as she and Rambo stepped inside. “Welcome to Riverfront Real Estate,” he politely greeted them in his robotic voice.

Rambo, unsure of what to think, barked loudly.

“We are glad you are here,” Tinker continued. “Please, follow me.”

The robot twirled around and rolled toward Annie, who was seated behind her desk, grinning from ear to ear.

Rambo continued barking, staying close to Carlita’s side.

“Look at Tinker.” Carlita laughed. “You put him to work. How cute.”

“Clients love him. He has a whole new vocabulary.”

Woof. Woof.

“Rambo.” She patted her pup’s head. “It’s okay. Tinker won’t hurt you.”

Annie tapped her keyboard. Tinker turned again, gliding toward Rambo.

He jumped back, his ears flat, warily eyeing the robot.

Tinker’s hand extended. In it were doggie treats. “These are for you.”

Rambo pressed even tighter against Carlita’s leg.

“Tinker has a treat for you.”

Rambo refused to budge.

She took a treat and fed it to the pup, who promptly inhaled it. “Tinker has two more. Go get them.”

Rambo crept forward, never taking his eyes off the robot. Meanwhile, Tinker stood still, hand extended, the treats still in his palm.

In the blink of an eye, Rambo lunged forward and gobbled them up. “Tell Tinker thank you.”

The pup pranced from side to side.

“Rambo says thank you, Tinker.”

“You are welcome.” The robot’s hand retracted. He rolled around and glided toward the desk.

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The dog, no longer afraid, trotted after him, eager for more treats.

“That is cool,” Carlita said. “A robot in real estate.”

“We’ve been working on teaching him new tricks for a while now. I recently added the pet treats. Clients stop by with their pets just to get a treat.”

Rambo spotted Annie behind the desk and trotted over.

“There’s my buddy.” She fluffed his ears. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you.”

“We’ve been busy,” Carlita said. “Do you have a minute?”

“Of course. Have a seat.”

Carlita settled into an empty chair. “I have a smallish problem.”

“Smallish?” Annie laughed. “When have you ever had smallish problems?”

“You’re right. Let me rephrase my statement. I might have a potentially biggish problem.” Without going into too much detail, Carlita outlined her current dilemma.

“How awful.”

“I need to do my due diligence first, but if true, it appears I might owe this Danny Lombardo guy a hefty chunk of change.”

“You said the property is here in Savannah?”

“Yep.” Carlita rattled off the address. “8807 Morton Street.”

“Let’s see what we have.” Annie got to work, logging onto the local real estate website. With a few clicks, she announced she had tracked down the property. “This is interesting.”

“Let me guess. The men lied. The taxes haven’t been paid and the city now owns the property.”

“No. The taxes have been paid. I’ve been a real estate agent for many years, but I have to be honest. I’ve only seen this a couple of times before,” Annie said.

Chapter 8

“Only seen what a couple of times before?”

Annie motioned for Carlita to come around to the other side of the desk. “This. The tax amounts were pretty consistent until this date.”

Carlita slid her reading glasses on, her heart skipping a beat when she read the date. “These are the taxes paid the last year that Vinnie was alive.”

“After his death, you can see they went down. Way down.”

“Why do you think this is?”

Annie rattled off several scenarios. “It could be as simple as changing the zoning. Maybe it was moved from commercial zoning to vacant land. Was your first husband savvy as far as taxes and property ownership was concerned?”

Carlita thought about it. “He seemed to be pretty proficient at buying properties and not telling me about them. I can tell you he would try to pay as little as possible. He wasn’t a huge fan of the government.”

“Which is the case for at least half the people who live in this country,” Annie joked. “How much is this lender saying he owed in taxes?”

“A hundred thousand dollars. The taxes are something I need to check out. How much has this ‘lender’ paid in taxes since Vinnie’s death?”

Annie grabbed her calculator and calculated it out. “If Vinnie only paid two hundred and fifty thousand for the property, he got a pretty good deal, even back a few years ago. Although it’s a smaller square footage property. Maybe it wasn’t far off. Considering it’s more than property taxes, added up it might be in line with the hundred thousand.”

“So, in your professional opinion, the five hundred thousand plus the hundred for the taxes could be close to accurate,” Carlita summarized.

“Possibly. How many payments did Vinnie make to this lender?”

“Only a few.”

“Then most of the principal owed at the time he died was still there.” Annie blew air through thinned lips. “I know it’s none of my business, but why would this lender wait until now—years later—to collect?”

Carlita rubbed her thumb and index finger together. “My guess is money. I think he’s been sitting back, waiting for the interest to accumulate.”

“If so, this sounds sort of slimy,” Annie said. “And not the type of person I would want to borrow money from.”

“Me either. Unfortunately, it looks like Vinnie may have. What about the area?”

Annie wrinkled her nose. “It’s not the best.”

“I figured as much. What was Vinnie thinking, to buy a property over there? I guess he saw something in it nobody else did.” Carlita slowly stood. “Thank you for digging into this for me.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck. It sounds like you might need it.”

“Without a doubt.” Carlita thanked her again before stepping out onto the sidewalk. She glanced at her watch. It was almost time to meet Mercedes and Tony.

She stopped by the apartment long enough to drop Rambo off and ran back to wait for her children. Within minutes, her son caught up with her in the alley. Mercedes

was only steps behind.

“Annie did a little preliminary research for me.” Carlita filled them in on what her friend had said.

“So, maybe the place is a dump and on a bad side of town, which is why this Lombardo guy doesn’t want it.”

“Could be, although Annie seemed to think it was still a decent deal. Remember, Enzo and Costanza made a comment about how Lombardo inherited the debt. Maybe he figures getting his money is a better idea. If so, we could be stuck with a real lemon.”

“Technically, I believe the only recourse the lender would have is to foreclose on the property. He couldn’t touch any of our other properties,” Tony said.

“Unless he got creative and used some underhanded tactics to get his hands on them,” Carlita theorized.

The trio climbed into Tony’s car for the quick trip. They passed by the touristy area, driving to a side of town Carlita rarely visited.

Boarded-up buildings lined both sides of Morton Street. Several appeared occupied. A liquor store. A laundromat. A check cashing business.

“Pops sure knew how to pick ‘em,” Mercedes joked.

“Thank goodness the Walton Square properties were in much better condition, not to mention a much better neighborhood. Had I showed up at this place first, I would have turned the car around and driven right back to New York,” Carlita said.

“And I would have been right there with you.” Mercedes slid over to the side window. “What is the street number?”

“It’s 8807. On this side of the street.”

Tony slowed, searching for building numbers. Finally, they found 8805. “It’s the next one up.”

Through the passenger side window, Carlita peered down a narrow alley. She caught a flit of movement. A man appeared, closely watching as their car crept past. “I’m not sure this is the safest area.”

Tony patted his pocket. “I have my gun.”

“Good. Who knows what we might run into.” Straight ahead, Carlita could see the outline. Two stories. Brick building on a corner lot. It reminded her of their apartment, a traditional Savannah brownstone.

A piece of wood dangled from the front door. Charred building numbers were barely attached. A tattered red and white awning hung above the small entry.

“It ain’t much to look at.” Tony stopped at the stop sign and turned right.

“Nope.” Carlita’s eyes squinted. “It’s bigger than I thought it would be. I wonder what your father planned to do with the place.”

“Bulldoze it and start over,” Mercedes joked.

Tony pulled alongside the curb and shifted into park. “Do you want to get out?”

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Carlita sucked in a breath. “What do you think?”

“Considering we might end up owning this gem, it probably wouldn’t hurt to look around.”

“True. Good point.” Carlita unbuckled and reached for the door handle. “Regardless of what happens, I suppose I am curious to see what the place looks like.”

“Hang on. Let me scope it out first.” Tony climbed out of the vehicle and stepped onto the sidewalk. Checking in both directions, he gave them the all-clear signal.

As soon as they were out of the car, he clicked the key fob twice, making sure the doors were locked.

With him leading the way, the three of them trekked toward the front entrance facing Morton Street.

Tony twisted the doorknob. “It’s not locked.” He pushed on the frame. It refused to budge. “The door is swollen shut. Stand back.”

Carlita and Mercedes took a step back.

Shifting his weight, Tony lifted his foot and landed a solid blow to the frame. The door popped open. “Stay here.”

Mother and daughter warily watched as Tony, his hand in his pocket, the one Carlita was certain held his gun, crossed the threshold. He disappeared from sight,

reappearing moments later. “The coast is clear. You can come in.”

They started to follow him in, and Tony stopped them. “I think I should warn you—this place is a hot mess.”

Chapter 9

Carlita braced herself for what was inside 8807 Morton Street. She took a tentative step across the threshold. Despite her son’s warning, she wasn’t prepared for what was waiting for them on the other side.

“Good gravy.” Mercedes let out a low whistle. “You weren’t kidding when you said it was a hot mess.”

“More like a firebombed mess.” Carlita’s sharp eye took in the charred ruins. Blackened walls. Gaping holes. What appeared to be insulation hung in shreds from the sagging ceiling panels. Exposed pipes, covered in black streaks from some sort of soot, ran from the front of the building to the other end.

Tony nudged a singed cardboard box with the tip of his shoe. “This looks like a mob hit.”

“A mob hit?” Mercedes echoed. “You mean like...drive by, toss a firebomb in the door and the place goes up in flames?”

“Vinnie must’ve replaced the door, especially if the original was blown to smithereens.” Carlita’s stomach churned. Is this what would happen to her beloved Ravello’s restaurant if she didn’t agree to Danny Lombardo’s terms? Or even more horrifying, the apartments where Mercedes, Tony, her granddaughter Violet, her pregnant daughter-in-law Shelby lived?

And then there were her tenants who were like family. Luigi, Cool Bones, Sam, Autumn. Carlita would never forgive herself if something happened to any of them and she could have prevented it.

“Now I know why the property taxes went down. In fact, after looking at this place, I think the taxes are too high and I’m gonna dispute them.”

“It’s not worth much in its current condition,” Tony said.

“Not in my book.” She voiced her greatest fear. “If the mob would do this to your father’s junky old building, what will they do to our place?”

Tony pressed a light hand on the back of his neck and spun in a slow circle. “I think Vinnie needs to see this.”

Carlita pulled her cell phone from her pocket and snapped a picture. She forwarded it to her oldest son and asked him to call her.

Her phone rang seconds later. “Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, Son. You got my picture?”

“I did. Is this the property Pops owned?”

“It is,” Tony answered. “Ma has you on speaker. Mercedes is here too. It looks like the place got firebombed a long time ago. We want your expert opinion.”

“About the damage?” Vinnie asked. “I hate to say it, but this looks like the work of the family.”

“So maybe Danny Lombardo firebombed the building,” Carlita theorized.

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“Why? It makes little sense. Maybe it was someone who had it in for him. I wonder when it happened.”

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out,” Carlita said. “Anything on Lombardo yet?”

“Maybe. I got a lead and am waiting for confirmation,” Vinnie said. “I’m coming down.”

“Down here?” Mercedes asked.

“Yeah. If this is who I think it is, we might have some even bigger issues on the horizon.”

Carlita blinked rapidly, trying to process what her eldest son had said. “Bigger issues involving the family?”

“Correct.”

“Who...who is it?” she asked.

“I don’t wanna scare you, Ma. They’re definitely from the family, but not from around here. Not even close, at least not until recently. By the time I get there this evening, I’ll have a pretty good idea what we’re up against.” Vinnie told them he’d already booked his flight and would be arriving at seven thirty.

“I’ll come pick you up at the airport,” Tony offered.

“Thanks. If the goons call back, don’t talk to them.”

“We won’t,” Carlita promised.

“Before I forget, do you have any idea where the tax bill is going?”

“No, but I’ll find out as soon as I get home.”

“And who the property is titled to,” he added.

“Is it safe to be here?” Mercedes asked. “I mean, seeing how this is a mob target and all.”

“If my sources are correct, these guys aren’t after real estate. They’re after money. How many people know about the you-know-what?” Vinnie asked.

Carlita took the phone off speaker. “The Marshland Isles Diamond?” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

“Pete, Tori, all three of you and maybe Paulie. I’m not sure if I told him and Gina about it.”

“Anyone else?”

“Louise Delmario.” Carlita studied the ceiling. “Maybe Lombardo’s henchman aren’t here to make me live up to Vinnie’s ironclad passing-it-onto-the-heirs agreement. Maybe someone heard about the diamond we found and linked it to our name.”

“It’s possible. The timing makes me think there’s a reason Lombardo waited until now to have his men show up on your doorstep,” Vinnie said. “I’m still trying to put

a few of the pieces together.”

“You sure you want to come down here?”

“I do.” Vinnie’s voice grew muffled. “I gotta get going. See you later.”

Carlita didn’t have time to thank him. He was already gone. “If Vinnie is coming down, I’m pretty sure we have a major problem on our hands.”

“Bigger than a burned-out shell of a building we’re going to pay six hundred grand and counting for,” Tony grimaced.

“Maybe.”

Back at Mercedes’ apartment, Carlita promptly pulled up the appraiser’s website. She typed in the property address and accessed the records. “The property is titled to...oh my gosh. You’re not going to believe this.”

“What’s the name?” Mercedes asked.

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“Marshland Investment Group. Your father named it Marshland Investment Group.”
Carlita dropped her head in her hands. “What was he thinking?”

“Not very clearly,” Tony said. “What I keep going back to is...why now? Why wait all this time?”

“Maybe Lombardo only recently bought the debt, or has been here watching, waiting for the moment he thought he could get the most money out of us and then bam!”
Mercedes slapped her palms together. “He decides to swoop in and try to take it all.”

“It’s better than hanging onto a burned-out wreck in a rough side of town,” Carlita said. “But why firebomb the place?”

“Maybe he didn’t do it and someone else did,” Tony said. “Where’s the tax bill going?”

“Good question.” Carlita’s fingers flew over the keys. She pulled up the second page of the tax bill and then the third. Oddly, it didn’t list the address.

“I’m hitting a dead end.”

“Ask Annie,” Mercedes suggested. “Maybe she knows how to find it.”

Carlita grabbed her phone and sent a text, asking Annie if she knew how to find it. She received a prompt reply.

It can be tricky. Do you want me to look it up?

If you don't mind.

Not at all. Standby.

A minute passed, and then two. Finally, Annie forwarded an address. Carlita nearly fell out of the chair when she found out where the Morton Street tax bill was being sent.

Chapter 10

The mailing address for the property over on Morton Street is somewhere in Sicily, Italy, Annie texted back.

Carlita's brows furrowed. "Sicily. I don't know anyone in Sicily."

"Maybe Pops did, or it's this Danny Lombardo," Tony said. "Something tells me Vinnie will be able to fill in the blanks once he gets here."

Carlita thanked Annie and eased out of the chair. "It's getting late. Go home. Have dinner with Shelby. If you want, Pete and I can pick Vinnie up at the airport."

"You sure? I was the one who offered," Tony said.

"Positive."

"If you don't mind. The baby likes to keep her up at night and she's been kinda tired lately." Tony and wife Shelby's baby was due in a few months and Carlita couldn't be more thrilled.

The only person more excited was soon-to-be big sister, Violet. To Carlita, the only foreseeable concern on the horizon was the family outgrowing their apartment, which

was above Ravello's. While more spacious than Carlita's other units, she suspected they would soon run out of room.

When she brought the subject up, Tony said the couple had already discussed it. He hinted at perhaps expanding the size by turning the storage area she'd used for last Halloween's haunted house into usable living space.

The issue would be coming up with the money for the renovations, something Carlita planned to offer. But now, with Vinnie's debt looming over her head and paying out a sizeable chunk to get the debtor off her back, it might not be possible. Hence, another concern lingering in the back of her mind.

"Don't worry about it. You take care of your family. Vinnie, Mercedes, Pete and I will figure it out."

"I have a better idea. How about we all meet at your place later? I'll bring Violet with me to give Shelby a break."

"It's a deal. I'll text both of you when we're on our way back from the airport."

Carlita and her son parted ways in the alley. Dusk had settled in and she picked up the pace, making a fast trek back home. Pete was already there, waiting for word.

Thinking a quick meal of sandwiches and soup would be easiest, she brought him up to speed while they ate. "Vinnie's on his way. I'm pretty sure what he found and what we've discovered means we're dealing with new mafia, a new family."

"It would be difficult running their business from across the ocean," Pete pointed out.

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“I don’t think they are.” Carlita absentmindedly stirred her soup. “My gut tells me they’re just getting started and, lucky us, the Garlucci family is on their radar.”

After finishing, Pete took a closer look at the loan papers Enzo and Costanza had given her. “Vinnie should never have agreed to these terms. Every single line favors the lender.”

“Most loan agreements favor the lender,” Carlita said. “I don’t know this for certain, but maybe even in the most above-board agreements, the debt could be tied to the estate.”

“But the lender doesn’t show up on your doorstep with veiled threats and unreasonable terms.” Pete held up a sheet of paper. “If the debt is in default, the lender will provide acceptable terms for repayment, including, but not limited to, immediate payment or payment amounts set forth by the lender.”

Carlita pursed her lips. “We were basically told to come up with the money, all of it, or Lombardo wants 50% of our profits until the debt is paid in full, plus interest.”

“I think you mentioned signing over the property. The lender isn’t interested?”

She gave him a thumbs down. “And after looking at it, I don’t blame him. It needs to be bulldozed.”

“We’ll figure this out, one way or another,” Pete vowed. “I see a copy of the deed on the last page.”

“With Vinnie’s name, my name and someone else, I’m guessing the original lender, before the debt was passed on to Lombardo, which is on another page. He must have had some inkling the property was in a serious state of disrepair,” Carlita said.

After eating, the couple took Rambo for a long, leisurely walk. By the time they returned, Vinnie called, letting them know his plane had landed.

It was a quick drive to the nearby Savannah airport. They pulled into the pickup area and found him waiting on the curb. Carlita hopped out of the car and hugged her son. “Thank you for coming down here.”

“No problem, Ma. We’ll figure this out.”

“I hope so.”

“Hello, Vinnie.” Pete shook his hand and reached for his bag. “It’s good to see you again. I only wish it was under better circumstances.”

“Me too. Although I have to say we Garluccis manage to find ourselves in a few messes. I guess we can thank Pops for this one.”

“Yes, we can.”

Back home, Mercedes, Tony, and Violet arrived within the hour.

“There’s my Violet.” Carlita gave her granddaughter a big hug.

Rambo trotted over and wiggled his way between them, his tail wagging ninety miles an hour.

Violet wrapped her arms around the pup’s neck. “I’ve missed you so much, Rambo.”

Tony ruffled her hair. “Did you bring your stuff?”

“Yep.” Violet promptly plopped down on the floor. She unzipped her backpack, reached inside and removed a plastic zippered bag. Inside was a packet of Rambo’s favorite treats and a small stack of paper muffin cups. “We’re going to play the muffin cup game. Now, you can’t watch.”

Carlita grabbed her pup and led him behind the kitchen’s center island while Violet hid treats beneath the muffin cups. “Let us know when you’re ready.”

“I will Nana.” The young girl hummed under her breath, carefully arranging the cups. “I’m ready.”

As soon as Carlita released her grip, Rambo skittered around the bar. He tromped on top of a muffin cup and gobbled up the treat hidden beneath it.

Violet covered her mouth and giggled. “You’re supposed to find them.” She patiently nudged him back. “Now, pick one,” she told him.

The pup gently tapped the top of one cup. Violet snatched the paper cup off the floor.

Rambo lunged forward, gobbling up the goody. They played the game until Violet ran out of treats. “Can we go outside?”

“Sure,” Carlita said. “Leave the slider door open and stay away from the railing.”

“I will.” Violet skipped out of the kitchen with a rambunctious Rambo by her side.

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“She loves that dog,” Tony said.

“And he loves her just as much,” Carlita said.

Pete, Carlita and her children gathered at the kitchen bar, going over everything they had. She grabbed a notepad and began taking notes.

-Marshland Investment Group. Property at 8807 Morton Street, Savannah, GA.

-Danny Lombardo, Sicily, Italy. Lender.

-Amount owed: \$500k plus taxes paid.

-Pay full amount in less than 24 hours or cough up ½ the restaurant, pawn shop and apartment rental profits.

-Enzo and Costanza returning the following day.

-Per bank manager, cannot get the money in time for the meeting.

Carlita tapped the tip of her pen on top of the notepad. “I’m able to get the money, but it won’t be by tomorrow morning.”

“Maybe when we meet with them, we can explain the situation and ask for more time,” Mercedes said.

“They’re not gonna agree to a delay,” Vinnie said. “I would bet my life on it.”

“You were working on getting more information about them,” Tony reminded him.

“They’re from Sicily, expanding operations here on the East Coast. From what I’m hearing, Danny Lombardo was feeling the squeeze from some Sicilian associates and decided to move his ‘family’ to the States.”

“He’s not a part of the Castellini family?” Pete asked.

“Nope. My guess is he got here and figured it was time to collect Pops’ debt. I’m sure he and / or his thugs have already been by the Morton Street property.”

“Based on their suggestion we go take a look at it as well as their comments, I’m certain they have,” Mercedes said. “Lombardo must’ve done some digging around. He found out about Ma and her businesses and figures he’s hit the jackpot.”

Vinnie spread the papers out on the counter and began going over them. “Talk about a one-sided agreement. You either pay up or start paying big time.”

“Principal, interest, taxes,” Carlita rattled off.

“This right here.” Vinnie jabbed the paper. “Half of net profit for loan repayment and for property protection. This is a shakedown if I ever saw one. There’s no end in sight. You’re gonna pay on this for the rest of your life.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I saw the picture you sent me. How rough is the rest of the Morton Street property?”

