

PENNE DREADFUL

AN ITALIAN CHEF MYSTERY

CATHERINE
BRUNS



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For Frank

Thank you for believing in me



ONE

THE RICH AROMA FROM THE MIXTURE of tomatoes and onions cooking wafted through the air, hitting my nose with a distinct perfume. It was a soothing smell that blanketed me in its warm hold. If alone, I would have been content to stand in front of my stove all day.

I stirred the sauce and listened as my cousin Gino Mancusi flipped through the sports section of the newspaper at my breakfast counter and grumbled about his beloved Giants losing again.

“The season is pretty much over. I actually thought they might get another ring this time.” He sighed and pushed the paper aside. “You shouldn’t have gone to any trouble, Tessa. A sandwich would have been fine.”

“It’s never any trouble.” I enjoyed watching others sample my creations and had vowed years ago that no one

would ever leave my home hungry. Part of this obsession came from my love of cooking, but I attributed the rest to my Italian heritage. Italians are passionate about almost everything in the world, and food is at the top of the list.

"It's rare for you to go out for lunch," I said. Gino was a police detective in our hometown of Harvest Park. "Did Lucy tell you to come over and check up on me? Is it your day? Oh wait, let me grab the calendar."

"Stop being a smart aleck." He left the counter and came into the kitchen to grab ice cubes out of the freezer for his soda. On his way back, he stopped and planted an affectionate kiss on the top of my head. "That's what family is for, Tess. We're all worried about you."

I squeezed his arm and turned off the burner. "Grab the parmesan cheese out of the fridge, will you? I grated it this morning."

Gino nodded without another word. I appreciated all that he and the rest of the family were doing, but I was determined not to start crying again today.

It was still difficult to talk about my husband's death, even with loved ones. I'd spent the last five weeks in a trance—or perhaps shock was a better term. Thanks to my mother, cousins, and my friend Justin, I had finally started

to come around. Whenever I thought I'd fully recovered though, a kind word or a nice gesture from anyone would make me dissolve into a puddle of tears again.

Last night, my elderly neighbor Stacia from across the street had brought me a fresh baked apple pie. "I know how much you love them, dear." She'd beamed at me from underneath a mass of pink foam hair curlers. Apple pie—anything apple, actually—had been Dylan's favorite, but I didn't have the heart to tell her so. Instead, I'd cried after she left and then devoured a huge slice.

Gino placed the cheese on the breakfast counter. He had classic Italian good looks complemented by dark hair, an olive complexion, and brown eyes that could either be sympathetic or suspicious. I suspected that the latter one was a cop thing.

"Right here at the bar is fine, Tess," he said. "Don't bother setting the table. I have to get back to work in a little while anyway."

"Okay, it's all ready." I ladled the ruby-red sauce onto his plate of penne, inhaling the rich savory smell. It was a little bit like summer, with the sweet fragrance of vine-ripe tomatoes complemented by the minty smell of fresh basil from my garden.

"It smells great," Gino said as he sat down. "Then again, I've never eaten anything of yours that wasn't top-notch. You need to give Lucy some pointers."

"Lucy's a good cook. She's too busy taking care of those devilish twins of yours to do much else. I've got a little bit of extra sauce if you want to take some home to her."

Gino's eyes widened as he swallowed a bite of pasta. "*A little?* Come on, Tess. I saw your extra sauce." He wiped his mouth on a starched white linen napkin. "When I opened the freezer, there were at least twenty ziplock bags in there. Maybe you're a bit obsessed with making sauce, huh?"

Like the rest of my family, Gino's focus was strictly on how the food tasted. For me, there was more to it. I loved the aromas, the spices, the way preparing food made me feel—relaxed, confident, and in control. I'd been cooking for twenty years, since the tender age of ten. My grandmother, a fabulous cook herself, and I had shared a special bond. Whenever we went to her house, I'd head straight to the kitchen to watch her make dinner, and we'd chat the afternoon away. My love of cooking came from her. On my thirteenth birthday, she gave me a special present—her secret tomato sauce recipe. She passed away when I was sixteen, and I took the recipe and made it my own over the

years, with the help of a few special ingredients. Although I could make just about anything, tomato sauce was my passion and specialty, always bringing to mind wonderful memories of our time together.