“It’s a teardown,” Mercedes said. “It looks like someone tossed a bomb in the front door and blew the place up.”

“And set what was left of it on fire,” Carlita added.

“My guess is this is what will happen to the restaurant, the pawn shop, the apartments, if you don’t agree,” Vinnie said.

“So even if I came up with the cash to pay off the debt, Lombardo isn’t interested.”

“I can’t say for certain, at least not yet. We need a little inside intel. Where’s Luigi?”

“How can Luigi help?”

“He’s from Sicily. He speaks their language. In fact, he might even know Lombardo.”

“Good point. Why didn’t I think of that?” Tony removed his cell phone from his pocket. “I’ll give him a call.”

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Thankfully, Luigi picked up right away. Their conversation was brief and to the point. Luigi, a former mobster and man Carlita and her children now considered a part of the family, offered to swing by.

He arrived within minutes. Taking turns, they brought him up to speed on their current situation.

“I’m worried this mob guy and his goons are going to become a permanent fixture around Walton Square,” Carlita summarized. “We need to figure out what we’re up against.”

“What are the associates’ names?” Luigi asked.

“Costanza and Enzo.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard of them. I also know Danny Lombardo. Let me rephrase that—I know of him. So, he finally decided to come to the States. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” Luigi said even before he left the business, he’d heard rumblings of discord inside the Sicilian family. “You want me to hit the streets and see what’s up?”

“Yes, and no. I don’t want you putting yourself in danger over this.”

Luigi shrugged. “It’ll be like old times. Off the top of my head, I can think of a few places they could be hanging out, mostly on the same side of town. What do they look like?”

Carlita described them to the best of her ability. “We haven’t met Lombardo. I have

no idea what he looks like.”

“I’ll go with Luigi.” Vinnie dropped a pack of cigarettes in his front pocket and grabbed his cell phone.

“Let’s make it the three amigos,” Tony said.

Vinnie immediately shot down the suggestion. “They already met you, which means they won’t be inclined to talk.”

“We’ll be back within a couple of hours,” Luigi said.

“In the meantime, I’m gonna see if I can find anything out about the Morton Street property,” Mercedes said.

Vinnie held up his hand and gave his sister a high five. “Sounds like a plan.”

A knot formed in the pit of Carlita’s stomach as she watched her son and tenant head out. Would they find answers...or would they find more trouble?

Vinnie’s words rang in her ears. She was gonna pay for her deceased husband’s past debt for the rest of her life.

Chapter 11

“You wanna use my computer to research the property?” Carlita asked.

“Nah. I’ll use my phone.” Mercedes tapped the screen and grew quiet. “Remember when we thought maybe the property was destroyed not long after Pops died?”

“Yeah. Because the property taxes went down,” Carlita said.

“I found a story from around the same time. Neighbors complained about vandals in the area. You need to read this.”

“Email it to me and I’ll print a copy,” Pete said.

With a few taps, Mercedes forwarded it.

Pete ran to the home office and returned moments later. The others gathered around. Within the first few paragraphs, it was clear someone had intentionally destroyed the Morton Street property.

“Seems like the neighbors suspected something was going on and notified police,” Pete said.

Carlita drummed her fingers on the counter. “This happened only a couple of months before Vinnie died.”

“Meaning the property was still intact until right before his death.”

“So, did Vinnie bomb it? Was someone targeting him?”

Mercedes grabbed a scratchpad and began scribbling.

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“What are you doing?”

“There are some quotes in here. I’m gonna look these places up to see if they’re still around.” She grabbed her cell phone again. “We’re in luck. Spiffy Clean Dry-Cleaning and Laundromat is still in business. The owner’s name is June Cleary. This place is open twenty-four hours a day.”

“Great. We can chat with her and try to find out what she remembers. Reading between the lines, I think Lombardo’s goons believe Vinnie was responsible for the destruction. I know he would never destroy a property, at least not intentionally.”

“This could be why Lombardo is pressuring you. He’s ticked to find out he owns a dump. Meanwhile, here you sit, pretty as a picture with profitable businesses,” Mercedes said. “Maybe if we can prove Pops wasn’t behind it, he’ll be more open to negotiating.”

“Or at the very least, not try to shake us down for no reason,” Carlita said. “It’s worth a shot.”

“We’ll know more after Vinnie and Luigi report back,” Pete said. “Hopefully, they’re making some progress.”

Vinnie shoved his hands in his pockets and studied the outside of the nightclub. “You still hanging around this joint?”

“Nah. Dernice keeps me busy...too busy to run around with the boys. I’ve had a few security gigs near here, though. Do you remember Phil Duce?” Luigi asked.

“Yeah. Phil the Pill Duce. Does he still own this place?”

“Yep. His sister Pat is still in the slammer.”

“And will be for a long time,” Vinnie said. “Murder, illegal gambling.”

“This is the preferred hangout for past and present family members.” Luigi grasped the door handle. “Phil and I are on a first name basis. He’ll be able to tell us if Enzo and Costanza are hanging around.”

Stepping inside the dimly lit club, Luigi and Vinnie strode over to the bar. Both ordered a drink and then scoped out the scene, searching for the men.

“I’m not seeing them,” Vinnie finally said.

“Me neither. I wonder if Phil is around.” Luigi waved the bartender down. “We’re wondering if Phil is around.”

“Boss man?” the bartender asked.

“Yeah.”

“Who’s asking?”

“Luigi Baruzzo.”

“Ah. I thought you looked familiar. You still working for that crazy chick, Elvira Cobb?”

“Yeah. Elvira’s a trip. I’ll give her your regards,” Luigi teased.

“No thanks. I don’t want to be anywhere on her radar.” The guy dropped his dishrag on the bar sink. “I think Phil is in the back.”

Vinnie waited until the bartender was gone. “Elvira has a reputation.”

“Everywhere. The woman is everywhere.”

He returned a minute later, followed by Phil Duce, a man Vinnie had met some years ago.

“Hey, Luigi.” Phil greeted him. “Rudy said you were looking for me.”

“Thanks for coming out.” Luigi extended his hand, and they shook. “I’m not sure if you remember Vinnie Garlucci.”

“I do. Castellini’s son-in-law. I’m sorry to hear about Vito’s death,” Phil said. “You have my condolences.”

“Thank you. It was unexpected,” Vinnie said.

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“You still...working with the Castellini clan?”

“Yeah. Up in Jersey. I run one of the family casinos.”

“Treasure Cove?” Phil asked.

“That’s the one.”

“Been there before. They have decent blackjack tables.”

“Next time you’re in the area, look me up. I’ll hook you up with the best dealer in Jersey,” Vinnie promised.

“I’ll be sure to do that.” Phil changed the subject. “What can I help you gentlemen with?”

“We’re looking for a couple of guys new to town. Their names are Enzo and Costanza,” Luigi said. “Have you heard of them or seen them around?”

Phil repeated it. “Yeah. They work for some guy named Danny Lombardo, fresh off the plane from Sicily, if I recall correctly. They’ve been by a couple of times. Why?”

“Because they’re trying to collect on a debt belonging to my old man,” Vinnie said. “He’s dead and my mother is left holding the bag.”

“What a shame. I wouldn’t want to be in her shoes. Some of those guys play hardball,” Phil said.

“We’re trying to figure out what went down. We heard the debt in question is a dump over on Morton Street.”

“Morton Street. Not the best area, although not the worst either.”

Luigi leaned his elbows on the bar. “You’ve been around for a long time. From what we’ve been told, the place got firebombed. We’re trying to figure out what happened.”

“Are you talking about the old Finch building?”

“I have an address.” Vinnie pulled a slip of paper from his pocket. “It’s 8807 Morton Street.”

“Yeah. That’s the place,” Phil said. “Rumor has it the owner set it on fire to collect on the insurance.”

“My father set the building on fire?” Vinnie asked. “It doesn’t make sense. From what we can figure out, he didn’t own it for very long when the vandalism occurred.”

Phil shrugged. “I dunno. I heard somebody came in, bought it for a steal, insured it, torched it and tried to collect the insurance.”

“Is there anything else you can remember?” Vinnie asked.

“Nope. That’s all I know. Do you want me to give you a buzz if these two guys show up again?”

“Nah. They’ll be back around tomorrow to cut a deal,” Vinnie said. “I appreciate the info. Remember what I said about Jersey.”

“You got it. I’ll look you up.”

Luigi and Vinnie finished their drinks and exited the bar.

“Well?” Luigi held the door for Vinnie. “What do you think?”

“Something smells fishy. I don’t believe my father torched the place to collect the insurance. I think someone set it on fire. For all we know, it could have been Danny Lombardo.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Enzo and Costanza are showing up tomorrow to collect their money,” Vinnie said. “I’ll be waiting for them.”

Chapter 12

Carlita woke early the next morning, having barely slept the night before. All she could think about was what Luigi and Vinnie had told her. People believed her husband had vandalized the Morton Street property to collect the insurance.

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Based on what Enzo and Costanza had said, it appeared Lombardo did as well. Had her husband torched the place, realizing he'd made a terrible investment in the hopes he could pay off the loan and walk away?

No wonder Danny Lombardo was breathing down her neck. He was heavily invested in a pile of rubble and decided to send his two goons to collect from widow Carlita, who happened to have not one, not two, but three successful, profitable businesses.

Setting up shop in the States was probably looking like a lucrative move, at Carlita's expense. And then there was the possibility he knew about the Marshland Isles Diamond. Why on earth would Vinnie use Marshland Isles as the name?

Because he thought the original lender, perhaps even Lombardo, were on the other side of the world and wouldn't know anything about the diamond? Carlita would never have her answer.

What she knew was she was on the hook for a sizeable sum of money. Possibly even more concerning was the fact Enzo and Costanza mentioned more than once having her pay for "protection."

For how long? Weeks? Months? Years? At what price? Half her profits forever? This, above all else, was what had kept her up. She could eventually dig her way out of the financial hole, but if these new-to-the-area mafia members were setting up shop, she could be in for a very long haul.

Her second concern was Vinnie insisting he be with her when she met with them. Without coming right out and saying it, Carlita believed he was also concerned this

“family,” completely unrelated to the Castellini family, was moving in and planned to operate in the same circles.

Carlita slipped out of bed and tiptoed into the kitchen. Rambo, who was sleeping near the bar, scrambled to his feet and made a beeline for the door. “I know. You need to go out.”

She ran to the bathroom, swapped out her pajamas for sweats and a T-shirt and followed her pup down the stairs.

The morning air was cool and clear. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Carlita should’ve known things were going a little too smoothly. Even having Kris and Monty her python, staying under the same roof, hadn’t been this stressful.

For the life of her, she still couldn’t understand what had gone through her deceased husband’s head. Why purchase all these Savannah properties? Perhaps he thought they’d been too good of deals to pass up.

Even her businesses had needed extensive renovations to make them habitable. Hard work, grit, determination and cold hard cash. Finally, things were going well. Someday, she and Pete could step back and let their children and families continue building generational wealth.

But not if Sicilian mobsters planned to swoop in and steal her profits. They would be working for pennies. Meanwhile, Lombardo and his “family” would benefit. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right.

Somehow, she needed to convince the guy to give her a break. But how?

Back inside, Carlita started a pot of coffee and began working on breakfast. Pete appeared midway through and helped. They carried their plates to the penthouse

balcony, glimpsing the glorious sun peeking over the horizon.

“This is a million dollar view,” Carlita said. “I’ll never grow tired of it.”

Pete reached for her hand. “We’ll have many years to enjoy it.”

“Unless we’re forced to sell everything we own to get rid of Lombardo.” Carlita toyed with her eggs, suddenly losing her appetite.

“We aren’t selling anything.” Pete sipped his coffee, eyeing his wife over the rim of his cup. “I’ve given it some thought. Based on what we’ve learned, this man could believe Vinnie blew up his own building.”

“Costanza and Enzo said something along the lines of my Vinnie leaving it in less than ideal condition. I don’t believe it.”

“Maybe he’s unwilling to make a deal because it’s his way of punishing you or teaching others who do business with him what will happen if they cross him.”

“Meaning he’s using us as a lesson?” Carlita shrugged. “I suppose it’s possible.”

“So...let’s say there’s a chance you can prove Vinnie didn’t destroy the Morton Street property. You’re able to reason with Danny Lombardo, come to a mutual agreement about the repayment of the loan.”

“Hey, Ma.” Vinnie appeared in the doorway, fully dressed and looking like he was headed to the office. Crisp, collared shirt with the first button undone. Tan slacks. Dress shoes, his hair damp from the shower and clean shaven.

“Good morning, Son. We have breakfast on the stove,” Carlita said.

“Thanks. I’m not much of a breakfast person, but I’ll grab a cup of coffee.” He disappeared, returning a short time later, cup in hand. “Looks like a beautiful day.”

“A beautiful day to find out if Lombardo’s associates are going to make us sign a bad deal,” she sighed.

“Not necessarily. Believe it or not, there’s a certain honor amongst the mob. My way of thinking is Lombardo believes Pops torched the place to collect insurance money. He’s ticked and is gonna make you pay to set an example.”

“Which is pretty much what Pete just said. Do you think we have a shot at reasoning with him, paying him his money and settling the debt?”

“Maybe. We would have to prove Pops didn’t do it.” Vinnie told them he had a call in to a friend of a friend who had various connections. “I’m putting the feelers out to see if this might be the case.”

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“We have a couple hours before our twenty-four hours are up.” Carlita shoved her chair back. “You still want to meet with them at nine?”

“Yeah. In the meantime, I’m gonna swing by the pawn shop and chat with Tony.”

“He gets there early, before it opens. I’m sure he would love to see you. I’ll catch up with you at Ravello’s.”

“Sounds good.” Vinnie finished his coffee and headed out.

Meanwhile, Carlita and Pete hung around home, cleaning up the breakfast dishes and getting ready for their day. Eight o’clock rolled around. She was too antsy to sit still and told Pete she was heading over to wait.

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No. Vinnie will be there.” She promised to let him know as soon as she had an update. Taking Rambo with her, they cut through the alley and came up on the back side of the apartment.

She peeked in the front window of their pawn shop and could see Vinnie and Tony inside talking. Passing by the courtyard, she continued walking until she reached Ravello’s front entrance.

The door was locked, so she strolled around back to the alley. Rambo pulled on his leash, eager to check out his old stomping grounds—the parking lot’s small strip of green grass.

Loosening his leash, Carlita let him explore. They squeezed in between Elvira's work van and her compact car.

Carlita peered in the window. The back seat was crammed full...blankets, a cooler, a toolbox, some crumpled fast-food wrappers.

The front passenger seat wasn't much better. Empty and half full water bottles. A stack of orange safety cones was wedged between the seat and the glove box.

"This vehicle is a health hazard," Carlita muttered. "I bet it stinks to high heaven."

Skirting past the back bumper, they walked to the corner and turned right. Remnants of Elvira's backyard excavation project were still visible. Not a blade of grass was in sight. Instead, small mounds of dirt dotted the area.

Beyond the fence was another rear yard, roughly half the size of the parking lot. Carlita noticed newly installed privacy fence panels. She could hear someone talking.

Bouncing on the tips of her toes, she peered over the top and glimpsed Elvira's gray hair. "Elvira?"

It grew quiet. The woman appeared. "Hey, Carlita. What are you doing?"

"Waiting for some visitors. Remember the guys who were snooping around the other day?" Carlita didn't wait for her to answer. "They're here to collect a debt Vinnie owed."

"Vinnie your son?"

"No. Vinnie my first husband."

“Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh is right.” Carlita changed the subject. “Nice fence. Why didn’t you fence in your entire yard?”

“The quotes I got back were ridiculously high. I settled on this instead.”

Carlita noticed specks of white floating in the air—more like blasting up in the air.

“What is that?”

“The white stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on around and check it out.”

Curious to find out what it was, she and Rambo circled around to the other side and walked through the open gate. Carlita abruptly stopped. “What in the world?”

Chapter 13

Carlita gingerly stepped into the gated area and onto a blanket of fluffy snow. She held out her hand, palm turned up. A white flake drifted down and melted on her warm skin. “It’s snowing.”

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“This is my new snowmachine.” Elvira proudly patted the black box. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Why are you making snow?”

“Because of these.” Her former neighbor held up a snowshoe. “I’m practicing.”

“I’m not sure I want to go down this rabbit hole, but what the heck. Why are you making snow and walking in snowshoes?”

“For my trip to Alaska. I contacted a television producer up there. He’s considering letting me have a look around their gold mining operations. It’s in Whittier. Have you ever heard of it?”

“Nope.”

“It’s a cool place. The entire town lives in one big building. They live there, work there, even shop there. The schools are in the building. Everything.”

“It sounds...interesting,” Carlita replied diplomatically. “So...you’re going to go see how an actual gold mining operation works.”

“Yep. My mind is like a sponge. I figure I can go up there, check out the operations. By the time I come back home, I can tweak what I’m doing and maybe finally hit on something solid.”

Carlita playfully peered into Elvira’s ear.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking to see if there’s anything else rambling around in your head that doesn’t involve treasure, money, gems or gold.”

Elvira swatted her hand away. “I need to learn from the pros. I can’t think of anyone who knows more about gold mining than those Alaskan adventurers.”

“When are you leaving?”

“I don’t know. I’m still hammering out the details.” Elvira told her she was trying to combine her trip to Whittier with a cruise on board Siren of the Seas to visit her boyfriend, Sharky Kiveski. “He’ll be up there all summer. Timing is key. I’ll need to time it right so I can hop on board. Whittier is the ship’s turnaround port.”

“I guess this means you’ll be putting Pete’s project on the back burner.”

“No way. However, until we can get an archaeologist here to look at it, we’re dead in the water,” Elvira said. “Pete’s got the tunnel locked up pretty tight.”

Carlita grinned. “Triple locked. You’ve already checked it out.”

“I may have swung by to make sure the tunnel was secure. You don’t want to have someone snooping around, sneaking in and messing things up.”

“No, we wouldn’t now, would we?” Carlita arched a brow.

“Hey, I have to protect my potential investment too.”

She changed the subject. “Show me how your snowshoes work.”

Elvira's efficient snowmachine had been hard at work, adding another dusting and leaving a fresh blanket covering their tracks.

"Stand back." Elvira lifted her leg and took an awkward step forward. She tottered to the left, almost losing her balance. "It's harder than it looks."

"They look clunky. I think boots would be a better choice. What's the purpose?"

"I'm not a hundred percent sure. From what I can figure out, they're designed to keep you from sinking in deep snow." Elvira took another step and wobbled again. With arms flailing, she fell flat on her face.

Crack. The tip of the snowshoe broke off. "Great. These things are a pain in the Rumpelstiltskin."

"Maybe you should save them for when you have deeper snow. It could be you don't have enough to walk around on."

"Yeah. True. I was excited and figured it would be fun to try." Elvira flopped over, pulled them off, and tossed them aside. "Good luck with your collection people. So what kind of debt are they trying to collect?"

"A loan on a property here in Savannah. Vinnie bought the place not long before he died. I had no idea it even existed."

“Where is it?”

“Morton Street.”

Elvira curled her lip.

“I know. It’s not in a great area, although Annie Dowton seems to think it wasn’t too bad of a deal. Tony, Mercedes and I took a look around yesterday. The place is nothing but a shell of a building.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how much do you owe?”

Carlita rattled off the amount.

Elvira made a choking sound. “For a dump on that side of town? I wouldn’t pay over a thousand for a place on Morton Street.”

“Neither would I, but like I said, Annie didn’t seem to think the price was too far off. Still, why Vinnie purchased the property from a less-than-reputable lender when he had these over here on this side of town is beyond me. The lender lived out of the country. I don’t think he had any idea what he was investing in. He’s here now and sent his associates to collect on the debt.”

“And if you don’t pay?”

“If I don’t pay, there’s a chance my businesses will end up looking like the building Vinnie bought.”

“Reading between the lines, I’m guessing they’re mob men. They’re gonna blow them into smithereens, shoot ‘em up or firebomb them,” Elvira said. “I’ve watched enough reruns of The Sopranos to know they’ll get their money one way or another. A piece of free advice...make sure your properties are heavily insured.”

“Which is another thing. My son, Vinnie, is here. He’s been doing a little digging around. Rumor has it my husband bought the place and then torched it to collect the insurance.”

“And this mob lender found out, so he’s gonna squeeze every penny he can get out of you.” Elvira slowly stood. “It sounds like you have a mess on your hands.”

“There is another minor issue. They were hinting around about how even if I pay off Vinnie’s debt, I’ll be required to use their protection services. For a fee, of course.”

Elvira let out a low whistle. “A good old-fashioned shakedown. You’ll never get rid of them.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Either way, the Sicilian mafia has the Garlucci family in their sights.”

“What about Vinnie? I mean, I guess I never asked, but is he part of the same family? Maybe he can help.”

“Unfortunately, the two are unrelated. They’re two separate families.”

“The Castellinis versus the...”

“Lombardos. The boss’s name is Danny Lombardo. I noticed an addendum to the original loan papers. There was an original lender and then this Lombardo guy took it over.”

“Probably by killing someone.” Elvira shook her head. “You can’t make this stuff up.”

“It appears not. Especially if it involves my family.”

“Like I said, good luck.”

“Thanks. I’m going to need it.” Carlita turned to go.

Elvira stopped her. “It looks like the archaeologist chick is trying to squeeze a visit in within the next month or so. At least it’s a little positive news, right?”

“Yeah.” Carlita attempted a smile. “I’ll take all the positive news I can get right now.”

Chapter 14

“Are you sure they’re gonna show?” Vinnie glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time.

“They told me I had twenty-four hours. We met right here yesterday at nine. They don’t strike me as the type of people who don’t show up.” Carlita craned her neck, anxiously peering out the window.

What if Lombardo decided he wasn’t in the mood to negotiate and was plotting to blow her properties to smithereens?

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She had no way of contacting them. No phone number. No idea about where the men were staying. Something told her this was a bad sign...a very bad sign.

Mother and son waited for another forty-five minutes until ten o'clock and then decided to call it quits. She ran back to the kitchen and told the manager on duty two men might come by looking for her and to call her immediately if they showed up.

She caught up with Vinnie on the front sidewalk, and they strolled to the end of the block. Entering through the pawn shop's front door, they waited for Tony to finish helping a customer before motioning him off to the side.

"Well?" he asked. "How did it go?"

"They didn't show," Vinnie said in a low voice.

"This might not be a good sign."

"Not good at all," Carlita said. "I told the Ravello's manager to call me if they came by."

"What's next?"

"I was thinkin' I wouldn't mind taking a look at the property myself," Vinnie said.

"We can go together," Carlita offered.

"We were there yesterday. There's not much to see." Tony promised to keep an eye

out for Costanza and Enzo and let them know if they surfaced.

After leaving, mother and son trekked the few blocks to the apartment to get her car and drop her pup off. Taking the back roads, they arrived at Morton Street within minutes.

Carlita climbed out of the driver's side and met her son on the sidewalk. "I'm sure this goes without asking, but I'm guessing you have a gun."

"Of course, Ma. I don't go anywhere without it. It's like putting clean clothes on every morning. Shirt, slacks, socks, shoes and Sig Sauer, all in this exact order. The only time I didn't have it was when I had to put it in my checked bag."

They reached the front entrance, and Carlita hesitated when she noticed the door was ajar. "I know for a fact Tony shut the door when we left."

"Could be someone looking for a place to sleep." Vinnie motioned for his mother to step away. He removed his gun from his jacket pocket. Holding it in one hand, he cautiously eased the door the rest of the way open.

Carlita sucked in a breath, her heart pounding loudly in her chest as she watched him make his way into the building.

She braced herself, expecting noises...maybe even loud voices, but there was only silence. Not a peep from Vinnie. Not an echo or a rattle. Not a single solitary sound. She inched forward, cautiously peeking around the corner.

Vinnie stood in the center of the room, gun still in hand. "There's no one here."

Carlita followed her son inside. "Not much to see, huh?"

“This has all the markings of the family.” Vinnie showed her how they had damaged the doorframe when they kicked it open and tossed the bomb inside. “Kaboom. Place blows up. What doesn’t explode catches on fire. It’s an efficient way of gutting a building.”

“A little too efficient,” Carlita muttered. “So, your father bought this as an investment and only made a few payments.”

“And this happened not long before Pops’ death?”

“From what we can figure out. He bought it. It got damaged. He tried to collect on the insurance and then he died, leaving me with this.”

“No wonder Lombardo is trying to squeeze every dime he can out of you.” Vinnie let out a low whistle. “What about the neighbors?”

“June Cleary’s Spiffy Clean Dry-Cleaning and Laundromat is somewhere nearby. An old news story mentioned vandals in the area around the time the building was damaged,” Carlita said. “If we have a few extra minutes, we should try to track her down.”

“It wouldn’t hurt. We’re already here.” Vinnie tightened his grip on the gun and crept forward.

Carlita followed behind, certain at any moment someone would spring from the shadows and attack them.

The floorboards creaked loudly with every step they took. A few feet away from what had once been a kitchenette stood a rusty, single side fridge. A thick layer of soot covered the Formica counters.

On the far end was a gas stove with a grimy stainless-steel sink wedged in between the wall and stove. Dingy white cabinets hung haphazardly from their hinges.

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She lowered onto her knee and looked inside. Sprinkled on the bottom shelf were brown pellets—rat droppings. “Gross.”

Backtracking, mother and son entered a narrow hall. On the left was the exterior wall. Carlita glanced out the window and noticed an alley running alongside the building.

To the right was a half bath with a seventies-era avocado green toilet, and a cracked pedestal sink.

Continuing on, they found a small office. A rectangular desk faced the wall while a straight-back vinyl chair, or what was left of it, sat nearby.

Strips of wallpaper hung down. Carlita reached out and finished pulling a section off. “This place is a wreck.”

“A dump. I’m gonna guess it wasn’t in the best of condition even before the mob torched it.”

They exited the office and made their way to the end of the hall, where they found another door. It was closed.

Carlita ran her hand along a deep diagonal cut in the wood. “It looks like someone was trying to hack it open.”

“They didn’t do a very good job.” Vinnie grasped the knob. Carlita stopped him. “Be careful.”

“It looks like a storage closet.” Adjusting his grip on the gun, Vinnie waited until his mother stepped back.

She gritted her teeth while her son wrenched on the doorknob. “Maybe we can find something to pry it open.”

“I almost have it.” Pulling with all his might, the door flew open.

Vinnie stumbled back, quickly catching himself. “It’s empty.”

“Seriously?” Carlita hurried forward, peering into the empty closet. “Locked up tight for nothing.”

Vinnie kicked it shut, and they continued walking to the end of the hall. On the left was a door opening to the alley. On the opposite side was a set of steps leading to the second floor.

“We might as well check out the rest of it.” Leading the way, Vinnie climbed the stairs with his mother close behind.

They reached the top and found a landing along with a small hall. Carlita glimpsed a room at the other end.

“Stay here.” Vinnie strode down the hall and abruptly stopped. He let out a string of cuss words.

Carlita’s scalp tingled “What is it?”

“We have a problem.”

Chapter 15

Carlita cautiously made her way into the room at the end of the hall where her son Vinnie stood.

Enzo, Danny Lombardo's associate, lay sprawled out face down on the floor with a gunshot wound in his back. His right arm jutted at an odd angle. His left leg was in a similar position.

"It's Enzo. Is he...is he still alive?" She pressed a trembling hand across her mouth.

"I don't wanna touch him."

"How awful. It looks like some violence may have been involved. Poor man." Carlita fumbled inside her purse for a packet of travel tissues and handed him one.

Vinnie placed the tissue against his neck. "Nope. No pulse."

"We gotta call the cops."

"Do you know how this is going to look?" he asked.

"Like we killed him." Carlita felt as if someone had punched her in the gut. She had both motive and opportunity. This guy and Costanza were trying to get money from her. Money she didn't have, not to mention the "protection agreement" she didn't want or need.

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Her mind whirled. Had Costanza killed him? Maybe it was Danny Lombardo. Wouldn't that be something—to kill your henchman and set it up so that a debtor who owed a lot of money became a prime suspect?

Another chilling thought occurred to her. “Tony, Mercedes and I were here yesterday and now Enzo is dead.”

“Luigi and I were asking questions about him and the other guy last night at the Black Stallion,” Vinnie reminded her.

“We can't just leave him.” Carlita rubbed the sides of her arms. “I have a legitimate reason for being here. Technically, this property is still owned by Vinnie...by me.”

“Your call, Ma. If Lombardo didn't take him out and Costanza didn't take him out, they're gonna think you're behind this,” Vinnie said grimly.

Carlita placed her hand on her forehead. Yesterday, she thought things couldn't get much worse. Boy was she wrong!

“I'll have to figure it out. In the meantime, we need to call someone to come get him.” Carlita dialed 911 and briefly explained the situation, how she and her son were checking on a vacant property they owned and found a body upstairs.

“The police are on the way.”

Vinnie slowly circled around, studying Enzo. “This isn't a typical hit.”

“Why?”

“They’re not gonna come inside a building, climb the stairs, corner the guy and shoot him. Hitmen are more of a drive by group. It’s a lot less messy.”

“This is definitely messy. I need to go downstairs and wait for the cops.”

“I’ll go with you.” Vinnie hesitated. “We should probably snap a couple of pictures. There’s something weird going on here.”

“Good idea.” Carlita turned away while her son snapped photos of Enzo’s body using his cell phone.

Back on the first floor, they made a beeline for the sidewalk, careful not to touch anything on their way out.

Carlita leaned against the building and closed her eyes. She felt a light touch on her arm. It was Vinnie. “You look a little pale. I can handle the cops.”

“I’ll be all right. To be honest, the police are the least of my worries. I can’t help but feel somewhat responsible for this man’s death.”

“You didn’t kill him, but someone did. I’m gonna give Tony and Mercedes a heads up to be on the lookout for Costanza.” Vinnie typed out a group text, adding they would fill them in when they got home.

Less than five minutes later, two cop cars arrived.

Carlita greeted all four officers who emerged. “I’m Carlita Taylor, the owner of this property. My son and I were here checking on it and found a man’s body upstairs.”

“Do we need an ambulance?”

“Unfortunately, he’s deceased.”

“Show us where he’s at.”

“I’ll take ‘em upstairs.”

Carlita stood off to the side, letting Vinnie lead the officers into the building. She made a move to follow behind when the tips of her ears started to burn, a sure sign she was being watched.

She pivoted. Her eyes were drawn to a business catty corner to the property. Directly above the doors and in big bold letters, was Spiffy Clean Laundromat. Below it and in smaller letters was, Dry-Cleaning.

It was the same laundromat mentioned in the dated news story about the suspicious vandalism and destruction right around the time of Vinnie’s death.

Despite the black metal bars, Carlita could clearly see through the floor-to-ceiling glass window. A woman, well advanced in years and hunched over, stared back at her through binoculars.

Carlita took a step off the curb and hesitated. On one hand, she wanted to chat with the owner or manager. On the other, she needed to be upstairs to keep an eye on what was going on. Although she knew Vinnie could handle the situation. In fact, she wasn’t overly concerned about the police suspecting her.

She and her children were innocent. Her biggest concern was why Enzo was at her property and why his killer had left his body in her building.

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As Vinnie had pointed out, this wasn't the family's typical MO. They were more into drive-by shootings and filling their victims full of bullets types of killers.

This seemed a little more...premeditated. Regardless of how Enzo had died, he was in her building. Lombardo's guy, a man who was putting the squeeze on Carlita and her family, was now dead.

Which meant if the mafia boss hadn't taken out his own person to set Carlita up, someone else had, and Lombardo wouldn't take too kindly to it. It was a no-win situation.

Before Carlita could decide whether to chat with the laundromat's binocular-beaming gawker, an officer appeared.

"I have a few questions for you, Mrs. Garlucci."

"Yes. Of course."

Casting a final glance toward the laundromat, Carlita stepped back inside. "Your son, Mr. Garlucci, mentioned he thought you might know the deceased."

"He's an acquaintance."

"Acquainted how?" The cop removed a notepad and pen from his pocket.

"My deceased husband purchased this property some years ago, unbeknownst to me. Mr. Enzo, I'm not sure if this is his first or last name, and another man who goes by

the name Costanza, showed up at my restaurant, Ravello's a couple days ago. They informed me my husband had borrowed money, now owed to their boss, who took over the loan and wanted to reach an agreement regarding repayment."

"Did you reach an agreement?"

"Not yet. They were supposed to return this morning after I had a chance to review the paperwork, to make sure it was legitimate. They never showed."

"So you stopped by here to..."

"My son, Vinnie, who lives in New Jersey, came down to visit. When Mr. Enzo and Mr. Costanza didn't show up, he asked if he could take a look at the property."

"Go on."

"So, we came here to see it. When we went upstairs, we found Mr. Enzo's body."

The officer continued writing. "We'll need to see a copy of the papers and will also need the lender's name."

"Of course."

"Do you know how we might track down this associate, Costanza?"

"I'm sorry. I don't. As I mentioned before, Mr. Enzo and Mr. Costanza were supposed to meet me at my restaurant this morning and never showed up."

He asked a few more questions, including if Carlita or Vinnie owned a gun.

"My son has one."

Vinnie appeared, and Carlita motioned him to come over. “The officer is asking us if we own a gun.”

“I have one.” Vinnie handed it to him.

The officer thoroughly examined his weapon, snapped a photo, and jotted down his information. His next line of questioning was about where they had been during the previous twenty-four hours, since the last time she’d seen Enzo alive. He took her address, told her not to leave the area, and promised he would be in touch.

While they were talking, a crime scene team arrived. They secured the property and ushered Carlita and Vinnie out onto the sidewalk.

While investigators continued working, another man, a person Carlita had never met before, arrived. The officer introduced him as Detective Ellery. He and the officer she suspected was in charge stepped off to the side while she and Vinnie hung out nearby.

“What do you think?” Carlita muttered under her breath.

“For now, they seem to be okay. Something tells me when they start digging around, it’s gonna be a completely different story.” Vinnie lit a cigarette, took a long drag, and blew the smoke away from his mother. “It could’ve been his boss. It could’ve been the other guy, Costanza. Or it could have been someone else.”

“The bottom line is I’m on the hook or I’m on the short list.”

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“We need to figure out what happened, and fast.”

The conversation ended when the investigator made his way over. “It appears the Savannah-Burnham Police Department is well acquainted with you, Mrs. Garlucci.”

“Mrs. Taylor. I recently remarried,” Carlita said. “I was gonna say you must be new to the police force. I know most of the investigators. Detective Wilson. Detective Polivich.”

“I’ll need your current address. I’ll also need a copy of the documents you and Mr. Costanza and Enzo were negotiating.”

“And I’ll be happy to give it to you.” Carlita rattled off her home address.

The investigator frowned. “This is the Parrot House Restaurant’s address.”

“My husband owns the restaurant. We live in the apartment above it.”

“And you also own...” Ellery flipped through his notes. “Ravello’s Italian Eatery.”

“Correct.”

The detective gave her an odd look. “We’ll be in touch. As a reminder, the property is off limits until we wrap up our investigation.”

“I understand.”

Carlita waited until they went back inside the building. “Remember how I said the cops were the least of my worries?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve changed my mind. They’re right up there with Danny Lombardo now.”

Chapter 16

Back at Walton Square, Carlita called an emergency family meeting at Mercedes’ place.

Taking turns, Carlita and Vinnie filled the others in on what had transpired. “The bottom line is someone took Enzo out. I’m not sure if it was Costanza or Danny Lombardo.”

Vinnie motioned to Tony. “Any sign of Costanza?”

“Nope. I checked with the manager at Ravello’s. No sign of him there, either.”

“So, he’s MIA. Maybe I should ask Elvira to check her surveillance camera recordings from yesterday until this morning.” Carlita dialed Elvira’s cell phone number.

“Hey, Carlita.”

“Hello, Elvira. I need a favor.”

“Sure. What?”

“I was wondering if you noticed if my two debt collectors showed up on your

cameras again.”

“I haven’t checked yet today. Why?”

“Vinnie and I found one of them dead inside the property over on Morton Street.”

Silence.

“Hello? Elvira, are you still there?”

“I’m here. I’m trying to process what you said.”

“It’s a lot to take in. A guy is dead. The other is MIA. Pete, Mercedes, Tony, Vinnie and I are trying to muddle through this and wondered if you could check to see if either of them was lurking around here.”

“Where are you?”

“At Mercedes’ place.”

“I’ll take a look and swing by after I finish.”

“You don’t...”

It was too late. Elvira had already hung up. Carlita waved her phone in the air.

“Elvira is going to check.”

“Let’s head out to the alley. I could use a smoke,” Vinnie said.

“I could use one too.”

Carlita wagged her finger at her middle son. “I thought you quit.”

“Semi quit, unless I’m stressed,” Tony said.

“This’ll do it,” Mercedes said. “If I smoked, I would want a cigarette too.”

“No one else in this family is taking up smoking,” Carlita scolded.

The group exited the apartment single file and gathered in the alley. While the brothers lit up, Carlita wandered around in circles. Pete called the manager of his pirate ship to let him know a family emergency had come up and he needed someone to host the evening’s outing.

Mercedes plopped down on the stoop. Sam rounded the corner and came to a full stop. “Vinnie. I didn’t know you were coming into town.”

“Neither did I until last night.”

Sam looked around. “Something tells me this isn’t a happy reunion.”

“It’s a family crisis,” Mercedes said.

“Involving...”

“All of us at this point,” Pete said.

“Pops owed a lot of money to an unscrupulous lender for a property over on Morton Street,” Mercedes replied.

“Morton Street,” Sam repeated. “That’s not the best area of town.”

“And the property isn’t in the best of condition. If you ask me, it probably needs to be torn down,” Carlita said. “The lender sent his associates to collect. They were supposed to meet with us this morning and never showed.”

“Ma and I found the body of one of them a couple of hours ago inside the property.” Vinnie flicked his cigarette butt and ground it out with the bottom of his shoe.

“Are the Savannah authorities involved?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. The lead investigator is a man named Ellery.”

“Charles Ellery?”

“We didn’t catch his first name,” Vinnie said. “Why?”

“A few of my buddies down at the station have mentioned him. He’s ruthless.”

“Great,” Carlita groaned. “All we need is a ruthless investigator breathing down our necks.”

Sam cast Mercedes a side glance. “At the risk of butting in, would you like me to see if I can get a little info on the investigation?”

Mercedes motioned to her mother.

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Carlita shrugged as if to say, “It’s up to you.”

“You can put out a few feelers, if you don’t mind. It goes without saying Ma didn’t kill the guy.”

“But someone did. I don’t think it’s a coincidence his body was found in your building,” Sam said.

“Neither do we,” Tony said. “He was left there to either send a message or to set Ma up.”

Sam told them he would call a couple of his friends on the police force. “I can’t make any promises considering it just happened, but I’ll try.” He stepped around Mercedes, who was still sitting on the stoop. “I found this great recipe for paella and was thinking about whipping up a batch. Do you want to swing by later and sample it?”

“Paella? I...sure,” Mercedes said. “Thanks for offering to help.”

“You’re welcome.” Sam slipped inside and quietly closed the door behind him.

“Sam was generous to offer his help,” Vinnie said. “Although I have to say I’m getting a cold vibe.”

“We’re reassessing our relationship.”

“Mercedes is reassessing their relationship,” Carlita corrected. “Not that I blame her after what happened with his ex, Natalie.”

“Ma.” Mercedes shot her mother an irritated look.

“Okay. Okay.” Carlita lifted both hands. “It’s none of my beeswax. However, I will say I agree with your brother. It was nice of Sam to offer to help.”

“And you would be crazy to turn down homemade paella,” Tony teased.

Elvira’s door flew open. She scurried across the alley. “The Garlucci family in full force.”

“We’re all here, except for Paulie and the wives,” Tony said.

Elvira sashayed over to where Vinnie stood casually leaning against the wall. “Hello tall, dark, and gorgeous. Had I known you were coming into town, I would’ve cleared my calendar.”

“Cleared it for what?” Carlita chuckled. “Dinner? Drinks?”

“For whatever suited the mood.” She sidled up next to him, her eyes sliding from the top of his head to the tip of his expensive Italian leather shoes. “You have to be the most gorgeous man on the planet.”

“I’m sure his wife Brittney thinks so,” Carlita said.

“If you ever tire of blondes, give me a shot. Older women can be so much better.”

“Elvira Cobb,” Carlita scolded. “Please stop. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Vinnie laughed out loud. “Elvira’s stroking my ego. It’s okay.”

She winked at him. “Thanks Mr. Hottie.”

“Elvira.”

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes. “I spent the last half an hour staring at surveillance camera recordings. I deserve a little reward.”

“We all appreciate you taking the time to help us. Did you come up with anything?”

“I skimmed through the surveillance from yesterday afternoon all the way up until this morning. What time were you supposed to meet the men?”

“We didn’t have a set-in-stone time. They gave me twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours would have been nine o’clock this morning,” Carlita said. “They never showed.”

“Let me get this straight. There were two men. One of them is dead and you don’t know what happened to the second one,” Elvira said.

“Correct.”

“Did you try calling them?”

“I would have if I had their cell phone numbers.”

“Maybe you should have asked for their contact information.”

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty,” Carlita said. “Yes, we should have exchanged information. However, I had no idea they weren’t going to show. To be honest, if not for the fact someone died and I’m clearly a suspect, I would have been happy to never see their faces again.”

“We appreciate your thoughtful suggestions,” Mercedes said. “What we need now is information. Did you notice anyone lurking around either sometime yesterday or early this morning?”

“Maybe,” Elvira said. “The cameras caught something very interesting.”

Chapter 17

“You need to come to my office and check it out for yourself.” Circling around to the front of the building, Carlita and her family followed Elvira into the EC Investigative Services office via the front door.

“Intruder alert! Intruder alert!” A blue and yellow macaw started squawking. “Take ‘em down. I repeat, take ‘em down.”

Carlita approached the bird’s cage, which was sitting on top of a file cabinet next to

the window. “Who is this?”

“Snitch, the bird I adopted,” Elvira said.

“I didn’t know you were an animal lover.”

“As a general rule, I’m not. They’re messy and a lot of work, but I got to thinking about Pete’s bird and how he keeps a close eye on what’s happening.”

Carlita grinned. “So you thought you would adopt a talking bird?”

Elvira tapped the side of her forehead. “Snitch. Get it?”

“You bought a parrot to spy on your staff.” Mercedes rolled her eyes.

“Snitch doesn’t miss a thing,” Elvira boasted.

“Gotta keep an eye out. What’s going down?” Snitch let loose an entire monologue, most of it involving food.

Elvira snapped her fingers. “Time for a rest.”

“Time for a rest.” Snitch tucked her head down and closed her eyes.

“And very well trained, I might add,” Pete said. “Gunner hardly ever listens to me.”

“Snitch is smart as a whip. However, she does like to talk a lot. I have to admit, I’m a little concerned. She seems a little off today.”