“No, I’m not obsessed.” There was silence in the room, except for the clink of Gino’s fork hitting the china plate. He didn’t understand. No one did. My love of cooking also helped soothe the grief of losing my husband, at least temporarily. Dylan had passed away a little over a month ago in a tragic car accident that would probably give me nightmares for the rest of my life.

This wasn’t supposed to happen to us. We’d been young, in love, and trying to have a baby. Dylan and I were married for almost six wonderful years. Although by no means rich, we’d lived comfortably enough. Dylan had been employed as an accountant for a large healthcare firm, We Care, in Albany. As a certified CPA, he’d prepared taxes privately for several clients outside the firm as well. To add to our modest income, a couple of months before Dylan’s death, I’d begun working as a cook for the Sunnyside Up Café. Back then, my main goal in life—besides starting a family—had been to run my own restaurant someday.

Dylan had been extremely supportive of my passion.

He'd always teased that he couldn't wait to quit his job and call me "boss," serving as my *maître d'*. Kidding aside, I knew he'd been as excited about the venture as I was. Still, we didn't have anywhere near the funds necessary to make it happen. Since we'd bought the house only two years ago, we'd been trying to put money away every month, but there were times when real life intervened. A new roof and hot water tank had helped derail the savings process for a few months. We remained hopeful that it would happen within the next couple of years.

Five weeks ago, my dream had been replaced by a nightmare. My new goal in life was to simply make it through a day without crying, and my restaurant ownership dreams had been put aside indefinitely.

After the accident, I'd asked my mother to call Sunnyside and tell them I wouldn't be returning. I'd only been there for a few months, and it wasn't fair to leave them hanging, although they'd been very supportive of my situation.

Even selling the house had crossed my mind a few times in the last couple of weeks. The first time the real estate agent showed us the light-blue Cape Cod, Dylan and I both instantly fell in love with its charm. Although

only about fourteen hundred square feet, it was perfect for us, with its large bay window, hardwood floors, and steepled roof.

Now, however, it was difficult to stay here alone. There were memories of Dylan everywhere I looked, such as the empty window boxes built into the white shutters where we'd planted annuals together every spring. I missed so many things about him—his deep-throated chuckle, the way he held me in his strong arms on lazy Sunday mornings in bed, and the long walks we'd take, hand in hand, after dinner on picturesque autumn days, much like this one. Early November in Harvest Park, although chilly, was the perfect time of year to watch multicolored leaves fall from the trees.

The house was an ideal home for a young married couple and even had the classic white picket fence in the backyard. The only things missing were the standard two-point-five kids and dog, which I'd mistakenly thought we had plenty of time for.

Luigi squawked from the floor and stared up at me expectantly. A spoiled tuxedo kitty, he was looking for his share of lunch too. I cut up a small piece of sausage and set it on a paper plate in front of him.

"That cat eats better than most people do," Gino commented. He took another bite of the pasta and groaned with pleasure. "Amazing as always."

This was the therapy I needed. "Thanks."

He watched me closely as I stood on the other side of the counter. "Aren't you going to eat?"

I shrugged and fiddled with the newspaper. "I'm not hungry."

"Tess." His voice was gentle. "Maybe it's time you went back to work. I'm sure you could get another job as a cook easily enough."

I stared down at my hands. "I don't know. I guess I'm afraid that I might break down in front of someone." My voice trembled. No, I wasn't going to do this now. I could—and would—make it through one day without bursting into tears. Dylan wouldn't have wanted me to carry on like this.

Gino rose from his chair and walked around the counter. He took my hand and led me into the combination living and dining room. "Come on. I need to talk to you about something."

I dropped onto the navy love seat, and Luigi jumped in my lap, curling into a ball on my knees. Gino sat across from me in the matching armchair, a line creasing his

broad forehead. "You're probably going to hate me for telling you this."

"What? The sauce was too spicy?" I joked.

He didn't laugh. "I should have told you sooner, but you've been so upset, I was afraid it might send you over the edge."

Now he had my full attention. My stomach twisted at his words. "What's wrong? Is someone in the family sick? Lucy or one of the twins?" I didn't think I could handle any more bad news.

Gino shook his head. "It's nothing like that." He exhaled a deep breath. "It's about Dylan."

"What about him?" I asked sharply. "Just say it."

He reached forward to cover my hand with his. "We have reason to believe that Dylan's death wasn't an accident."

My body went rigid. There was no sound in the room except for my heavy breathing and Luigi's purring as he snuggled against me. "Are you saying that someone intentionally killed my husband?"

Gino's mouth formed a thin, hard line. "It looks that way. We believe that somebody tampered with his vehicle."

Anger quickly replaced shock. "You said before that it was a car malfunction. How long have you known about this?"

“A few weeks.”

“Meaning since his death.” I hated Gino in that moment. For God’s sake, he was family. If you couldn’t depend on your own family to tell you the truth, who could you trust? “So why am I only hearing about this now?”

“Look, Tess,” he said quietly. “It’s an ongoing investigation. We don’t have all the details, and nothing has been released to the public yet.”

Startled, I rose to my feet, forcing Luigi to jump down and scamper out of the room. “Who cares about the public? I’m his wife and you’re my cousin! How could you keep this from me?”

Gino’s face flushed, and he put a hand on my arm. “You were so out of it those first couple of weeks. I was afraid if I told you, then maybe you’d do something crazy, like—”

“Like what? Take my own life? Join my husband in the hereafter?” I shook his hand off and moved to stand in front of the bay window, looking out at my lawn covered with its gold and orange leaves. “Please leave.”

But Gino didn’t leave. Instead, he came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. As a result, I crumpled. My shoulders started to sag, and the tears I was holding back finally broke free. So much for my new determination.

He held me in his arms while I cried. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't at liberty to tell you anything at first, and then as time wore on, I was afraid. That's the real reason I came over. Gabby said you seemed almost like your old self yesterday. She mentioned that you stopped by her store last night for the first time since Dylan died."

I straightened up and wiped my eyes. "I brought cookies for her club." Gabby was Gino's younger sister and owned a small bookstore, *Once Upon a Book*, that was three streets over from where I lived in the center of town. She was my dearest friend, the sister I'd never had.

"Like I said, nothing has been released to the public, but details may have already started to leak." He looked faintly embarrassed. "I've been questioning some people around town, and so has another officer. Unfortunately, he let it slip to someone that the car was tampered with, so it probably won't be long before the news starts to spread."

"I see. In other words, you wanted to make sure you told me before someone else did." Furious, I almost wanted to slap him.

Gino wrapped an arm around my waist and led me back to the couch. "That's not it. I swear that I was going to tell you, but you're right, I shouldn't have waited so

long.” To his credit, his face was full of misery. “Should I go on?”

I inhaled a large gulp of air. “Yes. Tell me everything.”

He hesitated for a second. “I don’t *know* everything. As we told you from the beginning, a fuel leak was the cause. But it looks like someone tampered with his engine by loosening a fitting, which caused the car to catch fire. Passersby reported seeing flames shoot out from under the vehicle right before Dylan crashed.”

“Okay, stop.” I had lied. I didn’t want to hear that part again—not about how my husband had been trapped in a burning car before crashing into a tree. He’d already been dead when the EMTs had pulled him from the wreckage, but I would always wonder what suffering he might have endured in those final moments.

Gino held tightly to my hand. “I did some checking around. Dylan always brought his vehicle to the Car Doctor, right? Matt Smitty wasn’t around the day before when Dylan brought the car in, but his mechanic Earl said they only did a tire rotation. He swore he didn’t touch the engine.” Gino paused, weighing his words before continuing. “You know that Smitty’s not one of my favorite people.”

I didn’t want to get into this now. Matt had been

my high school boyfriend. I'd broken up with him after he became too possessive, and Gino had never liked him. "But..." The words refused to fall from my mouth. I paused for a second and tried to get my bearings. "That can't be right. Why would someone want Dylan dead?" The thought was incomprehensible.

Gino replied to my question with one of his own. "Did Dylan have any enemies?"

I gave him what I hoped was an incredulous look. "How can you ask me such a thing? Everybody loved him."

"Are you sure about that?" Gino's tone was suspicious. He was using his cop voice, as Gabby called it. "Maybe he screwed up someone's taxes? Reported someone to the IRS for doing something illegal? Did a coworker have it in for him?"