“What do you mean?” Carlita asked.

“She’s barely touching her food.”

Pete walked over to the cage, studying the parrot. “She could still be adjusting to her new environment. Or she may be lonely and in need of a friend.”

Elvira brightened. “Maybe I could bring her over to meet Gunner.”

“It might help.”

“Thanks for the offer. I’ll continue monitoring the situation.” Elvira eased into her office chair and lifted the screen on her laptop. “Back to the matter at hand. For the most part, things were quiet up until around midnight when something odd happened.”

The group gathered behind Elvira’s computer screen, studying the alley between the buildings. Appearing from the right, coming from the vicinity of the parking lot, a man clad in dark clothing moved at a brisk clip past Ravello’s rear employee entrance. He walked all the way past Carlita’s apartment building until reaching the pawn shop at the opposite end.

Elvira switched cameras. The man reappeared. Although the image was grainy, Carlita was almost positive it was Costanza. “This is the other guy, Costanza.”

“Yep,” Tony agreed. “It’s him.”

“At least he’s alive.”

They watched as he pulled something from his pocket. He knelt next to the side of the pawn shop and then slowly made his way to the other end.

“What is he doing?” Mercedes asked.

“I don’t know.” Elvira hit the pause button and zoomed in. “Planting explosives?”

“Bite your tongue.” Carlita slipped her reading glasses on. “It almost looks like he’s measuring.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Pete said. “He’s measuring the buildings.”

“To figure out how many explosives he’s gonna need to take down all three?” Elvira asked.

Carlita slugged her in the arm. “Stop with the talk about blowing up buildings. You’re making me nervous.” She turned to her oldest son. “What do you think, Vinnie?”

“I gotta agree. It looks like he’s taking measurements. Check it out.”

Elvira pressed the play button again.

Costanza shoved whatever he was holding in his pocket, pulled out a flashlight, and began shining it along the side of the pawn shop.

Mercedes and her mother exchanged an uneasy glance. Costanza was near where they had found the Marshland Isles Diamond hidden away behind the brick wall, except it was inside...in the basement below the pawn shop.

Yet, the man was in the general vicinity. Carlita remembered how Vinnie had named the property after the diamond. Had Danny Lombardo and his men done some digging around, found out about the diamond and thought it might be hidden somewhere on the Garlucci family's properties?

They wouldn't be far off. It had been there but was now long gone, thanks to Mercedes and Carlita's relentless hunt to find it.

Once again, Vinnie had put a target on her back from beyond the grave. Perhaps he thought he was being clever, believing the original lender would have no clue what the name meant.

Was Costanza on the hunt for the Marshland Isles Diamond? Maybe they thought Carlita killed Enzo and were plotting their revenge, but wanted to track down the diamond before they turned her properties into piles of rubble.

"He's looking for something," Elvira said.

Carlita couldn't remember if she'd mentioned the diamond to Elvira. Those standing around her, as well as Tori Montgomery, knew about the diamond's existence. So did one other person—Ozzie Stagusso—who was currently safely locked up and serving time in a New York prison.

Carlita stared at the image of Costanza examining her wall, the pieces falling into

place. Ozzie Stagusso was involved with Danny Lombardo. Carlita would bet her life on it. “Lombardo might be a new resident here, but something tells me he has connections.”

She placed her hands on her cheeks. “Who else was snooping around recently, searching for gems, I might add?”

“Louise Delmario,” Elvira said. “Your building’s previous owner.”

“Who else?”

“Ozzie Stagusso,” Mercedes and Tony said in unison.

“Bingo. Let’s go with the theory Lombardo arrived here with his team. He’s setting up his business, collecting old debts, including Vinnie’s. He’s a smart man, does some digging around, and somehow connects with Stagusso.”

Tony picked up. “Stagusso tells him about the gems and wants in on the deal. Maybe Lombardo plans to take our properties out but won’t because Stagusso convinces him Delmario’s gems are here.”

“I have plenty of upstate connections,” Vinnie said. “I can find out if scumbag Stagusso teamed up with Lombardo.”

“We need to know,” Carlita said. “If they think there’s something here, it will buy us some time. If they don’t, the clock is ticking.”

“Because Lombardo is going to be after blood,” Elvira said. “If he didn’t take out his guy Enzo, he’s gonna think you did.”

“Meaning he’ll double down and make sure we pay.”

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Elvira tapped the keys. "I'll forward a copy of him taking the measurements to you."

Carlita thanked her and headed for the door. "The first thing we need to do is figure out what happened to Enzo."

"Start blowing stuff up," Snitch said. "Scumbag Stagusso."

Vinnie excused himself to make a few phone calls.

Meanwhile, Carlita, Pete, and her children gathered in the alley again.

"The next logical step is for us to go back to Morton Street." Carlita told them about the old woman with the binoculars inside the dry-cleaning business. "Something tells me she doesn't miss a thing. A hundred bucks says the cops have already talked to her."

"There's no law saying we can't too," Mercedes said.

"Later today, after they're gone." Carlita noticed Vinnie coming her way, an unreadable expression on his face. "That was fast."

"We've been keepin' an eye on Stagusso for our own reasons. Word is he has connections with someone outside the immediate New York family network."

"Danny Lombardo," Carlita said. "It has to be."

"This would be my guess."

Mercedes' cell phone chimed. "It's Sam wanting to know where we are. I told him we're in the alley. He said he has some information and is on his way down."

"Hopefully, with some good news," Carlita said. "Although I'm not holding my breath."

Sam appeared moments later. "I spoke to one of my buddies down at the precinct. They found a pack of matches in Enzo's pocket from the Black Stallion Club and went over to talk to Phil Duce, the owner. Duce told the cops Vinnie and Luigi stopped by last night looking for him."

Chapter 18

"Every time I think things can't get any worse," Carlita groaned. "Something else happens."

"I have an alibi," Vinnie said. "I was at your place, except for stepping out on the rooftop terrace for a few quick smokes."

"I'm almost a hundred percent certain Luigi was with Dernice last night," Mercedes said.

"The Parrot House Restaurant has cameras on every corner," Pete said. "Short of shimmying down the drainpipes and sneaking out through the side alley, there's no way you got out of our building undetected."

"It might be a minor inconvenience, but I don't see how the cops can pin this on me or Luigi. Still, I agree it's time to head over to Morton Street to chat with the business owners," Vinnie said.

Carlita motioned to Sam. "Any idea how long the cops are going to be over there?"

“They were wrapping things up,” Sam said. “What might also be worth noting is Mr. Enzo recently moved to the area.”

“From Sicily,” Mercedes said.

A look of surprise flickered in Sam’s eyes. “How did you know?”

“Vinnie found out the lender, Danny Lombardo, recently moved here from Italy,” Tony said.

“Is there any connection to...your past?” Sam asked.

“Not as far as the Castellini family is concerned,” Vinnie said. “This is a new group moving in and putting down roots.”

“Not good.”

“Not good at all. One of them is dead. If Lombardo didn’t kill him, I’m sure he thinks we’re behind the shooting, which will put a target on our back,” Mercedes said.

“The other man, Costanza, is still alive,” Carlita added.

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“How do you know?”

“Elvira’s cameras caught him snooping around here last night. Do you remember Ozzie Stagusso?”

“The former mob guy who kidnapped Louise Delmario last fall, held her hostage and was looking for...” Sam’s voice faded.

“For gems her husband, also the previous owner of this property, allegedly stole. Vinnie thinks Stagusso, who is still in prison, and Lombardo, the new guy in town, are working together.”

Sam let out a low whistle. “Wow.”

“Yep. It appears I have some serious issues on my hands.”

“On our hands,” Pete corrected.

Sam motioned to Vinnie. “Is there anything you can do?”

“The loan appears legit. Pops and Ma borrowed money from the original lender. Somehow, Lombardo inherited or secured the loan, probably not knowing what he was getting into,” Vinnie said. “Or maybe he knew it was a dump and also knew Ma had three successful businesses he could tap into.”

“The bottom line is if we can figure out what happened to Enzo, we can either get Lombardo off the streets and off my back or it won’t matter. The wheels have already

been set in motion. Something tells me the Lombardo family will be a thorn in my side forever.”

“No, they won’t Ma. The Castellini family will make sure of it,” Vinnie vowed. “They’re gonna back off, one way or another.”

“It’s the ‘another’ I’m worried about.”

Mercedes rubbed her palms together. “We need to get a move on. As long as Lombardo and Costanza think there’s something here, Ma’s properties are safe. I say we head over to the dry cleaners.”

“I believe the investigators are still wrapping things up,” Sam reminded them. “You might want to hold off until they’re gone.”

“Time is of the essence. We need to send someone over there...someone the authorities won’t recognize,” Carlita said.

“I’m out.” Mercedes shook her head. “Almost every cop in Savannah knows who I am.”

“Ditto for me,” Tony said. “Although I could go in disguised.”

Carlita wrinkled her nose. “To do laundry?”

“Shelby?” Mercedes suggested.

Her mother immediately shot down the idea. “I’m sure Shelby would be happy to help, but she’s pregnant. I don’t want her involved. I trust her, but I don’t trust the Lombardo clan. Vinnie and I are out.”

Pete offered to go. “The only issue is the cops stop by the restaurant pretty frequently. Most of them would recognize me.”

“This is getting tough.” Carlita tapped her foot on the ground. “I could ask Reese.”

Claryce “Reese” Magillicuddy, retired city sanitation worker and Savannah trolley driver, who was also a good friend of Carlita’s, had helped on many occasions. In fact, Reese thrived on a busy, active lifestyle...and being involved. Hence, her taking a job as a local trolley driver after her initial retirement.

She promptly called Reese’s cell phone. The call went directly to voicemail, meaning she was probably working. “I think she’s at work. We’ll put her on the maybe list. If we have to wait until later, she would be a viable option.”

“Autumn is always willing to help,” Mercedes said.

“She’s also a high-profile local,” Carlita said. “We need someone who will fly under the radar.”

An EC Security Services’ van pulled into the alley. The group stepped off to the side to move out of the way. Dernice was behind the wheel, with Luigi beside her in the passenger seat. They both gave a friendly wave as they drove past.

“I think I know the perfect person to ask,” Carlita said.

Chapter 19

Carlita and the others caught up with Luigi and Dernice at the end of the parking lot, surrounding the company van as they exited.

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“What?” Dernice’s eyes traveled around the group. “Why are all of you looking at me like that?”

“We need a favor,” Carlita said.

Luigi swung the door open and hopped out. “Let me guess...something happened with Enzo and Costanza.”

“Enzo is dead.” Carlita briefly brought them up to speed. “The key is the Morton Street property. The firebombing, Enzo’s death, Vinnie purchasing the property. This all ties into the place.”

“I’m familiar with Morton Street,” Dernice said. “It’s a rough area.”

“It is. Despite my hunch, I’m clinging to the hope there’s the off chance the guy’s death has nothing to do with me.”

“Or it’s the exact opposite and has everything to do with you and Lombardo,” Vinnie said.

“Either way, we need more info about the property,” Carlita said. “For various reasons, none of us can snoop around with the cops there. We’re not sure when they plan to wrap up their investigation.”

“You want me to do some digging around?” Dernice asked.

“If you don’t mind. There’s a laundromat very close by. I noticed someone with

binoculars staring out the window earlier when we were there. I checked out some of the old news stories after the property was vandalized. They specifically mentioned the laundromat.”

Dernice’s brows furrowed. “It wouldn’t happen to be Spiffy Clean Dry-Cleaning and Laundromat, would it?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because June Cleary, the little old lady who owns the place, is...” Using her index finger and thumb, she made circles and pressed them to her eyes. “Eye spy. I took my leather jacket to her place to have it cleaned not long after I moved here. Let me tell you, she’s off the charts.”

“Off the charts?” Luigi asked.

“I happened to swing by there on my Harley. I was kind of low on cash. She started hinting about wanting a ride, so we made a deal. A cruise around town on my bike in exchange for a discount on cleaning my leather jacket.”

“Awesome.” Mercedes clapped her hands. “You two are friends.”

“We have common interests. I mentioned Elvira and her businesses. As soon as we got back, she dragged me inside to show me around. The woman makes my sister look like an amateur at surveillance.”

“Even better.” Carlita gave her a thumbs up. “If anyone knows what happened over at Vinnie’s property, it would be her.”

“No doubt about it,” Dernice said. “It’s been a while since I’ve been by there. She might not remember me.”

“It’s worth a try.”

“What kind of information are you looking for?”

“Anything she can remember about the property right around the time it was damaged. I’m also curious to know if she noticed Enzo and Costanza,” Carlita said.

“I’ll give it a shot.” Dernice turned to go.

Carlita stopped her. “Hang on.” She ran to the pawn shop, grabbed fifty bucks from the petty cash drawer, and ran back out. “You said she loves your Harley.”

“Loves, loves, loves it. June is definitely a biker chick.”

“Here’s fifty bucks. Fill the tank, take her for another spin and get her to tell you everything she knows.”

“Fifty bucks to fill my motorcycle’s little old gas tank?” Dernice’s eyes lit. “You have yourself a deal.”

“I hope we aren’t wasting Dernice’s time,” Carlita said. “It was awfully nice of her to agree to help.”

“Fifty bucks for her to spend time on her bike, and she’s one happy camper,” Luigi said. “In the meantime, I’m gonna head over to the Black Stallion and see what Pete Duce has to say about the cops asking questions.”

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“I need to leave for my next tour.” Sam hesitated. “Would you...do you want to go with me, Mercedes?”

“Sorry, but I can’t.”

Sam’s shoulders drooped. “Maybe next time.”

Vinnie waited until he left. “You really are giving him the cold shoulder.”

“I feel kinda bad, but I keep thinking about the whole trust issue.”

“Sometimes these things take time,” Carlita said. “It could be the relationship has fizzled. It happens. People change. Better now than later.”

“Mercedes is still young,” Tony said. “My guess is now that Ma moved out and she’s living alone, she’s realizing she likes her freedom.”

Mercedes made a timeout. “Will you all stop analyzing my love life like I’m not here?”

Vinnie hugged her. “That’s what big brothers are for. Sam’s a good guy, but at the end of the day, it’s your life. There’s nothing wrong with slow and steady or even taking a step back.”

“Everything happens for a reason,” Carlita said. “Maybe Natalie showing up was a wake-up call, and you realized you’re no longer in love.”

“All I know is I’m busy with my author group, work, writing, hanging out with friends. Sam is always busy too. Nights, weekends, holidays. I don’t want to sit around twiddling my thumbs.”

“Then maybe taking a step back is the right thing to do,” Tony said. “Either way, you know your family loves you. All we want is for you to be happy.”

“Thanks.” Mercedes planted a kiss on Tony’s cheek and then Vinnie’s. “I have some of the best brothers in the whole wide world. How about dinner at my place tonight?”

“It depends on what you’re making,” Tony teased. “I’m not sure I trust your cooking.”

Mercedes playfully punched him in the arm. “Love and adoration one minute. Jibs and jabs the next.”

“You know I’m messing with you.”

“I figured I would make a batch of Ma’s homemade spaghetti and meatballs.”

“It’s a deal. Wait until Violet finds out. It’s one of her favorite dishes.”

Mercedes tapped Luigi’s arm. “You and Dernice are welcome to join us.”

“We’ll be there. Dernice can fill us in on what she found out,” Luigi said.

“What a great idea. A free meal and a tank full of gas in exchange for helping us,” Carlita said.

“How does seven-thirty sound? It will give me time to swing by Colby’s for some of those fancy Italian ices he stocks.”

“Seven-thirty is perfect.” Carlita opened her purse. “I want to help.”

Mercedes stopped her. “Not a chance. This is my treat.”

Luigi took off. Mercedes, Tony, and Vinnie weren’t far behind, leaving Carlita and Pete alone in the alley.

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others, but the local Savannah expert I contacted is eager to come by and check out the tunnel.”

“When?” Carlita asked.

“Now.”

“Are you going to mention what you and I found?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll know more once I meet the man.”

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“Good idea.” Carlita made a zipping motion across her lips. “I won’t say a word. Boy, wait until Elvira finds out.”

“We beat her to the punch.” Pete chuckled. “We’ll be able to wrap it up and see what we have on our hands before Mercedes treats us to her Italian feast.”

Chapter 20

By the time Pete and Carlita arrived at the Parrot House Restaurant, the local Savannah historian and archaeologist was already waiting for them at the hostess station.

Although the lobby was full, Carlita had no trouble picking him out of the crowd. Wide-brimmed hat. Fitted t-shirt. Loose khaki slacks. Steel-toed boots.

He eased past a group waiting to be seated. “Pete Taylor?”

“Yes.”

“I recognize you from a writeup about your pirate ship.” The man extended his hand. “I’m Arvid Poindexter, Savannah historian and part-time archaeologist. I don’t go by my first name. Please call me Poindexter.”

“Poindexter it is. You can call me Pete.”

“Thank you for letting me come by on such short notice.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you could fit us in. This is my wife, Carlita. We’re eager to find out what’s downstairs.” Pete looked around. “Do you have equipment?”

“It’s in my van.” Poindexter explained he didn’t want to drag it through the restaurant and draw attention. “Do you have a rear entrance?”

“We do.” Pete, with Carlita by his side, led the man outside and around to the back. “The steps are near the center of the building. Unfortunately, we will have to navigate through one of the dining rooms to get to the tunnel system.”

Carlita waited near the door while the men left to collect the equipment. They returned, each carrying a large canvas bag.

“I’ll get the door.” She hurriedly opened it and stepped aside. “Is there anything else?”

“This is it.”

The trio trekked down the hall, through the dining room and descended the stairs.

Making quick work of unlocking the first access point, Pete escorted them to the “t” and turned right. Reaching his tunnel, he began working on the first lockset.

“You take tunnel security seriously.”

“We had to,” Carlita said. “There’s another interested party, a person who might be tempted to sneak in here.”

“A local?” Poindexter asked.

“Yes. She’s chipped away, blasted out, dug through her tunnels and now has her

sights set on this one.”

“It wouldn’t happen to be Elvira Cobb, would it? She’s the only person I know of who has been issued a cease and desist letter by the city.”

“It’s her,” Carlita said. “At the risk of not minding my own business, do you know exactly what was in the letter?”

“What you described,” Poindexter said. “Concerns about the structural integrity of the tunnels, the walls. Using explosives without securing a permit. Tampering with city property. How did she become involved in this endeavor?”

“It’s a long story,” Pete sighed. “Most of it a direct result of her persistence and finally wearing me down.”

“Will she be joining us today?”

“Not if I can help it. Whether she shows up uninvited is an entirely different matter.” He finished unlocking the locks and eased the heavy metal door open.

Poindexter lifted his gaze, studying the ceiling. “I thought this might be the case.”

“What?”

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“Your ceiling differs from other areas of the tunnel system.”

“We noticed the same,” Carlita said. “Why do you think this is?”

“My professional opinion is because of the proximity to the river, to withstand the force of the pressure.” He ran a light hand across the left-hand side, the wall which was a part of the city’s property. “The city has its own building guidelines as opposed to you and other owners who are responsible for maintaining their structures.”

“We’ve already had Stuart Wempley, a structural engineer down here.” Pete motioned to the recently installed beams. “At his suggestion, we installed these beams before we chipped away at the tunnel wall.”

“I’m familiar with Wempley. The city has used him for various projects. He knows his stuff.” Poindexter mentioned a tunnel wall near to the cemetery. “A group of homeless people were living in it. They started messing around with the structure, resulting in a portion of it collapsing. Two of them were injured.”

Carlita’s hands flew to her lips. “How awful. Did this happen recently?”

“Last year.”

“We never heard about it.”

“Because the city officials kept it hush-hush. They didn’t want to give anyone else ideas.” The historian told them they’d reinforced the doors and locks. “It hasn’t been a problem since.”

Pete adjusted the spotlight, aiming it at the opening.

“I noticed fresh footprints in here.”

Carlita told him how they and the others had done some initial exploration. “As soon as we realized there might be some historical findings, we stopped.”

“Again, I appreciate you contacting me.” Poindexter’s hand shook as he unzipped one of the bags. He reached inside and removed what appeared to be a metal detector.

“A metal detector?” Carlita asked.

“Correct. It’s a high-end 3D ground penetrating radar. It can detect objects almost a hundred feet down.”

Pete leaned in for a closer inspection. “I wonder if Elvira knows about this.”

“I’m sure she does,” Carlita said. “Did I tell you she’s heading to Alaska?”

“Alaska? Why?” Pete waved dismissively. “Never mind. I already know. Gold mining.”

Poindexter slid a pair of headphones around his neck. He finished assembling the metal detector and grabbed a heavy-duty flashlight. “I’m ready.”

Carlita waited for the men to climb through the opening first. Pete told her the coast was clear, and she followed them in. The trio hovered near the wall while Pete pointed out the general vicinity of where they thought something heavy had been dragged across the ground.

“A jolly boat. It would be an incredible find. Where are the markings?”

“Over here.” Keeping close to the perimeter, Pete and Poindexter walked to the side facing the river and made a right. They stopped at the halfway point. “This is it.”

Poindexter propped the metal detector against the wall and turned his flashlight on. He beamed it back and forth for several long moments. “Can you hold this?”

“Sure.” Pete took the flashlight from him.

Removing his cell phone from his pocket, he aimed it at the ground and began snapping pictures. Inching toward the other side, he continued taking pictures from different angles. “I would like to examine the markings on the other side.”

The men returned to their starting point, where Carlita stood watching. They walked to the other end of the wall and then back to the center.

Once again, Poindexter beamed his light back and forth multiple times. “I would like to take a soil sample.”