"No. No one I can think of." But Gino had planted a seed of doubt in my head. Maybe there was a disgruntled client Dylan hadn't told me about. "Did someone tamper with his car while he was at We Care? Have you checked out his office?"

"I thought he parked in the garage adjacent to their building. Isn't that for employees only? Plus, there are cameras on every floor."

I nodded, racking my brain. “He had eaten lunch right before it happened. You were the one who told me his car was parked in the alley behind Slice before he...died.” It still hurt to say the word. There was such finality attached, and I suddenly felt as if I was reliving that day once again.

Gino had been the one to come to my house to deliver the news. I was grateful it hadn’t come from a stranger but had immediately gone into shock. Slowly, the memories returned, and then I recalled Gino mentioning Slice Pizzeria, the restaurant that Dylan constantly frequented.

A light bulb switched on in my head. “Do you think that someone at Slice would know anything?”

Slice was a small restaurant situated at the end of the main street in Harvest Park and owned by New York City native Anthony Falducci. I’d met him a couple of times when Dylan had brought me there for pizza. The building was a bit of an eyesore from the outside. It needed a new roof, and the brown paint was peeling in various spots. The surface of the blacktop in the adjacent parking lot was cracked in several places. Regardless, it was still a staple in the community and served mouthwatering pizza with a variety of delicious toppings.

“It’s possible.” Gino was silent for a second. “Actually,

that's another reason why I wanted to come talk to you. I had a chat with Anthony, but he didn't have much to offer. I've been trying to get a line on his restaurant but can't find anything. I'm suspicious though. Slice may be the only place where someone could have had access to Dylan's vehicle that day. You guys have a two-car garage, and it would be difficult for someone to tamper with the vehicle at his office building."

I nodded but kept my thoughts to myself. If I could track all of Dylan's activities in his last few days, maybe it would lead me to whoever had killed him.

Gino went on. "Anthony seems golden. He got a speeding ticket a couple of years back, but other than that, he's clean. The guy's been a pillar of the community for almost two decades. His brother Vince recently started working at Slice, and his daughter helps out when needed."

It was well known in Harvest Park that Anthony donated to several organizations every year. On Christmas Day, the restaurant was open to anyone in need of a free meal, no questions asked. When word spread of Dylan's accident, Anthony had taken the news hard. I vividly remembered the tears in his eyes during Dylan's wake.

"Dylan spent a lot of time there."

“He did. Especially lately.” Gino raised his eyebrows pointedly.

I bristled. “What does that mean? Why is it a big deal that he liked to go there for lunch? Dylan did Anthony’s monthly taxes, so obviously, they were close.”

“It’s just another angle to check out,” Gino replied. “All I’m saying is maybe there’s a connection.”

I swallowed hard and locked eyes with my cousin. “Tell me one thing. Are you positive Dylan’s death was no accident?”

I could always tell when Gino was lying. I remembered one especially frigid winter day when he and Tommy Harper were twelve and they pelted Gabby and me with snowballs while we waited for the school bus and then tried to pin it on someone else. His mother had seen through his lie as well. Policemen were trained to have unreadable faces, but this was my cousin. I could always see through the mask he wore.

His voice was sober. “No, it wasn’t an accident, Tess. I’m so sorry.”

I bit into my lower lip as tears flooded my eyes. “Then I want to know who did this.” Someone had ended Dylan’s life and destroyed mine in the process. They needed to pay.

Gino stroked his clean-shaven chin in a pensive manner. "I knew you would feel this way." He hesitated for a moment. "If you really want to find who did it, you may be able to help us."

"Anything. What'd you have in mind?"

"There's a *Help Wanted* sign on the front window of Slice." He took a deep breath before continuing. "They need a cook."

If Gino had wanted to light a fire under my butt, he'd succeeded. I squared my shoulders, prepared to do battle. "Well, it looks like I'm going on a job interview today."



TWO

“HOLD ON A SECOND,” GINO SAID. “For the record, I knew you’d want to do this. Hell, I want to know the truth too. But there’s no rush. Think on it for a few days before you make a decision, okay?”

I ignored him and walked into the kitchen to remove my stainless-steel pot from the stove, placing it in the sink to soak. “Forget it. The job could be filled by then. Do you think Anthony will hire me?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Gino asked. “You’re a fantastic cook. Everyone in town knows that. You could get back to what you’re meant to do and help the police department at the same time. A win-win situation.”

“All right, you’ve already convinced me. If I can take down the guys who killed—”

He cocked an eyebrow. "Whoa. Easy there, cowboy. You're not taking down anybody. I just want you to keep your ears open and find me a legal reason to get a warrant to search the place. *If* there is a reason. Got it?"

I nodded, but he wasn't finished. Gino frowned at me and started using his cop voice again.

"Don't do anything but listen when people are talking. That means don't ask questions, don't search through drawers and other places you have no right to. And please, don't give them a reason to believe you suspect Dylan's death was anything but a car accident. I want you cooking—it's what you were meant to do. Also listening, but mostly cooking."

"Oh-*kay*. I'll be a fly on the wall, minding my own business and making pizzas. If they hire me."

He crossed the room and stared out the front window. "When I came in I noticed one of your tires might be a little low on air. Want me to check it for you when I leave?"

"Sure." I was grateful for the attention. With Dylan gone, auto maintenance was an item on my to-do list that never seemed to get done. "So, when did you see the sign last? They may have already hired someone."

"I doubt it. It was there this morning," Gino replied. "I drive by there a couple of times every day. Did Dylan ever mention that there was anyone at the restaurant who didn't like him?"

"No. He talked about Anthony, and we went there for pizza a couple of times. I kind of had a feeling that Dylan didn't like to bring me there."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "It was his hangout, not mine. Maybe he thought I'd go in and criticize the place."

"You, criticize a kitchen? It could *never* happen."

"Very funny." Maybe Slice wasn't my ideal restaurant, but a little bit of money and creativity could work wonders for the place. I let myself ponder the possibilities for a moment, recreating the dream restaurant I had built in my head so many times before Dylan had died. If I owned Slice, the first thing I'd do would be to take out all those awful orange booths and replace them with square oak tables and matching chairs. It would be a family-type restaurant, but with an air of elegance. A place where you would feel comfortable enough to bring your three-year-old child or your eighty-year-old grandmother. Family was important to Harvest Park's close-knit community, and I

certainly wouldn't have made it through the last month without mine.



An hour later I had pulled into a parking spot outside of Slice, taking note of the crooked *Help Wanted* sign in the window with an exhale of relief. I climbed the two steps of the small cement porch and was about to push open the front door when a teenage boy exited the building in a flurry, the corner of the pizza box he held poking me as he brushed by.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." He flushed slightly and, with an apologetic look, hurried down the steps, not waiting for my response.

As I stepped through the doorway, I took in the familiar surroundings. The room for restaurant seating was directly in front of me, with the service counter and kitchen in the back. A tall man came out from behind the orange Formica-topped checkout counter and stared over my head and out the door, clearly annoyed. "Sorry about that, miss. Sam knows he's supposed to use the kitchen door for deliveries. *Kids*. You can't teach them anything these days." He was over six feet tall and extremely good-looking with a

mess of curly, black hair that poked out from underneath a Yankees ball cap he wore backward on his head.

I followed him back to the service counter. Still irritated, he punched some numbers into the register, opened the drawer, and glanced up at me. "Are you here to pick up?"

I shook my head. "My name is Tessa. I'd like to see Anthony, if he has a minute."

He smiled at me, his eyes dark and warm, like freshly roasted coffee beans in the morning. "Sure thing." The man turned away from the counter and walked through the open prep area, then stopped in the doorway of an adjoining room in the back of the kitchen and stuck his head in. "There's a woman named Tessa here who wants to see you."

As I waited for Anthony, I took a moment to study my surroundings. I hadn't been inside Slice for several months, and the place looked shabbier than I remembered. A black phone, a cash register, and a plastic container holding laminated menus occupied the counter of the checkout station. Behind this area was the open-concept kitchen featuring a granite work surface to the right sprinkled with flour, probably used for prepping dough. Next to it was a large metal prep table that held a variety of pizza toppings

inside. The wall oven ran behind it, and farther down on the same side of the kitchen was the doorway the tall man had disappeared into, Anthony's office, where Dylan had brought me to meet him before.