He went into great detail about soil composition, the difference between artefacts (pottery, glass, building materials) and ecofacts (grains, shells, charcoal). “I fear I’m rambling on and boring you to tears. The bottom line is the soil can tell a story.”

“Sample away.”

Poindexter returned to his duffel bag and grabbed several glass bottles. The couple watched as he collected a sample of the soil near the disturbed area, samples in all four corners and samples near where Pete and Carlita had found the dirt-encrusted gems.

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He placed the jars in a plastic bag and then began going over every square inch of the space with his metal detector. Multiple times it went off. Each time he would stop, scoop up the item and place it on a clean white towel.

Curious to find out what he had found, Carlita tiptoed over. Bowls. Long rusty nails. What appeared to be part of a metal brace. Several coins.

An hour passed, and Carlita could see her husband was growing impatient. Finally, he asked how much longer it would take.

“Only a few more minutes. I’m almost done.”

After finishing, the men gathered up Poindexter’s equipment, the towel with what the detector had found, and made their way out.

Carlita hadn’t noticed it before, but the man was sweating profusely. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I experience hyperhidrosis when I get excited.”

“Hyperhidrosis?”

“Excessive sweating.” He pulled a cloth kerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead. “It will take me several days to have the findings analyzed. I’ll be in touch.”

Pete reached for the second duffel bag. “Based on what you saw today, what do you

think was in there?”

“One of the most exciting finds we’ve had in decades,” he said. “Your restaurant, a historical site, sits on top of a second historical site. I would bet my life on it.”

Chapter 21

Roar...Rooarrr.

Dernice expertly steered her custom chrome Harley into the parking spot directly in front of Spiffy Clean Dry-Cleaning and Laundromat and kicked the kickstand down. Unstrapping her helmet, she tucked it under her arm and sauntered toward the front entrance door.

Stepping inside, she noticed the smell of bleach mingled with laundry detergent hung heavy in the air. Looking right to left, Dernice searched for June Cleary, the owner. A man, in his twenties, if she had to guess, watched her make her way to the back.

A woman sat next to a dryer; her legs crossed and her nose stuck in a magazine. She barely gave Dernice a glance.

Near the corner, she found the dry-cleaning drop off. Seated at the small desk, magnifying glass in hand, sat June Cleary, working on a crossword puzzle.

Dernice cleared her throat.

June looked up. “Hello.”

“Hello. June?”

“Yes.” She set the magnifying glass down and pushed her chair back. “Can I help

you?”

“I was in here some time ago. I’m not sure if you remember me.”

June’s eyes widened behind her wire-rimmed glasses. “Why yes. I remember you. You’re the woman who owns the Harley. I gave you a discount on cleaning your leather jacket and you took me out for a spin on that sweet ride of yours. And you had the most unusual name.”

“Dernice Cobb.”

June made her way to the counter. “Dernice. Do you need your jacket cleaned again?”

“No. My jacket is fine. The leather satchel on my bike has some spots. I was wondering if you could take a look at them to see if you think they’ll come out.”

“Oh. Absolutely.” Moving at a quick clip for a woman who wasn’t a day under ninety, June followed Dernice out of the building and to her Harley parked out front.

“It’s on this side. I think it’s bug splat.”

June pressed on the center of her glasses and examined the splotches. “I’ll have to be honest. I’m not sure these will come out. Bug guts are tricky, especially if I don’t know what kind of bug it was. If I were you, I would try wiping the spots with very warm water. Not too hard, mind you.”

“Thank you. I will. You did such a great job on my jacket, I knew you would be able to help,” Dernice said.

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June ran her fingertips over the chrome handlebars. “This bike is such a beauty. Did I ever tell you about mine?”

The woman had. In fact, she’d enthusiastically shared several stories about being a biker chick, but Dernice didn’t have the heart to tell her she’d heard all about it. What harm was there in letting her relive a few moments of her glory days?

“No. I don’t believe you did.”

“Well, there was this one season. I lived in Pennsylvania at the time, near the Pocono Mountains. My boyfriend, Ernest, had a 1972 Harley-Davidson Shovelhead.” June made googly eyes. “He wasn’t much to look at, but that motorcycle of his was a dream.”

“You dated him because he had a sweet ride?”

“Well, for a little while. Until I met Charles, who eventually became my first husband.” June flapped her hands. “Sorry. I’m getting sidetracked. Ernest and I rode all over that summer. Him on his Shovelhead and me on my girlie bike. It was similar to the Softail deluxe models on the market now.”

Her expression grew faraway. “It was such a special summer.”

“I bet you were a real gearhead,” Dernice said.

“I most certainly was.” June straightened her back. “Not to mention I was one smokin’ hot mama. These days, I wouldn’t trust myself. Besides, I sold my bike.

None of my friends would ride with me. They were too afraid of breaking a bone or cracking a rib.”

“It’s a legitimate concern at your age,” Dernice said.

“If you want a piece of advice, keep on riding for as long as you can.” June patted the seat and reluctantly took a step back. “She sure is a beaut.”

“Would you like to take her for another spin?”

“Now?”

Dernice nodded.

“I...I would love to. Unfortunately, I’m the only one working. I don’t have anyone to cover for me.”

“Bummer.” Dernice tapped her foot. “Seeing how you can’t take another ride, feel free to settle in for old times’ sake.”

“I don’t want to smudge her up.”

She waved dismissively. “It’s fine. Go ahead.”

June swung her leg over the side and settled in, a look of utter joy spreading across her face. She reached for the handlebars and closed her eyes. “It feels good. What a time we had back then.”

She sat for several long moments before reluctantly climbing off. “Thank you, Dernice. You made my day. Maybe you can come back another time and we can take her out for a spin,” she hinted.

“I’m sure I can arrange something.” Dernice casually glanced at the property across the street, the one surrounded by police tape. “What’s going on over there?”

“I call it the Morton Street monster,” June said. “The property has been nothing but trouble for years.”

“Targeted by vandals?”

“I’m sure it’s been vandalized. Actually, the place is probably cursed, going all the way back to when a man by the name of Garlucci bought it.”

Dernice perked up. “What happened?”

“Well, first of all, he had questionable ties and was from New York. You know what they have up in New York, don’t you?”

“Expensive real estate?” Dernice joked.

“No. Mobsters,” June said in a loud whisper. “I heard this Garlucci fellow had ties to the mob. Not long after he bought it...kaboom!”

“It blew up?”

“I think it was firebombed. Thank God no one was inside when it happened. It was some time ago. I heard the Garlucci guy died, probably murdered by his own people.”

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“Who owns it now?”

June shrugged. “I have no idea. I’ve seen a few street people sneaking in from time to time. Then, out of the blue a few days ago, I noticed a lot of activity.”

“Maybe someone is going to buy it and fix it up,” Dernice said.

“I kind of thought the same thing. Two women and a man showed up yesterday. They went inside but weren’t in there for maybe ten or fifteen minutes before they left. Not long after, two men in suits showed up. They spent a good deal of time snooping around. Next thing I know, they were over here asking a bunch of questions.”

“What sort of questions?”

“If I had seen other people hanging around. If the place was being used as a drug house. They wanted to know the name of the other business owners on the block. Questions along those lines.”

“So maybe they were thinking about buying it.”

“I asked them outright. They never did answer,” June said. “The men were both very businesslike with an interesting accent, like they were from another country.”

“Were they British?” Dernice mustered up her best British accent.

“No, more like Italian.” June snapped her fingers. “Yeah. They had Italian accents. You know foreigners are coming here in droves, snatching up prime real estate. Not

that this is prime property, but you know what I mean.”

“So how come they put up police tape?”

“Well, this is where it gets interesting. One of the women who came by yesterday came back this morning with a different man. He was a younger guy and very good looking.” June let out a flirty whistle. “If I was sixty years younger, I would’ve run right over there and introduced myself. They went inside. Next thing I know, a bunch of cops showed up.”

“They must have found someone or something inside.”

“A body.” June’s mouth formed a large “O,” and she nodded. “Thank goodness I had my surveillance equipment keeping an eye out, something I need because...well, let’s be honest...this isn’t the best of neighborhoods. They bring out a body. I’m not sure, but I think it may have been one of the men who had an accent. The sheet they had covering him flipped up on his leg. I could see pinstripes, similar to the pinstripes the men who stopped by here were wearing.”

“How awful.” Dernice pressed her hand to her chest. “Have the police been over to question you about it?”

June nodded. “You betcha. I told them everything I knew, even going back to when the Garlucci man owned the place. If you ask me, they should bulldoze it and start over.”

“You might be right.”

“My neighbor on the other side, Bernie Ziffra, who owns a check cashing business, and I both think it would be better to tear it down. Looking back, I bet Bernie is glad he never bought the place.”

“A local business owner tried to buy the property?”

“He thought about it. I told him it was a bad idea. Hopefully, those women who were over there didn’t decide to purchase the place. Like I said, I think it’s cursed.”

“I’m sure the investigators will get it all sorted out,” Dernice said.

“I can tell you one thing for certain...I’ll be sleeping with one eye open tonight.” June grabbed hold of Dernice’s arm for balance and stepped onto the sidewalk. “Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?”

“Thank you for the offer. I should be going. I need to run home and get ready for work.”

June’s shoulders drooped. “Perhaps some other time. If you don’t mind me asking, what do you do?”

“I work for my sister’s security services company. EC Security Services.”

June repeated the name. “I think you mentioned it before. Yes, I’m sure you did. Thank you for coming by and letting me sit on your bike. It was like a mini trip down memory lane.”

“You’re welcome. Someday soon, when we’re able to do a little better planning, I’ll swing by and give you a ride.”

“I would like that, Dernice Cobb. I would very much like to take you up on your generous offer.” June ambled back to her door and made her way inside. She walked to the window, the smile never leaving her face as she waved goodbye.

Dernice waved back and gave her a peace out sign. Settling onto the bike, she slid her

helmet on and secured the strap.

With a full tank of gas, Dernice cruised the perimeter of downtown Savannah. Discovering she had a few minutes to spare, she drove toward the main road leading to the highway.

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Passing by the city limits sign, she put the pedal to the metal. With the sun shining down, Dernice cruised at a comfortable speed, wishing June was with her—a fellow rider who appreciated the freedom and pure magic of the Harley.

Something told her the woman had many more stories to share. A little sad yet philosophical. What stood out to Dernice was how June embraced life and lived it to the fullest.

She had little doubt June Cleary blazed her own path. Fearless to live in a sketchy side of town for all these years. Determined to run her business despite bombings, vandals, and now an unsolved murder. Would Dernice live to be her age with no regrets?

So far, she had plenty, not the least of which was her role in an armed robbery. Things hadn't always been easy for Dernice Cobb. In fact, if not for Elvira, she had no idea where she would be right now.

Probably in prison or dead, mixed up with the wrong people. Despite Elvira's laundry list of shortcomings, she was the best sister a person could ask for.

Dernice reached the highway and then circled around, heading back into town. During the ride, she mulled over her conversation with June. Clearly, nothing got by the woman, at least nothing that took place in her neighborhood.

She had the senior Vinnie's number from the very start. The women and man she'd seen must've been Carlita, Mercedes and Tony and then later, Carlita and Vinnie. Dernice would bet money the other two were Enzo and Costanza. They fit the

description. The Italian accents, the line of questioning.

June confirmed what Carlita had already told her. Yet, a comment the laundromat owner made in passing hit Dernice's radar. It was a small thing which might turn out to be a big thing.

Chapter 22

"I miss hosting these family-style dinners in the hall." Carlita circled the folding table, adding extra plates for Cool Bones, Autumn, and Sam, the tenants Mercedes invited at the last minute.

"Me too. Maybe we should start hosting them once a month, casual get-togethers," Mercedes said. "It's so much fun having everyone over."

Autumn placed plastic cups next to the dinner plates. "And ditch our weekend courtyard soirees?"

"Nah. We can do both," Mercedes said. "I love cooking for everyone and pasta fits my budget."

"We could all chip in, turn it into a potluck," Cool Bones suggested. "It's good for the neighbors to get together."

"Agreed," Sam said. "Not to mention Mercedes is an excellent cook."

"I learned from the best—Ma," Mercedes said. "Instead of block parties, we'll have hall parties."

"Where's Dernice?" Carlita looked around.

“She’s on her way,” Luigi said. “She wouldn’t miss a Garlucci dinner for nothing.”

“What about Elvira?” Tony asked.

“She couldn’t make it. Something about not wanting to leave Snitch alone. She asked if we would send a dish home with Dernice,” Carlita said.

“If we have any leftovers,” Sam added.

“Before I forget, Detective Ellery stopped by the pawn shop. He asked a few questions,” Tony said.

“What kinds of questions?”

“How long we’ve owned the pawn shop, how many apartment units we had, how long Ravello’s has been open. I also gave him a copy of the Morton Street loan agreement.”

“I was wondering when he would show up,” Carlita said. “Thank you for taking care of it for me.”

“No problem.”

The final guest arrived. The group gathered around the table, talking and feasting on delicious spaghetti and meatballs, along with buttery slices of thick garlic bread. Despite Mercedes insisting she wanted to handle the dinner herself, Carlita brought a tossed salad and grabbed dessert from the restaurant.

She waited until they were enjoying coffee and their decadent triple berry cheesecake before asking Dernice what she’d found.

“Like I figured, June was there. In fact, she lives there.”

“Lives in the same building as her laundromat?” Carlita asked.

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“Yeah. She remembered your husband, Vinnie. She mentioned seeing two women and a man there the other day.”

“Me, Mercedes and Ma,” Tony said.

“Based on what she said, it would be my guess.” Dernice pointed to Vinnie. “She also commented on seeing you and Carlita over at the property.”

“In other words, she doesn’t miss a thing.”

“Nope. She also remembers seeing Enzo and Costanza.”

Carlita’s heart skipped a beat. “Going inside the building?”

“Yep. After spending time inside your property, they stopped by her laundromat.”

“Awesome.” Mercedes clasped her hands. “What did she say about them?”

“They were asking a bunch of questions about the property, people hanging around, stuff like that. They were also interested in who some of the other business owners on the street were. I’m guessing it was them because she specifically mentioned they were wearing suits and had Italian accents.”

“So Costanza and Enzo were checking the place out,” Pete said. “What did she tell them?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say. She made an interesting comment about the neighbor.

I think she said his name was Bernie Ziffra. He owns a check cashing business. I guess he was planning on buying the place. Vinnie swooped in and got it first.”

“Ziffra should count his blessings,” Carlita muttered.

“June said something along the same lines about how he was lucky and she thought the place was cursed.”

“I have to agree. Bombings, destruction, death. It doesn’t have a great track record.”

“Did you check out the check cashing place?” Luigi asked.

“Nah. Looking back, I should have. I was right there.”

“It’s okay,” Carlita said. “I appreciate you finding out what you did. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Dernice polished off her last bite of cheesecake. “She’s a sweet little lady with spunk. I’m guessing age-wise, she isn’t a day under ninety but is young at heart.”

“Thank you for inviting me to your delicious dinner.” Cool Bones was the first to leave, explaining he needed to head out for band rehearsal. Sam was next, claiming he had a large tour group he was meeting downtown. Luigi and Dernice helped clear the table and then headed downstairs to his efficiency.

After loading the dishwasher, Carlita and Pete, along with Vinnie, strolled back to their apartment.

Vinnie lingered near the back door, smoking a cigarette while Pete and Carlita kept him company. “Any word on Elvira finding someone to take a look at your hole in the wall?”

“She’s still working on it,” Pete said. “We’ve already gotten our own professional opinion.”

“Yeah?” Vinnie flicked his ashes on the ground. “What is it?”

“The restaurant, although already a historical location, may be sitting on another historical site. The expert was somewhat vague about precisely how historical, pending some testing, but he seems confident.”

Carlita nudged her husband. “Let’s show Vinnie.”

“Show me what?”

“Pete and I found a piece of wood wedged in the ceiling. It’s upstairs in the apartment.”

“I’m not much into history, but I wouldn’t mind checking it out. Have you found anything else other than a chunk of wood?” Vinnie’s sharp eye caught the look that passed between his mother and Pete. “You found something.”

“Maybe. We found a few small gems covered in dirt.” Carlita held a finger to her lips. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t. Elvira is going to flip out.”

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“Which is why we plan to keep it under wraps, at least until we can figure out what we have.”

As soon as Vinnie finished smoking his cigarette, he followed the couple up to the apartment. Pete carried the piece of wood into the kitchen and set it on the counter.

“This looks like an old timber, even older than the floor currently in place.” Pete ran a light hand over a pair of corner notches. “These notches are significant.”

“Notched out to fit with another piece of wood,” Vinnie guessed.

“I was thinking the same thing. It doesn’t fit in with the ceiling structure. My guess is this was created for an entirely different purpose.” Pete squinted his eyes. “Why didn’t I think of this before?”

“Think of what?”

“I’ll be right back.” He ran down to his office and returned moments later, waving a roll of paper above his head. “This is it. Proof of what I’ve suspected all along.”

Carlita squinted her eyes. “Proof of what?”

“This timber is from a pirate ferryboat, or as we’ve been calling it, a jolly boat.” Pete unrolled the parchment paper, showing a detailed diagram of a jolly boat in the upper corner. “You can clearly see the notches. They match the notches in this piece of wood.”

“But how did a piece of the boat wind up getting wedged in the ceiling, aka the restaurant floor?” Carlita asked.

“Imagine this.” Pete set the timber on the end of the paper to keep it flat. “At one time, the river came up close to the restaurant. It was filled with water, sludge, mud. Who knows what else? The jolly boat somehow became marooned on shore. With a great deal of effort, the crew managed to get it back into the water.”

Vinnie picked up. “While the crew was struggling to get it back into the water, a part of it broke off and became wedged in what is now the restaurant’s floor.”

“It’s a perfect match.” Pete beamed. “If my theory is correct, it’s possible the area contains more gems, coins. We might be on the brink of finding cargo left behind by the crew.”

“But why leave it behind?” Vinnie asked.

“Pirates were a wily bunch. Many of them spent time in prison. Few, if any, had squeaky clean backgrounds. It could be they found themselves running from the law, were forced to leave in a hurry and left some goods behind.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Carlita leaned her elbows on the counter. “You don’t have to wait for Poindexter’s professional opinion or Elvira’s expert, for that matter.”

“True, although I would hate to disturb a piece of history, a piece of Savannah’s history, because I didn’t want to wait.”

“It’s your call.” Vinnie shrugged. “What if the city finds out? They could step in and try to seize the property.”

“Although Georgia doesn’t have eminent domain—seizing private property for public

use, they might try. Even if they do, I'll hire an attorney to stop them." Pete rolled the parchment paper up. "I need to sleep on this and consider my next step."

Ting. Ting.

The outer bell chimed. Carlita ran to the wall and flipped the monitor on to see who it was. "Hmm."

"Who is it?" Pete asked.

"You better put the stuff away. It's Elvira, and she brought someone with her."

Chapter 23

Carlita ran downstairs and unlocked the apartment door. "Hello, Elvira."

"Hey, Carlita. I hope I'm not intruding."

"Vinnie, Pete and I were just upstairs chatting." She motioned to Snitch, hunched over inside her birdcage. "You brought your parrot with you."

"Remember when I said she wasn't eating very much?" Elvira didn't wait for her to answer. "She has barely eaten all day and I'm really getting worried. I called the vet. He said to hand feed her baby food."

"Did it work?"

Elvira tipped her hand back and forth. "A little. Have you ever tasted baby food?" She made a gagging sound. "Some of that stuff is gross. The peas were downright inedible. I might try some fruit next."

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Carlita leaned in, studying the bird whose head was tucked down and her eyes closed. “Pete knows a lot more about parrots than I do. Let’s take her upstairs.”

The women made the quick climb up the steps and into the apartment. Heeding Carlita’s suggestion, the parchment papers and timber were long gone.

“Hello, Elvira.”

“Hey, Pete. I’m sorry to bother you guys. Snitch is refusing to eat. I was hoping you could help me figure out what’s wrong.” Elvira told the men what she’d already told Carlita. “You know a lot more about these birds than me. What do you think?”

Pete approached the cage. He unlatched the door and gently stroked the top of her head, talking in a soft, low voice.

Snitch opened her eyes and stared at him as he continued talking.

“She seems to be responding,” he said. “As I mentioned before, she could be going through a period of adjustment. Moving to a new place, new surroundings and she’s still trying to settle in.”

“I was thinking maybe you could introduce her to Gunner. The two might bond,” Elvira said.

“We can certainly see what happens.” Pete went into their bedroom and returned with Gunner.

“Gunner is handsome,” he squawked. “Gunner the pirate.”

“Yes, you are.” Carlita hurriedly moved his stand next to the counter.

Pete hooked his cage to the stand and turned him so that he faced Snitch.

Gunner’s rambling sentences abruptly stopped. He skittered across the pole, his gaze laser focused on the other parrot. “Hello.” He let out a flirty whistle.

Snitch slowly lifted her head, blinking rapidly and staring back at Gunner with equal interest. “Hello,” she replied.

“Gunner is handsome.”

She introduced herself. “Snitchy Snitch.”

A rapid round of chirps and words ensued.

Snitch flapped her wings and pranced on her perch, whistling a merry little tune.

Gunner, not to be outdone, displayed his plumage and puffed out his chest. “Hot little mama,” he sang. “Gunner, Gunner.”

Back and forth, the parrots chatted, flirting and carrying on.

Elvira grabbed Pete’s arm. “This was it. Snitch is lonely.”

“It appears the two are quite taken with one another,” Carlita said.

Long minutes passed. Finally, Pete suggested they try getting Snitch to eat something.