On the left side of the room was a refrigerator, two bay sinks, a dishwasher, a six-burner gas stove, and a black utility storage cabinet. The doors were shut, but I assumed they held ingredients such as flour, sugar, canned tomato paste, and oregano. Empty pizza boxes were stacked on top of the cabinet and on a small metal table next to it. There was a steel door on the other side of the table that most likely led to a cooler or freezer—maybe both. The once-white walls had yellowed, no doubt from grease, and the entire room was in serious need of organization. It wasn't my ideal kitchen, but then again, I wasn't here for the ambience.

The good-looking guy came back and leaned his muscular arms over the counter. I studied the intimidating tattoo of a scorpion on his left bicep. "I'm Vince, Anthony's brother. His much *younger* brother." His eyes scanned me up and down, and he gave me a sly wink.

Surprised, I took a step back.

He ran a hand over the scruff of a beard forming

around his sensual looking lips, and his perfect white teeth gleamed against his bronzed complexion. "Why don't you and I meet up and have a drink together later?"

"Vincenzo." Anthony was standing a few feet behind his brother, glaring at him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Anthony Falducci was in his late fifties or early sixties, dressed in a short-sleeved black T-shirt like his brother with a white bib apron tied over it. He came around the counter to where I stood, wiping his hands on his apron. His once-dark-brown hair was now dominated by gray and cut short. He ran a hand through the sparse hair on top of his head as he regarded me.

Anthony's brown eyes were set in a round, pink face that broke into a wide grin. "Tessa, how nice to see you." He nodded at the other man. "Don't get any ideas. This lady is off-limits."

Vince stared at him, his expression puzzled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Her husband was Dylan Esposito. Remember? The guy who—"

"Oh man." Vince gave me an apologetic look. "I'm really sorry, miss. I had no idea."

"It's okay," I reassured him, desperately wishing I was somewhere else.

The phone rang, and Vince snatched it up in a hurry, as if grateful for the distraction. "Slice. Pick up or delivery?"

Anthony turned back to me. "What can I do for you?"

I pointed in the direction of the front door, where the *Help Wanted* sign hung. "I'm looking for a job."

Anthony's eyes widened. "That's right. You're a cook, and a good one too. Dylan said so." There was an awkward pause, and then he crooked a finger at me. "Follow me, hon." We walked away from the carryout station into the large dining area where only two booths were in use. A young couple deep in conversation was seated at one, while a woman with three small children occupied another. Anthony motioned toward a booth with red checkered paper place mats on top of the surface. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No thanks." Dylan had raved about Anthony's homemade pizza, although he was always careful to mention it wasn't as good as mine, reminding me of the old adage—a way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I'd always kidded my husband that I shouldn't have prepared dinner for him on our first date. It became a standing joke

between us that my chicken parmigiana was what had convinced him to propose.

The restaurant was fairly clean but had started to show its age. Pieces of the dull tile flooring were broken or loose in several spots. The orange vinyl-covered seat underneath me sported several cracks and a large hole near one of its seams. The overhead light fixtures appeared spotty, and a few of the bulbs had blown out, giving the dining room a depressing and foreboding-like atmosphere. I knew that Slice was primarily a takeout restaurant, so perhaps Anthony didn't see the point of spending additional funds in the dining area. Still, I could think of a dozen ways to make the place brighter, cheerier, and more appealing to the public. I visualized looped cable lights hanging from the ceiling to echo draped pasta noodles. Red-and-white-checked linen napkins adorning the spotless wooden table surfaces. Perfection.

Anthony cleared his throat uncomfortably. "So, the truth, honey. How've you really been doing?"

"Not great." The words were no lie, and the object *was* to make Anthony feel sympathetic enough to hire me. Still, I detested pity of any sort. On the day of Dylan's wake, if I'd had to experience one more person muttering "Sorry

for your loss,” I might have screamed out loud. Yes, it was a difficult situation for everyone involved, and what else was there for people to say? But it had been agony to endure all the same.

Anthony nodded in understanding. “Dylan was a great guy. One of my best customers and a whiz with my taxes. I really miss him.”

“Me too,” I managed to choke out.

He reached across the table to pat my hand awkwardly. “This has got to be hell for you. My wife, Luisa, she drives me crazy, but if I didn’t have her around—” His face grew red as he said the words. “Well, you know what I mean. So, what kind of experience do you have cooking?”