“I didn’t bring any food with me,” Elvira said.

“We have plenty.” Pete grabbed a banana from the basket of fresh fruit. He peeled it back and held it out.

Snitch nibbled a small bite and then dug in with gusto.

“She’s eating.” Elvira clapped her hands. “Snitch needs a friend.”

“And it appears Gunner is happy to oblige.”

The parrots continued to banter. Meanwhile, the group gathered on the balcony while Vinnie smoked. “I’ve been thinkin’ about what Dernice told us.”

“About June Cleary?”

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“And the other guy, the other business owner. It might not be a bad idea to see what’s up with him.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Carlita said. “It also wouldn’t hurt for me to take a spin around town and chat with Reese. She knows almost everyone and everything that goes on in Savannah.”

“But safely,” Pete cautioned. “If you plan to visit this check cashing guy’s place, don’t go alone. I can rearrange my schedule.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“I’ll go with Ma,” Vinnie offered. “I’m not leaving town until we figure out who killed this Enzo guy.”

“I can hitch a ride on Reese’s trolley first thing tomorrow morning. Afterwards, Vinnie and I will pay a visit to Mr. Ziffra.”

“I can’t help but think June Cleary might hold the key,” Carlita said. “If what Dernice said is true, the woman doesn’t miss a thing. She might know more than she’s letting on.”

“Meaning you might swing by to chat with her tomorrow, too?”

“Why not? Vinnie and I will be right there.”

“And what about Costanza?”

An uneasy feeling settled over Carlita. “He’s hanging around looking for something. It’s possible Lombardo is having him keep a low profile. Or it’s possible the investigators have already tracked him down and questioned him.”

“Again...”

“I’ll be careful,” Carlita promised.

Elvira glanced at her watch. “Snitch and I need to get going. Do you mind if we swing back by for another visit?”

“Not at all,” Pete said. “I think it’s safe to say there’s a budding romance in the works.”

“I guess we all need someone,” Carlita said. “Even Snitch and Gunner.”

Later that night, long after she and Pete had gone to bed, Carlita tossed and turned, trying to figure out who had murdered Enzo. Was it Lombardo? Costanza? Someone else? If so, why?

She woke up early the next morning. Pete wasn’t far behind and Vinnie, who had spent another night in their spacious guest suite, joined them as soon as the coffee was ready.

Thinking a big breakfast for a busy day was in order, she whipped up a batch of scrambled eggs, fried some bacon, and cooked a pan full of potato wedges. Although not a breakfast person, she convinced her eldest son to have a bite to eat.

The trio gathered at the table, discussing their plans for the day. While Carlita caught

the trolley for a spin around town, Vinnie would hang out at the apartment and catch up on some work. Meanwhile, Pete had meetings scheduled with his staff from both the restaurant and pirate ship.

After cleaning up, Pete left first. Carlita showered and ran down to the trolley stop, only steps from the restaurant's front entrance.

Ting...ting...ting-a-ling. Carlita heard the bell moments before the trolley rumbled around the corner. Her friend Reese sat behind the wheel, announcing the stop via the intercom system. As they cruised closer, she caught Carlita's eye and gave a friendly wave.

Carlita waited for the passengers to get off and then climbed aboard, swiping her ride card on her way to the empty seat directly behind Reese.

"Good morning, Carlita," she cheerily greeted her. "You're up and out early."

"I am. Unfortunately, I didn't get much sleep last night. A few troubling issues are upsetting the Garlucci family applecart."

"Uh-oh." Reese sobered. "What kind of applecart upsets?"

"Finding out my first husband borrowed money from some sketchy people to purchase a dump over on Morton Street."

"Morton Street?" Reese wrinkled her nose. "That isn't a good area of town to invest in."

"Tell me about it," Carlita sighed. "Although Annie Downton seems to think it wasn't a horrible investment. A man who came knocking on my door the other day to collect is now dead."

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“No wonder you couldn’t sleep. Hold your thought.” Reese grabbed her microphone. She went into a brief history lesson as they passed through Reynolds Square before steering the trolley alongside the curb for their next stop. A rider exited. Two more passengers climbed on and they were once again on the road.

“Sorry. So, you found out you own another property. The lender shows up to collect and ends up dead.”

“A man sent by the lender. It wasn’t the guy who actually loaned the money. My oldest son, Vinnie, and I found his body inside the Morton Street property.”

Reese made a choking sound. “You found him? How did he die?”

“Someone shot him. Judging by the way his body was sprawled out, they broke a few of his bones while they were at it. The bottom line is I’m on the police investigator’s radar. The guy worked for a person I’m certain will collect his debt one way or another. If he didn’t take him out, he probably thinks I did.”

“You have a mess on your hands.”

“There’s more,” Carlita said.

Reese’s eyes grew round as saucers.

“Elvira’s cameras caught the other guy who showed up, Costanza, snooping around my property the other night after his partner died.”

“Why?”

“I wish I knew.” Carlita told her how Dernice had chatted with June Cleary, the laundromat / dry-clean owner.

“I know June. She’s been in business over on Morton Street for decades.”

“And has a sharp eye. From what Dernice told us, the two men who were trying to collect were over at her place asking a bunch of questions.”

“About you?”

“About the area. Was it a drug dealer hangout, questions about the neighbors. I’m not sure, but my name may have been brought up at some point.”

They reached the next stop. Once again, Carlita waited for passengers to get off and new ones to board.

Checking for traffic, Reese pulled back onto the street. “Are you thinking maybe June is behind it?”

“I don’t think so. Dernice told me she’s up there in years.”

“She is. You wouldn’t know it, though, by how agile she is. June gets around pretty good. Was he a big guy?”

Carlita thought about it. “He was average. Average build, but the kind of person who could handle himself in a fight. I’m also certain he was armed at the time of his death.” She told Reese the police had questioned her and Vinnie about having a gun.

“Based on what Dernice told you, did she think June sounded angry or irritated?”

“No. I don’t get the impression she was upset with them. She strikes me as being an interesting person with a colorful history.” Carlita mentioned her being a biker chick, which impressed Dernice.

“Oh, June has a colorful history, all right.” Carlita nearly fell off the seat at what her friend said next.

Chapter 24

“June spent a few years enjoying three hots and a cot in Whitworth Correctional Institution.”

Carlita’s jaw dropped. “She’s a felon?”

“Yep. She spent time in the slammer for check fraud. June isn’t shy about telling people about it either. Of course, it happened a long time ago.”

Carlita’s mind whirled. Had June Cleary killed Enzo? If so, what would be the motive? Clearly, she wouldn’t be able to possess firearms. Although possessing guns illegally was an entirely different story. “Do you think she’s capable of murder?”

Reese thought about it. “I don’t know. She doesn’t strike me as the murdering type, but then she doesn’t strike me as a person who would be involved in check fraud.”

“Do you know anything else about the businesses near Morton Street?”

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“Barnie Ziffra owns a place over there. Interestingly enough, I believe it’s a check cashing and paycheck loan operation. It’s one of those borrow-money-today. Pay-it-back-tomorrow with ridiculously high fees, types of places.”

They reached their next stop. Reese thanked the riders as they left and greeted the next batch who boarded. “I don’t know much about him other than his check cashing and loan place have been around for a long time.”

“Good to know.” Carlita grew quiet, mulling over the new information. The saying “suspect the least likely suspect” ran through her head. Chatting with June moved to the top of her to-do list.

The rest of the trolley route flew by, with Carlita and Reese filling each other in on their busy lives. Making it back to her stop, she thanked her friend and ran inside to track Vinnie down.

She found him at the kitchen bar, open laptop in front of him and cell phone in hand.

“Hey, Ma. How’s Reese?”

“Good.” Carlita dropped her purse on the counter. “I’m glad I took the trolley.” She filled her son in on what she’d discovered.

“You think maybe this old lady took Enzo out?”

“I don’t know what to think. Obviously, she knows all about what happens in her neighborhood. Why would she kill him? From what we know, he and Costanza just

got into town.”

“Could be they were trying to hustle her, and she didn’t like it.” Vinnie pointed out Enzo was shot in the back. “He coulda let his guard down, thinking she was a harmless little old lady. He turned his back on her and she popped him.”

“And kept a close eye on what happened next. If it was her, she’s off the hook and we’re on it.”

“Anything is possible.” Vinnie shut his computer off. “Do you want to head over there now?”

“If you don’t mind. The sooner the better.”

Exiting the apartment, Carlita and her son climbed into her car and took the back streets to the other side of town.

Portions of the police tape were still in place. No one was around, and the street seemed quiet. Almost too quiet.

Carlita slipped out of the driver’s seat. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, and she got the distinct impression they were being watched. She resisted the urge to look toward the laundromat.

Instead, she stepped onto the sidewalk where Vinnie stood waiting.

“You feeling what I’m feeling?” he asked.

“Like we’re being watched.”

“Yep. Let’s start walking.”

At the end of the street, they turned left, strolling along the front of the building. They passed a tattoo parlor and a liquor store, along with several boarded-up buildings.

An Asian takeout restaurant sat on the corner. Through the grimy glass window, a pink neon sign flashed OPEN.

Casting it a quick side glance, Carlita could see two people standing behind the counter.

Crossing the street, they found two more boarded-up buildings along with EZ Check Cashing. The lights were off. A sign listing their business hours sat propped up in the front window.

“Crud. This place doesn’t open for another hour.”

“We’ll swing by the laundromat first.”

The lights were on inside the building next to the check cashing place. Carlita slowed, trying to figure out what it was. She shaded her eyes and gazed up. A cat sat watching them from the ledge of a second-story window. “This property appears to be occupied.”

“Could be housing,” Vinnie said.

“True.”

At the corner, they crossed the street to the laundromat. Taking the lead, Vinnie entered the building. A young mother with a baby in a stroller next to her stood near the front window. She glanced in their direction and continued folding clothes.

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Near the back, they found the dry-cleaning window. Carlita approached the counter and rang the bell.

A white-haired woman, petite and with bright gray eyes, scurried over. "Hello."

"Hello," Carlita greeted her. "My name is Carlita Garlucci-Taylor. I own the property across the street and was hoping to speak with June. I believe her last name is Cleary."

"I'm June Cleary," she said. "What did you say your name was again?"

"Carlita Garlucci-Taylor."

"I remember you. Both of you. You were here the other day. Weren't you the ones who found a man's body in your building?"

"We did. I'm sure the police have already been here, but we were hoping to ask you a few questions," Carlita said.

Her eyes narrowed. "About what?"

"About the man who died and his...associate."

"I don't know much about them. I didn't even know their names until the cops came by to ask me about it. Were the men friends of yours?"

"No. My deceased husband, Vinnie, purchased the property. The men worked for the

lender who loaned my husband money. They came to town, looking to collect.”

June blinked rapidly. “You never paid them?”

“I didn’t know my husband had taken out a loan or anything about the place until they showed up on my doorstep.”

“I bet when you came here and saw the condition, it was a real shocker.”

“You have no idea.”

June turned an interested eye on Vinnie. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“I’m Vinnie Garlucci.”

Carlita could see the wheels spinning as June put the pieces together. “You’re Mr. Garlucci’s son.”

“Correct.”

“Do you live around here?”

“No. I live in New Jersey. I run a casino up there.”

June perked up. “A casino? Which one?”

“Treasure Cove.”

“I’ve been there.” June’s eyebrows knitted. “It’s a fancy joint.”

“It is a more upscale facility,” Vinnie agreed.

“I’m guessing you and your business have been here for a long time,” Carlita said.

“Over thirty years.” She straightened her back. “The only other place that’s been around longer is Bernie Ziffra’s place—EZ Check Cashing.”

“I know it was some time ago, but I was wondering if you remember my husband, Vinnie.”

“Oh, yes. He came around several times and even stopped here to introduce himself. He had big plans for the property. Of course, when he bought it, it was in fair condition.”

“And then someone vandalized it.”

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“Blew the place up.” June threw her hands in the air. “It happened one night, not long after he purchased it. I was in bed at the time. The whole ground shook. I thought it was an earthquake.”

“It must have been a massive explosion.”

“Like nothing I’ve ever been through before.” June lowered her voice. “If you ask me, the place is cursed.”

“I don’t disagree,” Carlita said. “Can you think of anyone in the neighborhood who may have been upset about my husband buying the business?”

June tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Not off the top of my head. Like I said, your husband didn’t own it long before the inside was blown to smithereens.”

“Going back to the men who stopped by, if you don’t mind me asking, what kind of questions did they have?”

She shrugged. “If I had seen people hanging around. Did I think people were over there dealing drugs. They also wanted to know the name of the other business owners on the block. The usual questions when someone is new to the area.”

“Besides me, my son and the two men, do you remember seeing anyone else hanging around recently?”

“No. Actually, I take that back. I do remember seeing you and two other people the other day, before you found the man’s body.”

“I was with my daughter and another son,” Carlita said.

June started to say something and stopped.

“You were going to say something,” she prompted.

“It’s none of my business, but you said your husband never told you he bought the property?” June asked.

“No. Unfortunately, he did not.” Carlita stepped aside to let a customer approach the counter.

He picked up his order and left. “We won’t take up any more of your time. If you think of anything else, could you give me a call?” Carlita handed her a business card.

“Ravello’s.” June flipped the card over. “This is the fancy Italian eatery over in Walton Square.”

“It’s my restaurant. It belongs to me and my children.”

“I’ve seen it featured on Divine Eats in Savannah. Your food looks delicious.”

“Authentic Italian.” Carlita took the card from her. She handwrote a free lunch on the back and signed her name. “Bring this card into the restaurant for a free lunch. Tell the server I gave it to you.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to come by soon.”

“And thank you for taking the time to talk to us.” Carlita followed Vinnie through the laundromat and out of the building. “Well?” she asked as soon as they were on the sidewalk. “What do you think?”

“It’s possible she knows more than she’s letting on,” Vinnie said. “For someone her age, she’s sharp.”

“I agree.” Carlita glanced across the street and noticed a familiar vehicle sat parked directly behind hers. Her heart plummeted when she realized who it was.

Chapter 25

Detective Charles Ellery waited for Carlita and Vinnie to cross the street. “Good morning, Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Garlucci.”

“Hello, Detective Ellery,” Carlita said. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is.” He nodded toward June Cleary’s place. “I see you were over at the dry-cleaning business.”

“We were. We met June Cleary.”

“She’s an interesting woman.”

“She is,” Carlita agreed.

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He folded his arms. “Was there a particular reason for your visit?”

Carlita arched a brow, answering his question with one of her own. “Do I need a specific reason? I still own this building and figured I might as well introduce myself to the neighbors.”

A flicker of surprise crossed the detective’s face. “Are you planning on hanging onto this property?”

“Let’s just say that I’m keeping my options open.”

“Then I’m sure you’ve also met Mr. Ziffra, who owns the check cashing business.”

“No. Actually, I haven’t. We met Ms. Cleary. Meeting her was as far as we got.”

“And you mentioned Mr. Enzo’s death to her.”

“Of course. It’s a cause for concern,” Carlita said.

“Especially considering you knew the man,” the detective pointed out.

“Correct. But knowing a man who shows up at my door to...”

“To collect a debt,” Ellery interrupted.

“Yes, to collect a debt. Although, as I’ve already said, we hadn’t reached an agreement.” Carlita told him she’d gone to the bank to work on securing the money to

pay off the property. “Mr. Enzo wasn’t the lender. If you’re insinuating I might have had something to do with his death, what would be the purpose of me killing him?”

“It was an act of revenge, judging by the condition of Mr. Enzo’s body.”

“Regardless, do I look like a person who could break a grown man’s bones?”

“You couldn’t, but someone else could.” He pointedly stared at Vinnie. “Perhaps a family member?”

“I’m gonna guess my gun doesn’t match the murder weapon.” Vinnie shoved his hands in his pockets. “Otherwise, you would’ve already tracked me down for another round of whodunnit.”

“This isn’t funny,” Ellery snapped.

“I’m not laughing.”

“Let’s not beat around the bush. We both know you’re here snooping.” Ellery clenched his jaw and jabbed his finger at Carlita. “Stay out of my investigation.”

She could feel the tips of her ears burn. It was her turn to lose her cool. “Last time I checked it’s still a free country and I can talk to whoever I want.”

Ellery muttered something unintelligible under his breath. He climbed into his car, slammed the door, and sped off.

Vinnie dusted his hands. “You sure told him, Ma.”

“He’s a jerk,” she fumed. “If he’s the best Savannah has, then they need to keep looking.” Carlita made a move to head into her building when her cell phone rang. It

was Arnie, Ravello's head manager.

"Hey, Arnie."

"Hey, Carlita. I'm sorry to bother you."

"You're not bothering me. What's up?"

"We have a minor problem. One of the food truck workers, the driver, called out. He has the flu."

"Crud. The music festival starts at one. I need to get our truck over there with two people."

"I could go in a pinch."

"No. I would rather have you at the restaurant. All we need is someone to drive the truck and serve food."

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“Which is ready to roll. Unfortunately, I’m tight on staff today. You got any ideas about who could fill in?”

“Mercedes?”

“Is already here working.”

Carlita rattled off a few more employees’ names, all of which, for various reasons, wouldn’t work. And then she remembered. “I might have a fill-in. I’m on my way.”

She ended the call and tossed her car keys to Vinnie. “I’m gonna see if Paisley wants to make a few extra bucks.”

“Who is Paisley?”

“Steve Winter’s girlfriend. She’s a little rough around the edges, but a good person. He mentioned they were short on cash the other day.” Carlita dialed the number Autumn had given her. Her call went right to voicemail.

She left a brief message explaining who she was and mentioned the job before disconnecting. “It looks like I might be dishing out food this afternoon.”

Her phone rang before she could finish the sentence. It was Paisley who said she would love to give it a try.

“Wonderful. Is now too soon?”

“I’m right around the corner. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Carlita thanked her and ended the call. “Crisis averted. I’m always looking for extra help. If this works out, Paisley might have a permanent part-time job or maybe even full-time.”

Reaching the parking lot, Carlita hopped out of the car and made a beeline for the restaurant. The food truck was already parked out back.

“Well?” Arnie caught up with her.

She gave him two thumbs up. “I have someone. Her name is Paisley. She’s Steve Winter’s girlfriend. She should be here any minute.”

“Does she have a driver’s license?”

“Now that you mention it, I’m not sure.” Carlita blew air through thinned lips. “I hope so. What about the other worker?”

“They don’t have a driver’s license.”

It wasn’t unusual, at least not for Savannah, especially for locals who lived in the heart of the historic district, not to have a driver’s license. They relied on public transportation, including the trolley system, to get around—work, shopping, going out. Not only was owning a vehicle low on the priority list, but fewer vehicles meant fewer parking problems, considering parking spots were at a premium.

A figure at the end of the alley caught Carlita’s eye. It was Paisley, moving at a fast clip.

Arnie made a choking sound as she drew closer. “I hope this isn’t Paisley,” he

whispered under his breath.

Chapter 26

“It’s Paisley,” Carlita whispered back, noticing she looked the same as she had the last time she’d seen her at Steve’s shop, except for the addition of a new tattoo which now reached above her neckline. At least the new tat was a wreath of flowers.

As the woman drew closer, her gaze was drawn to the black snake with intense green eyes hissing at her through a cluster of pink azaleas.

“Hello, Carlita.” Paisley smiled brightly.

“Hello, Paisley. Thank you for getting here so quickly.”

“You’re welcome.”

Carlita introduced her to Arnie. “This is my restaurant manager, Arnie. As I mentioned on the phone, we need someone to serve food from our food truck during this afternoon’s music festival.”

“I love the local music festival. In fact, I was telling Steve we needed to get down there later today. Some of my favorite bands will be playing.”

“I’m sure you’ll have plenty to listen to.” Carlita briefly explained the help needed. Basically you’ll be serving a limited number of items to hungry festivalgoers. “To keep it easy, we have a few main dishes, a couple of sides and one dessert.”

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“Melanie will show you how to operate the cash register when you get there,” Arnie added.

Paisley stared at the keys he held in his hand. “What are those?”

“The keys to the truck’s ignition and the rear door.”

“I...uh.” Her eyes widened. “Am I driving the food truck?”

“Melanie doesn’t have a driver’s license.” Arnie scratched his forehead. “You do have a driver’s license, don’t you?”

“Y-yes,” she stammered.

Carlita and her manager exchanged an uneasy glance.

Paisley reached into her pocket, pulled out a pink wallet, and flipped it open.

Carlita studied the driver’s license. It was Paisley, all right. She glanced at the issue date, which was only a couple of months ago. “This is a new license.”

“I just got it.”

“Got it renewed,” Carlita clarified.

“No.” Paisley shook her head. “I recently passed the tests and was issued my license.”

“But you’ve practiced driving and are comfortable behind the wheel?”

Paisley’s eyes slid to the side where the big box truck was parked. “I know how to drive a car. I’ve never driven a truck before.” She hurried on. “I’m sure I can handle it.”

Arnie cleared his throat. “Maybe we should practice driving around the block a time or two.”

“Good idea,” Carlita said. “It will give Paisley a feel for what it’s like behind the wheel.”

Paisley took the keys and climbed the side steps.

Arnie shot his boss a concerned look and reluctantly followed behind.

Carlita stood off to the side. Watching through the front windshield, she could see Arnie and the woman talking. She fired up the motor and shifted into drive.

The truck sat idling for several long moments. Carlita instinctively backed up when the engine revved up. So far, so good.

With Paisley behind the wheel, she and Arnie reached the end of the alley and disappeared around the corner. Less than a minute later, the food truck reappeared, coming at her from the opposite direction.

As they passed by, she noticed the young woman’s expression appeared more relaxed. Paisley stopped at the end of the alley and shifted into park.

Carlita ran to the window. “You’re doing great. I should warn you some of the assigned parking spots are tight. Maybe you should practice backing up.”

“Okay.” Paisley nervously licked her lips and shifted the truck in reverse. She tapped the gas. The truck lurched backward.

Carlita jumped out of the way, watching in horror as the vehicle careened left.

Crunch.

Someone yelled loudly. It was Arnie. Before Carlita could run over to see what had happened, she hit the gas. Gravel flew from the rear tires and pelted the side of the dumpster.

Through the windshield, Carlita locked eyes with Paisley’s terror-filled ones. She gritted her teeth, watching helplessly as her food truck swerved toward Elvira’s work van parked alongside her building.

Screech. Carlita looked away, praying a collision had miraculously been averted. Bracing herself, she shifted her gaze. The food truck sat at the end of the alley idling. Seconds later, Arnie and a shaking Paisley exited.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hit your dumpster.”

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Carlita jogged to the back to inspect the damage. A tiny dent was the only thing she could see. For all she knew, it could have already been there. “The food truck is no worse for the wear. Unfortunately, I don’t think you’re ready to drive this beast.”

“I agree. It would be too dangerous. All of those people, not to mention the tight parking spots.” Paisley’s eyes filled with tears. “I could really use this job. Is there...do you think it would still be possible for me to work?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Carlita motioned to Arnie. “I think we should have Melanie stay here and swap places with Mercedes, who is comfortable driving the food truck. She can also help train Paisley. Do you think Melanie would mind?”

“Not at all. What a great idea.” Arnie hurried inside and returned less than a minute later with Mercedes following close behind.

“Arnie said you need me to handle the food truck today.”

Carlita briefly explained the situation. “Paisley has graciously offered to help us today. She’s a little uncomfortable driving the food truck and Melanie, who was going to cover the shift, doesn’t have a driver’s license.”

“Gotcha. Sounds good to me. I wouldn’t mind checking out the music festival.”

“The keys are in it.” Paisley climbed into the passenger seat while Carlita followed her daughter around to the driver’s side door. She grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Paisley needs the money,” she said in a low voice.

“No problem, Ma. Maybe she’ll like it so much she can start helping with deliveries.”

“As long as she doesn’t have to drive a big truck,” Carlita joked. “She rear-ended the dumpster and almost sideswiped Elvira’s work van.”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t drive. Don’t worry. I’ll teach her everything I know about food truck service.”

“Thank you.” Carlita held the door for Mercedes. She lifted her hand and gave her a “v” for victory.

Arnie stepped in next to Carlita. “Never a dull moment around here.”

“Never,” Carlita sighed. “At least we don’t have to wonder if the food truck will come back in one piece.”

Chapter 27

“Thank you for driving the truck.” Paisley absentmindedly tugged on her seatbelt. “I have my license but have never driven anything bigger than a car.”

“You’re welcome. I don’t blame you for not wanting to take this on the road. It’s a tank.” Mercedes tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “Have you ever worked in food service before?”

“No, although I’ve helped Steve at the tattoo shop. I worked at an herb and tea shop about six months ago and then I had a seasonal job working at a garden center.”

“You’re drawn to natural things,” Mercedes said. “Cool.”

“I’m drawn to whatever pays the bills,” Paisley joked. “I also worked at an oil change

place. The job only lasted a couple of months. I discovered having synthetic oil permeate my skin wasn't good for my body, not to mention by the end of my workday I smelled like a tow truck with a major oil leak."

Mercedes laughed. "I'm sorry to hear none of your jobs worked out. Maybe feeding hungry festivalgoers will be a better fit."

"I hope so. Steve and I are kind of short on funds. A lot of the tattoo shop customers are like us, having trouble paying their bills. Tats are more of a luxury item, you know?"

"Either eat or look beautiful," Mercedes quipped. "Have you tried applying at places that offer full-time employment—something with benefits that also brings in a steady paycheck?"

"Yeah." Paisley pursed her lips. "I've had several phone interviews. They went off without a hitch, but then, when I show up for an in-person interview, I never get hired. I guess I don't fit their company image."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I dunno." Paisley patted her thin as a rail arm. "I'm a little on the skinny side, but stronger than I look. I even showed the guy at the curbside delivery place I could carry large boxes, but he never called me back."

"Do you think your tattoos could be a turnoff?" Mercedes blurted out.

"My tattoos?" She absentmindedly ran a light hand across the tattoo of flowers and the serpent dangling from her neck. "Tattoos are art and expression."

"They also make a statement...about a person."

“Yes, they do, which is why I love every single one of mine,” Paisley said.

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“But maybe not everyone would love them.” Mercedes softened her tone. “I’m not here to make you feel bad. In fact, I don’t think people should be judged on appearances alone. I’m just trying to help.”

“Thank you. And thanks again for offering to drive plus train me.”

“You’re welcome. I hope you love it.” Mercedes turned into the square and circled around to their assigned parking spot. It took a few tries—pulling forward, backing up. Pulling forward and cranking the wheel before they were lined up alongside the other food trucks.

“I could not have done what you just did in a bazillion years,” Paisley said.

“It takes a little practice.” Mercedes grabbed her purse, hopped out and headed to the back, where Paisley caught up with her. “We’re right on time. The vendors are ready to roll. Hopefully, we’ll have lots and lots of hungry music aficionados stopping by.”

“The busier, the better.”

“You’ll need one of these.” Mercedes handed Paisley an apron and started by explaining how to operate the iced coffee machine. Up next was showing her where the supplies were located. The last step was ringing up a sample sale on the cash register.

Training finished only moments before they opened the order window. Customers lined up, ordering dishes of thick lasagna, spaghetti and meatballs, cheesy manicotti and creamy chicken Alfredo.

Working together, the women plated, assembled and served meal after meal. For two hours straight, they worked nonstop, filling orders and ringing up sales.

Finally, there was a lull. Paisley slid onto an empty barstool and sipped her iced coffee. “The hours are flying by.”

“They are. Do you think this is something you would be interested in doing again?”

Paisley’s eyes lit. “Yes. The people are friendly. Some of them even tipped us, including the couple whose order I screwed up.”

“We all make mistakes.” Mercedes waved dismissively. “You’re a fast learner. I could barely keep up with you.”

The woman fiddled with her straw. “You’re just being nice.”

“I’m serious. You’re doing a great job.”

“I am?”

Mercedes nodded. “I’m sure Ma would be thrilled if you were interested in covering a few more shifts. The employee who was supposed to work today has the flu.”

“I would love to. Sign me up.” Paisley removed her cell phone from her pocket and tapped the screen. “Steve is checking in, asking how it’s going.”

“Make sure you tell him you’re doing a great job and have the Mercedes’ stamp of approval,” she joked.

“He’s geeked.” Paisley slid her phone back into her pocket. “Maybe I’ll make enough to keep the lights on. The electric company is threatening to shut our power off.”

Mercedes pressed her hand to her chest. “How awful.”

“We either eat or have heat. At least it’s only chilly at night. The biggest issue is we can’t run the tattoo shop without electricity.”

“How much do you owe?”

“We’re two months behind. We owe five hundred. Five hundred and twenty-two dollars to be exact,” Paisley said. “Autumn offered to loan us the money, but we refused. She doesn’t have a lot left over at the end of the month.”

“I can help.”

Paisley shook her head. “I didn’t mention it to make you feel sorry for me.”

“I know you didn’t.” Mercedes grabbed the tip jar and shook it. “You can have the tips. I also have a bunch of tips at home. My piggy bank is full. I want to loan it to you and Steve. There’s more than enough to catch you up on the electric bill.”

Paisley’s eyes filled with tears. “But you don’t know me.”

“I know Steve, and I can see how hard you’re working. I want to help.”

Paisley turned away and swiped at her eyes.

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Mercedes placed an arm around her shoulders. “It’s okay to accept help.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. It’s been a tough...rough stretch. I’ve been trying hard to find a job, but nobody wants me.”

“We want you. If you are serious, plan on working every day during the festival. Ravello’s has a great staff. We’re good people. I guarantee you’ll get along with everyone.”

“Thank you, Mercedes. I don’t know what to say,” she whispered.

“I’m glad you confided in me, so we can try to help. I’ll let Ma know right now.” Mercedes sent a quick text to her mother, letting her know Paisley was doing a great job and asking her to add the woman to the rest of the music festival’s work schedule.

Carlita’s response was fast. “Wonderful. Tell her welcome to the Garlucci family empire.”

Mercedes chuckled at her mother’s reply.

“What did she say?”

“She said welcome to the Garlucci family empire.”

“This is the best day I’ve had in a very long time. And you’re the best.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” Mercedes gave her a quick hug, noticing a group of

hungry customers heading their way. “It’s time to get back to business. Let’s work on racking up some more tips for you.”

Chapter 28

Carlita dusted her hands. “It’s safe to say we averted shutting down the food truck. I need to run a couple of errands before my shift starts.” She parted ways with Arnie in the alley, heading back to the pawn shop where she found both her sons inside.

She noticed Vinnie standing at the gun case, helping a customer. Curious to find out what he was saying, Carlita slipped in behind him.

“...so if you’re lookin’ for a gun with fast firing, this Glock 18 with a built-in compensator is the one for you. It comes with an extended 19 round magazine.”

The potential customer took the gun from Vinnie and aimed it toward the ground. “Do you have any idea what kind of speed this’ll give me?”

Vinnie leaned his elbow on the counter. “I’m gonna guess it can fire off twenty rounds per second.”

“That’s dope. How much is it?”

“Let me ask the manager.” Vinnie turned. He caught his mother’s eye and winked before strolling over to where Tony stood helping a man, who was perusing a stack of old comic books.

After a brief word, he returned. “The Glock 18 is three hundred bucks. Trust me, it’s a steal.”

“I’ll take it. Do you offer credit?”

To Carlita, the clean-cut customer couldn't have been more than nineteen. Of course, everyone looked much younger these days.

"Sorry, man." Vinnie shook his head. "We don't."

"I want the gun." The potential customer told him he would try to scrape together the cash and left.

Carlita folded her arms, watching Vinnie place the gun back inside the case. "I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"You could slide right into a job here at the pawn shop without batting an eye."

Vinnie laughed. "I already have a job."

"But maybe someday, when you're tired of dealing with thugs and mobsters."

"Ma."

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Carlita lifted her hands. "I'm just leaving it on the table."

"I appreciate it." Her son changed the subject. "Did you get your crisis over at the restaurant figured out?"

"Yeah. Mercedes and Steve's girlfriend Paisley are on the way over to the music festival with the food truck." Carlita mentioned how the couple needed money.

"Times are tough right now. I'm sorry to hear it."

"Me too."

Vinnie tossed the gun case keys in the air and caught them. "You ready to head back over to Morton Street to have a look around and try to track down the check cashing neighbor?"

"I am, unless you need to hang around here and help your brother."

"Nah. I figured I would give him a hand while I waited." Vinnie returned the keys to Tony and caught up with his mother near the back door.

Taking the same route, Carlita drove to the dilapidated and damaged building. Exiting the car, she cast a furtive glance toward the laundromat, certain June Cleary was lurking somewhere nearby, watching them.

Letting Vinnie take the lead, they stepped inside. It looked exactly the same as it had the other day. Depressing, sad, and beyond repair.

Carlita sucked in a breath.

“You okay Ma?”

“Yeah. I can’t help but wonder what your father was thinking.”

“In his defense, it didn’t look like this when he bought it.”

“I’m beginning to think the person who destroyed the building killed Enzo.”

“It stands to reason,” her son agreed.

“But why? Why destroy the building and kill a man who had just gotten into town?” she asked.

“That’s the million-dollar question.”

“Let’s take another look around.”

Splitting up, Vinnie started on the left while Carlita started on the right, poking through what was left of the building’s meager contents.

Finishing the search of the lower level, they climbed the stairs to the second floor. Careful to avoid the spot where they had found Enzo’s body, it didn’t take long to scope out the open area.

“I’m sure the cops went over this place with a fine-tooth comb,” Vinnie finally said.

“We’re spinning our wheels trying to figure this out.”

“We might as well go over to the check cashing place. Maybe we’ll get lucky and hit on something when we talk to the owner.”

Back on the main floor, Carlita strolled to the front door, nearly colliding with June Cleary, who was on her way in.

She stumbled back, clutching her chest. “You scared me half to death.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Taylor. I thought that was you.” The woman cast Vinnie a charming smile, coyly turning her head. “Hello again.”

“Hello, Mrs. Cleary.”

“June. Please call me June.”

“June,” Vinnie repeated.

“I noticed Detective Ellery was over here earlier.”

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“He wondered what we were doing,” Carlita said.

“Between you and me, he is a very rude man.”

“I don’t disagree,” she said. “My son and I are planning on chatting with some of the other owners on the street.”

“The liquor store doesn’t open until four. I’m sure Bernie Ziffra is at his check cashing place. He never misses a day of work. Of course, he has a pretty brisk business over there.”

Vinnie casually looked up and down the block. “I bet this would be a good area for people who need cash quickly.”

“It’s been busy since the day he opened his doors. In fact, I may have already mentioned he had considered buying this building before your husband purchased it.”

Carlita’s jaw dropped at what June Cleary said next.

Chapter 29

“Looking back, I’m sure Bernie wasn’t too happy when he found out Mr. Garlucci planned to open a loan and check cashing business, too.”

Carlita blinked rapidly. “What did you say?”

“I said your husband planned to loan money to people. Have you ever heard the term

shylock?" June didn't wait for an answer. "More than one person told me your husband was a shylock."

"I'm not sure who told you that. Rumors certainly know how to travel," Carlita answered evasively.

"Did you mention this to the investigators?" Vinnie asked.

"No. Should I have?"

"You don't think Mr. Ziffra would have a problem with my husband opening a business similar to what he was running?"

"I-I suppose when you put it like that, he might have. Are you thinking..." June's hand flew to her lips. "Are you suggesting Bernie might have been behind bombing the building and the shooting?"

"It would be an interesting twist," Carlita said. "He had both motive and opportunity."

"But why would Bernie kill Mr. Enzo?"

"I don't know. It's a question I would like to ask Mr. Enzo's associate, Mr. Costanza," Vinnie said. "If we could locate him."

The color drained from June's face. "The other gentleman is missing?"

Carlita patted her arm. "He's around. We've caught him on camera."

"That's a relief. I've always known Bernie could be a wildcard," June admitted. "Not that I'm a saint by any means."

Carlita's radar immediately went on high alert. "Why do you think Mr. Ziffra could be a wildcard?"

"Because of the time he spent in prison. Of course, he never told me about it. I found some records online. It's been years ago."

Vinnie cleared his throat. "Do you have any idea why he was in prison?"

"For racketeering." June frowned. "Please, if you talk to him, don't mention you heard this from me. I don't want my business firebombed or for me to end up getting shot at."

Carlita made a zipping motion across her lips. "We won't breathe a word. We'll pretend we never had this conversation," she promised.

"Thank you." June made small talk and left not long after.

Carlita wandered to the window and stared out at EZ Check Cashing. A sign in the window said, "Open."

She spun around. "There's no way he's going to confess. The cops already think they have their killer—me."

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“We need a plan, a way to prove it wasn’t you.” Vinnie rocked back on his heels, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “I’m thinkin’ it’s time to coerce a good old-fashioned confession, family-style. But before we do, we need a few more players in place. There’s also one other person we need to talk to.”

“Costanza,” Carlita guessed.

“Yep.”

“How you gonna find him?”

“I have an idea,” Vinnie said. “We might have to put off confession time until tomorrow.”

“Better to get this done the right way than to rush in and mess things up,” she said.

“Exactly. We need our ducks in a row before chatting with our new neighbor,” her son said.

“What’s the plan, boss?” Luigi dangled his arm out the open car window. “We gonna give Costanza a beat down?”

“Nah. He’s not who we’re after. Although I’m hoping we can find him and ask him a few questions. We need to hit a few of the hot spots where he might be hanging out. The Black Stallion for sure.”

“There’s another place, a bar.” Luigi rattled off the name. “It’s right down the street from the Black Stallion Club.”

Reaching the other side of town, Vinnie parked between both businesses. The club was to the right and the other bar was two buildings down on the left. Their first stop was the second hangout Luigi mentioned.

Entering the dimly lit bar, Luigi immediately approached a couple of regulars who were seated near the door. He greeted them by name. Within minutes, they discovered Costanza had made an appearance, but not the previous night. Vinnie handed the bartender, who was working until closing, a twenty and gave him his number, asking him to call if Costanza showed up.

Their next stop was the Black Stallion, where they discovered Costanza hadn’t been in for a couple of days. Another twenty-dollar bill changed hands, and soon Vinnie and Luigi were back on the sidewalk.

“Now what?”

“We wait. I’m hoping he’ll surface.” Vinnie unlocked the car. The men climbed inside, watching as patrons entered and exited. Ten minutes passed. Twenty. Half an hour.

Luigi glanced at his watch. “How much longer do you want to wait?”

“Let’s take a spin around town.” Vinnie pulled out of the parking lot and drove along the river. With a few turns, they reached Morton Street. Cruising past Ziffra’s check cashing place, they found it was dark except for a lone light beaming down from above the entrance door. The laundromat was the exact opposite and lit up like a Christmas tree, with bright lights illuminating the interior.

They slowly drove past and noticed someone inside doing laundry.

“I don’t think I would pick this hour to do my laundry,” Luigi said.

“Not unless you were packing heat,” Vinnie said. “Then it might be an entertaining night out.”

Luigi laughed. “Like back in the old days.”

Vinnie shot his former bodyguard a side glance. “I know I’ve asked you this before, but do you ever miss it?”

“The family?”

He nodded.

“Once in a while. Not the job, but the people. Like you,” Luigi said. “Thanks to your mother, I have a sweet life. A good job, a nice place to hang my hat, a girlfriend. I never thought I would say this, but I’m glad I made it out of the family alive.”

Luigi nudged Vinnie. “What about you? Any chance you’ll ever get out?”

“I always considered myself a forever family man, but as little Vin grows, I’m reconsidering.”

“Carlita would love to have you here.”

“I know she would.” Vinnie admitted he was getting some pressure from Brittney, who wanted another baby, but not until they were away from their current lifestyle. “I got a lot to think about.”

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“The good news is you have options. Looking back, I would do it all over again in a heartbeat,” Luigi said. “I got a family down here. Your family.”

“Ma considers you one of her own.”

“She’s got some chutzpah,” Luigi joked.

“Yes, she does. I’m proud of all Ma has accomplished.” Vinnie’s phone chimed. A call was coming in. “It’s Phil Duce.” He pressed the answer button. “Hey, Phil. What’s up?”

“He’s here. He just walked in.”

“We’re on our way.” Vinnie ended the call and waved his phone in the air. “Costanza just showed up.”

Following Luigi’s directions, they took a shortcut through the center of town, arriving at the club moments later.

Vinnie sprang from the car and led the way inside.

Phil, who was behind the bar, caught his eye and motioned toward the pool tables on the opposite wall.

Vinnie zeroed in on the man his mother had described. Luigi circled around, heading at him from the opposite direction in case he tried to make a run for it.

Vinnie strode across the room. “Costanza?”

Costanza’s head shot up. His eyes narrowed. “Who’s asking?”

“Vinnie Garlucci.”

Costanza spun around, ready to bolt.

Luigi was right behind him and blocked his exit.

“What’s going on?”

Vinnie placed a light hand on his arm. “We want to step outside for a chat.”

“I don’t...”

Luigi cut him off. “And I don’t think it’s in your best interest not to go.”

Costanza reluctantly let Vinnie and Luigi escort him out of the club.

Turning left, they walked several steps away from the entrance, far enough to have a private conversation.

Costanza jerked his arm free. “What do you want?” he growled.

“We want to know what happened to Enzo.”

“What does it matter to you?”

“Because the police are breathing down my mother’s neck,” Vinnie said. “We both know she didn’t kill your associate.”

“We want to make sure the person responsible is caught,” Luigi added.

“Lombardo is about to bring the hammer down on him,” Costanza said.

“And then what? We know you’re talking about Bernie Ziffra, the owner of EZ Check Cashing. You take him out and my mother becomes a suspect in Enzo’s and Bernie Ziffra’s deaths,” Vinnie said. “What happened?”

“He confronted me and Enzo at the property, talking smack and threatening us. We told him he would be sorry and figured we had scared him off. Right after he left, I went to the store to grab some supplies.”

“Supplies?” Luigi interrupted.

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Costanza's eyes slid to the side. "Stuff."

Vinnie took a menacing step closer. "What kind of stuff?" And then it dawned on him. "You were going to finish blowing the place up."

The look on his face answered Vinnie's question. "Lombardo had it heavily insured as a beneficiary."

"So he was gonna finish taking it down and collect on the insurance." Vinnie gritted his teeth. "Technically, my mother still owns this property."

Costanza shrugged. "Hey, I'm not inside Lombardo's head. I had a job to do, and I was gonna do it."

"So you left to go buy explosives. When you came back, Enzo was dead."

"And that little weasel, Ziffra, killed him. I would bet my life on it."

"When are you taking Ziffra and his property out?" Vinnie asked.

"It's none of your business," Costanza said.

Vinnie, his eyes filled with rage, grabbed hold of the man's shirt so tightly he started choking. "You listen to me. This message is for you and Lombardo. This is Castellini family territory. You don't make another move. Do you hear me? Because if you do, you're going to join your buddy Enzo. Capisce?"

“Castellini?” Costanza gasped. “Who is a Castellini?”

“Me.” Vinnie loosened his grip.

Costanza made a choking sound. “You can let me go. I’m not gonna do anything. Why didn’t you tell me you were part of the Castellini family?”

“To repeat what you said—it’s none of your business.” Vinnie’s eyes narrowed. “You can take this back to Lombardo and whoever else is involved. We’ll handle Bernie Ziffra.”

“When?” Costanza nervously wiped his brow. “I need more information.”

“Tomorrow. You can tell them it’ll be taken care of tomorrow.”

Chapter 30

“Here’s the plan.” Carlita pressed her hand to her forehead. “I go over to Ziffra’s place and lure him to the Morton Street property.”

“And we’ll take care of the rest,” Tony added.

“Do you know for sure if he’s working? Never mind.” Mercedes waved dismissively. “I can call and find out.”

Vinnie glanced at his watch. “He should be opening for business.”

Using her cell phone, Mercedes tracked down the website and clicked on the telephone number. It rang several times. She was getting ready to hang up when someone finally answered.

“EZ Check Cashing. Barnie speaking.”

“I-I’m sorry. I must have the wrong number.” Mercedes ended the call and waved her phone in the air. “He’s there. He answered.”

“Let’s get this show on the road.”

Carlita drove separately while Tony, Vinnie and Luigi followed behind in Tony’s car. Reaching Morton Street, they parted ways when her son turned into the alley directly behind the building.

Quickly climbing out of the car, Carlita darted inside. Less than a minute later, her sons and Luigi stepped inside via the back alley entrance, not visible to the buildings on the opposite side of the street.

“You ready for this, Ma?” Vinnie asked.

“Yeah.” Carlita sucked in a breath. “I have everything we talked about down pat. No worries. I’ll get him over here as soon as I can.”

“And we’ll be waiting,” Luigi promised. “Don’t worry, Mrs. T. After today, Lombardo will be off your back and Costanza’s killer will be behind bars.”

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Despite the nagging feeling something was going to go terribly wrong, Carlita mustered up a brave face. “I’m counting on it.”

“We’ll be right here watching it go down,” Vinnie said. “Stay near the front window so we can keep an eye on you.”

“Will do.” Carlita gave them a snappy salute and hurried out of the building. With a quick check for traffic, she crossed the street and entered Bernie Ziffra’s business.

Light filtered in through the grimy windows. The smell of stale cigarettes lingered in the air. Near the front window was a set of brown plastic chairs. In between was a small coffee table with an array of magazines spread out across the top. A large cactus plant sat next to them.

No more than ten steps ahead was a long, low laminate counter. Behind it stood a man, in his sixties, if Carlita had to guess. Bald on top with long sideburns and a moustache.

He wasn’t tall, wasn’t short, but was what she would consider average. Slightly overweight with a paunchy gut, the material of his plaid short-sleeve, button-down shirt stretched taut to cover his bulge.

From where she stood, Carlita noticed a gold loop earring dangling from his left ear.

“Hello. Welcome to EZ Check Cashing.”

“Hello.”

“How can I help you today?”

“I’m looking for Barnie Ziffra.”

“And you are?”

“Carlita Garlucci-Taylor.”

A flicker of something, not necessarily fear. Maybe it was surprise, flitted across his face. “I’m Barnie Ziffra.”

“My deceased husband, Vincent Garlucci, owned the property across the street. He died several years ago, and I recently found out about it. While I was doing some research, I discovered your business and remembered your name. Vinnie had mentioned it to me,” she fibbed.

“I don’t remember your husband.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. No clue,” Ziffra said.

“Interesting.” She tightened her grip on her purse. “I met with a Mr. Enzo and Mr. Costanza about the property. Do either of those names ring a bell?”

“The cops were here asking about them. One of the guys was found dead in your building.” Ziffra’s eyes narrowed. “You working with the police?”

“No, and for you, it’s a good thing,” Carlita said. “Do you have a minute? I would like to show you something.”

“Show me what?”

“It’s over at my property.”

“I’m not going over there.” Ziffra began shaking his head.

“I think you should,” Carlita said. “I have proof you killed Mr. Enzo.”

She watched the color drain from his face. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” She arched a brow. “As I said, I’ve done my research. You run a very successful business.”

“A business that took me a long time to build.”

“I’m sure it did. It would be a shame for you to end up behind bars and lose it all.” Carlita was expecting, was anticipating Ziffra coming after her.

“What the...” Ziffra growled.

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Carlita spun around and ran out of the building. Move, move, move. She resisted the urge to look back. Instead, she jogged across the street, praying the man was following her.

Moving at a rapid pace, she stepped into her building.

Ziffra, a look of pure fury etched on his face, and breathing heavily, appeared. She lingered long enough to make sure he saw her and slipped around the corner.

“You have no proof I killed Enzo.”

“Costanza, who is in hiding for reasons of his own, claims otherwise,” Carlita said. “We have proof.”

“Show me,” he demanded. “Stop with the games. Otherwise, I’m going to call the police myself.”

Carlita stepped back into view. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glint and a slight movement. “Let’s go back to the beginning when my husband, Vinnie, purchased this property. You came over here to find out what was going on. Vinnie told you he planned to open a business and loan money himself, which would put you in direct competition, maybe even put you out of business.”

She continued. “You did some digging around and discovered he planned to do just that. You firebombed this place to stop him. Unfortunately, Vinnie died before he could prove it was you.”

“You presented a nice fairytale lady,” Ziffra smirked. “Try selling it to someone else.”

Carlita ignored him. “Fast forward to a few days ago. Mr. Enzo and Mr. Costanza show up. Again, you’re protecting your investment, so you come over here to see what’s up. You get in their faces, argue. Costanza and Enzo even mention they might follow through with Vinnie’s plan to open a legit business. You finally leave. Costanza takes off to run an errand. You come back here, argue with Enzo a second time and then shoot him. For good measure, you break a few of his bones.”

“Prove it,” Ziffra taunted. “You got nothing on me, lady. You’re grasping at straws.”

Vinnie stepped out of the shadows, gun in hand, and pointed it directly at Ziffra. “Is she? Maybe it’s time for a confession.”

Ziffra made a choking sound and stumbled back.

“This is my son, Vinnie,” Carlita said. “He’s here to help convince you to tell the truth.”

“You can’t shoot me.” Ziffra nervously cleared his throat. “Two bodies in the same building in one week? The cops are gonna throw you in jail.”

“You’re right. Maybe we don’t want to shoot you. We have other ways to make you talk.”

In the blink of an eye, Luigi came out of nowhere. He lunged at Ziffra and shoved him to the ground. “Got it.” He grabbed the man’s gun and slid it across the floor. Not releasing his grip, he finished frisking him. “He’s clean.”

Tony appeared. In a single swift move, he grabbed hold of Ziffra’s arm and yanked

him to his feet.

“How many people you got ganging up on me?” he huffed.

“Two of my sons and a former mobster,” Carlita said.

“Who thoroughly enjoys coercing confessions from the guilty party.” Luigi began cracking his knuckles.

Carlita thought for a second Ziffra was going to pass out. Instead, he stood his ground, summoning up his best poker face. “I have nothing to hide and nothing to say.”

“Meaning you have no idea how this building got firebombed?” Carlita arched a brow. “You’re lying.”

Luigi punched him in the gut.

“Oof.” He doubled over, the wind knocked out of him from the force of the blow.

Carlita winced when Luigi landed the second blow.

“Okay. Okay,” he gasped. “I might’ve tossed a couple of explosives into the building. It was a dump before your husband ever bought the place. It wasn’t much of a downgrade.”

“What about Enzo? Did you kill Enzo?” Vinnie demanded.

“No. I...”

Luigi doubled up his fist, preparing for a third powerful blow, this one to Ziffra’s

face.

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“Hang on. The man was a weasel. I did you a favor. Tell you what. I’ll give you a nice tidy chunk of cash and we’ll pretend this never happened.”

“Meanwhile, I’m on the hook for Enzo’s death,” Carlita said. “I don’t think so.”

“Then, I’ll deny it,” Ziffra said.

Luigi pulled back his fist.

Carlita stopped him. “Don’t bother. We’re going to turn Mr. Ziffra over to the authorities. All four of us heard him confess. It’s the best we can do.”

“You’re wrong.” June Cleary’s voice echoed from the doorway. “I heard the entire thing. I have video surveillance showing Barnie coming into this building around the time Mr. Enzo was murdered.”

“June, shut your mouth!” Barnie roared.

“You’ve been the bully on the block for far too long. And now to find out you’re a murderer. Shame on you Barnie Ziffra,” she scolded. “Your mother must be turning over in her grave.”

“Y-you have proof Barnie was in this building?” Carlita stammered.

“I sure do. Barnie begged me not to show it to the cops. He said he was afraid because of his past record that they would throw him in the slammer. I’m all for second chances. I guess I didn’t want to believe he was capable of murdering another

person.”

“Thank you, June,” Carlita said sincerely. “Between all of us hearing him confess and your video surveillance, I’m hoping the authorities will be able to wrap this up pretty quickly.”

“I like you, Carlita Garlucci-Taylor. You remind me of myself, filled with spunk and determination.” June gave Vinnie googly eyes. “And that handsome son of yours? I would hate to see his mother go to prison for a crime she didn’t commit.”

Tony eased in next to his mother.

June’s eyes lit. “Another one? Oh, my stars. Two hotties from the same family. This must be my lucky day.”

“And because of you, it’s my lucky day too,” Carlita said.

Chapter 31

“What’s taking her so long?” Carlita started to pace.

“Maybe Elvira’s person didn’t show up,” Mercedes guessed.

Arvid Poindexter tapped the top of his phone. “What was the archaeologist’s name?”

“Randi Colbane, I believe.”

His head shot up. “Randi Colbane? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. You know her?” Carlita asked.

“I know of her. She’s famous and nearly impossible to track down.”

“Not for Elvira,” Tony said. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

The faint echo of voices caught Carlita’s ear. “I hear someone talking. It must be them.”

The voices grew louder. Elvira appeared, along with a woman, tall and thin with short blond hair. “Sorry to keep you waiting. I ran into a minor snafu, a misunderstanding.”

“We were getting ready to proceed without you,” Pete said.

Elvira immediately zeroed in on Arvid Poindexter, Pete’s historian / archaeologist. “Who is he?”

Pete introduced them. “Mr. Poindexter has been helping us figure out what we have.”

“But I already found someone.” Elvira stomped her foot. “I spent all this time getting the best in the biz. Meanwhile, you sneak around behind my back and hire someone else.”

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“I didn’t sneak behind your back,” Pete said. “No promises were made. You found an expert. I found an expert. Together, we’ll figure out what went on behind this wall.”

“I already have a good idea,” Poindexter said. “Although, to avoid any confusion, this isn’t Randi Colbane.”

“I couldn’t get her after all,” Elvira grumbled. “But I got second best. Please meet Janet Gigowski.”

“It’s nice to see you again.” Janet shook Arvid Poindexter’s hand.

“Same here. I welcome your expert opinion,” he said.

“Ditto.”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Elvira clapped her hands. “Can we skip the kissy face and get to work?”

“Elvira Cobb.” Carlita wagged her finger. “You’re the one who’s late. Being rude is uncalled for.”

“It’s okay.” The woman waved dismissively. “I’ve dealt with Elvira before. I’m accustomed to her tantrums.”

“Tantrums?” Elvira scowled. “I’m not having a tantrum. Time is money. I’m all business.”

“And all annoying,” Carlita whispered under her breath.

Dernice, who was standing next to her, snickered.

“What did you say?”

“Never mind.” Carlita and Pete led the colleagues to the opening and waited in the tunnel while they got to work.

Using the spotlight, they carefully examined the markings in the dirt. Next, they examined all four walls and the ceiling.

Elvira alternated between pacing and watching. Pacing and watching. The minutes ticked by and her face turned a deep shade of red.

Carlita stopped her. “Are you all right? Your face is red.”

“I’m fine. Just a little nervous. This is a big deal.”

“Yes, it is. Regardless, you have other future endeavors on the table,” Carlita reminded her.

“Alaska.” Elvira brightened. “I forgot to tell you. It’s a done deal.”

“You’re heading to Alaska?”

“Yep. I’m joining a gold mining crew in Whittier to learn everything I can about it.”

“Good for you. When?”

“I’m still working on a timeline,” Elvira said. “Sometime this summer. I’m also

trying to coordinate booking a cruise to see Sharky.”

“I’m sure he’s thrilled.”

“He doesn’t know. It will be a surprise.” Elvira smiled widely. “He’ll be geeked.”

“Are you...sure you don’t want to let him know you’ll be coming?”

“Nah.” She waved dismissively. “It’ll be fine.”

“If you say so.” Carlita didn’t know Sharky well, only well enough to suspect he might not be thrilled at having his girlfriend show up unannounced and unexpectedly. Still, it was her call.

Elvira scooted past the onlookers and leaned into the opening. “How’s it going?”

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Gigowski and Poindexter stood huddled in the corner, their heads close together. “We should have something soon.”

The minutes continued to drag by. Carlita could see Elvira becoming increasingly agitated.

Finally, they finished talking and returned to where the others stood waiting. The woman held up what appeared to be a piece of driftwood. “This, ladies and gentlemen, is a piece of history.”

“Is it worth any money?”

Carlita elbowed Elvira, shooting her a warning look. “Go on.”

“We both believe with 99% certainty this was once part of a pirate boat, dating back to possibly the 1700s.”

“Sweet,” Elvira squealed. “Let’s start digging.”

“Not so fast,” Poindexter cautioned. “The markings in the dirt are consistent with a smaller vessel, a jolly boat used to ferry pirates from the ship to shore. Although surface excavation could reveal some important artifacts.”

“Valuable artifacts like gems and jewels?”

“Of course. Any deeper excavation would require special equipment to be brought in considering the location of the potential dig site,” Janet Gigowski added.

“We’ll figure it out.” Elvira waved dismissively. “But for now, we can sift through the surface soil.”

“Yes.” Arvid Poindexter nodded. “I will ask, however, considering the potential treasure trove you might have, that you allow a qualified team to work with you.”

“But whatever is found belongs to me,” Pete said.

“To us,” Elvira quickly corrected.

“To us.”

“Yes.”

“I think...”

Elvira grabbed Pete’s arm and pulled him off to the side.

Carlita could only imagine what she was saying. Pete nodded a couple of times. He shook his head. The conversation ended, and they joined the others.

“We agree to allow a team to work alongside us. Access is by appointment only and we’ll be present at all times.”

“We don’t want excavators to get sticky fingers and pocket something not belonging to them,” Elvira added.

“As you wish.”

There was some discussion about a timeline, mainly Elvira pushing to get a move on, with the experts suggesting a little more caution.

Finally, a tentative start date was reached. Poindexter and Gigowski packed up their equipment and left.

As soon as they were gone, Elvira let out a loud whoop and began shimmying around in a circle. “We’re gonna be rich, rich, rich. We’re gonna be rich,” she sang.

“We haven’t found anything yet,” Pete cautioned. “I wouldn’t break out the bubbly just yet.”

“It’s only a matter of time. I can feel it in my bones.”

Tony made a timeout with his hands. “Now that we have the preliminary results in hand, it’s time to chat about Morton Street and Bernie Ziffra’s arrest.”

“First of all, I want to thank my son for dropping everything and coming down here to help.” Carlita hugged him. “Maybe someday soon Brittney and little Vin can come for a visit.”

“A visit not revolving around a family crisis,” Vinnie teased.

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“Absolutely.” Carlita rolled her eyes.

“Lombardo knows we weren’t responsible for Enzo’s death and Bernie Ziffra is behind bars for killing him,” Tony said.

“I bet he regrets inheriting Pops’ old debt, a debt he acquired from a shylock Pops did business with,” Mercedes said. “He sent Enzo and Costanza here to check it out. They took one look at the place and reported back. Lombardo realized there was no way he could get his money out of it, decided to blow it up and collect on the insurance.”

“What was left of it,” Tony corrected. “Meanwhile, he sent those two on a hunt to locate Ma.”

“He found out about our pawn shop, the restaurant, the rental units and figured he would collect,” Carlita said. “Not only collect on it, but also shake us down. I believe he intended to force us to pay for their services. As in, not blow up our buildings in exchange for a tidy amount of cash every month.”

“Until he found out he was messing with the Castellini family and backed off,” Pete said. “We still have to consider the fact he and Ozzie Stagusso may have formed some sort of partnership.”

“Which means someone else might start snooping around, on the hunt for the Marshland Isles Diamond.” Mercedes tapped Vinnie’s shoulder. “Do you think this is cause for concern?”

“Stagusso is definitely working with Lombardo. The fact Pops named his business Marshland Investment Group gives credence to the idea. Stagusso is telling anyone who will listen the gems are at Ma’s properties.”

“You won’t hear from Lombardo again,” Vinnie promised. “I tracked him down and paid him a visit last night. We had a productive chat. He understands now he would be stepping on the wrong toes if he decided to pursue his protection agreement and enforce Pops’ contract. He sends you his regrets and apologies.”

Carlita stared at Vinnie. “What did you do to him?”

“It’s not what I did, but what I promised would happen, courtesy of the Castellini family.”

“I’m still a little fuzzy about why Enzo ended up dead,” Dernice said. “Why did Ziffra kill him?”

“Enzo and Costanza went over to the property to scope the place out. Bernie Ziffra showed up, started throwing his weight around, and demanded to know what they were doing. They told him they owned the place and were planning to clean it up and set up shop.”

“Which wasn’t true,” Carlita interrupted. “Lombardo wanted me to take the dump off his hands. His backup plan, or maybe it was elevated to Plan A, was to take it all the way down. I’m still trying to figure out why Costanza and Enzo would tell Ziffra a different story.”

“You gotta get into their head.” Vinnie tapped the side of his forehead. “These guys were messing with Ziffra, especially if he was trying to throw his weight around and act all tough.”

“Which, based on what we know from you meeting him, was exactly what he did,” Mercedes said. “Barnie Ziffra thought he was a top dog in the neighborhood.”

Vinnie picked up. “Finally, we get to the truth when Tony, Luigi and I coerced a confession out of him family-style.”

“I barely touched the crybaby, and he started singing like a canary.” Luigi grinned. “He told us exactly how it went down.”

“After June Cleary showed up, claiming to have proof Ziffra was in the building around the time of Enzo’s death,” Carlita said. “He saw Costanza and Enzo going into the building a second time and decided to confront them. He returned to his place but kept watching and noticed Costanza took off, leaving Enzo alone. Barnie came back. Enzo told him to beat it. They argued. Barnie pulled out a gun and shot him.”

“And broke a few bones in the process,” Vinnie added.

“I’m sure Enzo was armed,” Pete said. “Interesting how this guy got the upper hand and took out a mobster.”

“Barnie wasn’t squeaky clean. He spent some time in federal prison for racketeering,” Sam said. “After being released from prison, he bought the place across from yours and set up shop.”

“Which corroborates with what June Cleary told Vinnie and me. My Vinnie came along,” Carlita said. “Using the money he borrowed from the original shylock, he beat him to it. When Ziffra found out Vinnie planned to set up his own ‘loan’ shop ala mafia style, he decided to stop him. I’m sure Vinnie suspected it was him, but he died before he could prove it.”

“Fast forward a few years. Barnie Ziffra developed a bad taste about Vinnie and the

property. When Enzo and Costanza showed up, he was itching for a fight,” Tony said.

“He’s lucky he’s in jail,” Vinnie said. “Costanza was on the down-low, getting ready to do the same thing to Ziffra’s place. Danny Lombardo wasn’t playing. In fact, I’m not sure he’ll be safe in prison. He’s still going to pay for killing Enzo. About the property...”

Carlita held up her hand. “I signed for the place unbeknownst to me. I’m willing to pay Lombardo off.”

“You won’t have to.” A slow smile spread across Vinnie’s face. “Lombardo is going to keep it.”

“It’s a dump,” Tony said bluntly. “And an expensive one, to boot.”

“I suspected all along there was something fishy about the price. When I asked Lombardo about it, he admitted he fudged the numbers.”

Carlita’s eyes grew round as saucers. “You mean your father didn’t pay two hundred and fifty for the Morton Street property?”

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“Nope. Lombardo added another hundred to the contract he gave you as proof.” Vinnie made quotes with his fingers. “For his trouble. Again, he’s seen the error of his ways and has decided not to pursue collecting the original amount. All you need to do is sign off, giving him the property.” Her son told her Lombardo promised to have the paperwork over by the end of the day.

“Way to go, Vinnie.” Tony slugged his brother in the arm.

“For a minute there, I thought Dernice’s buddy, June, might’ve been a suspect,” Luigi said. “She flew under the radar until you found out she had a record.”

“For check fraud.” Dernice waved dismissively. “Hey, no one is perfect. She did the crime and paid the time. I like her.”

“Speaking of June Cleary, I need to do something nice for her. If not for June, we might never have been able to prove Bernie Ziffra killed Enzo.”

“By turning over the surveillance videos to the authorities, proving Ziffra was inside the property around the time of Enzo’s death. I know what she would like,” Dernice said. “Another ride on my motorcycle.”

“It sounds like the perfect thank you,” Carlita said.

“I’m looking forward to it. Besides, it needs to be ridden. I’ve been thinking about June and the look on her face when she sat on it. She got so excited. In fact, I’m going to invite her to cruise along the coastline, maybe take a spin around Tybee Island.”

“You’re a good woman, Dernice.” Her sister patted her shoulder. “Hopefully, when we get to her age, someone will come along and add a little excitement to our lives.”

Elvira turned to Carlita. “But for now, the Garlucci family adds more than enough.”

The end.