I folded my hands on the table. Fortunately, I didn’t have to lie about this part. “I’ve been cooking since I was ten. I went to college as a business major, then quit after two years to go to culinary school.” My parents had not been happy with that decision, but as far as I was concerned, it was the best one I’d ever made. When I started at the culinary academy, I knew I’d found my niche. “After that I worked as a waitress, then a short order cook.” I didn’t explain that I’d wanted to learn how to do every particular job in a restaurant because my dream had always been to

run my own someday. “I started a new job at Sunnyside Up Café three months ago. When Dylan’s accident—” Suddenly, I couldn’t go on.

Anthony waited patiently. “Take your time. It’s all right.”

I let out a deep breath. “Sunnyside was a nice place, but I didn’t know when I’d be able to return, and it wasn’t fair to keep them waiting. Besides, my specialty is Italian food. It’s also my favorite to make. Before Sunnyside, I worked as a chef at Magnifico’s Restaurant.”

He looked impressed. “Wow. That’s a nice place...er, was. Didn’t they go bankrupt last year?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Magnifico’s had been a fancy Italian restaurant, about a half hour’s drive from Harvest Park. I’d worked there for two years and enjoyed the experience, except that the constant competition with other employees, specifically the other two chefs, had been a major turnoff. Everyone was always looking out for number one, while my only desire had been to make the customers happy. It was a family-owned place with people who had no idea how to run a business and all the drama you would expect from that scenario.

Anthony seemed to regard me with new respect. “Tessa, you probably have more culinary talent than the

rest of us here combined. Didn't your tomato sauce win first prize in some big competition recently?"

The mention made me flush with pride. "Yes, at the New York State Fair last year." I'd also won a thousand dollars in prize money but didn't mention that part. The certificate, framed and on the wall of my kitchen, meant more to me than the cash.

Anthony pursed his lips. "That's what I thought. Wow. I need a cook but honestly don't think I can afford you."

"It's not about the money." Also not a lie. "The location is convenient for me, and pizza is one of my favorite dishes to make."

"A clever girl like you should be figuring out how to license that fantastic sauce of yours instead. You might be sitting on top of a gold mine, honey." His eyes lit up. "Have you ever thought about selling your recipe? Didn't that Neiman Marcus cookie sell for a small fortune?"

I laughed. "I could care less about the money. The recipe originally belonged to my grandmother before I made a few tweaks. I'd never consider selling it."

"Ancient family secret, eh?" Anthony smiled and leaned forward. "I'll level with you, honey. I've been looking for a cook for a couple of weeks now and haven't had any bites

yet. Vince, who you met, is a great cook. He's actually a sous chef. Trained in New York City. But he doesn't want to be tied down in the kitchen all day. Vince is a real impatient sort, and he's used to doing as he pleases. I need someone I can rely on, five days a week."

"Well, you wouldn't have to worry with me," I assured him. "There's no place I'd rather be than in the kitchen." I gave him my most eager smile but sensed that something was holding him back. Could it have anything to do with Dylan?

Anthony pursed his lips, as if conflicted. "Why don't you let me think about it for a few days and I'll get back to you? Leave me your phone number."

"No." I put a hand to my mouth, but it was too late. The word had already slipped out between my lips. Impatience crept into my bones, and my emotions might start to show if this went on any longer. I needed to stay calm and not give myself away. "I'm sorry, Anthony. This is a one-time offer. There's another restaurant that wants to hire me as well." Okay, another white lie, but he didn't need to know. "I prefer a closer commute, and that's a major reason why your place is appealing. I promised to give them my answer today."

Anthony looked torn. He leaned back in the seat and studied me for a few seconds, the lines deepening on his

forehead. I could almost see his mind at work as the sharp, dark eyes weighed both the pros and cons. His expression brightened, and when he gave me a reassuring smile, I knew the decision was in my favor. "You've got a lot of spunk, Tessa. Okay, it's a deal. Welcome to Slice."

Relief swept over me. "Thank you so much."

He leaned closer. "What I said about Vince, that's between you and me, okay? Plus, I don't know how long he plans on staying in Harvest Park."

I remembered what Gino had said about Vince being new to the restaurant. "So, he's only here temporarily?"

Anthony shrugged. "We're closed on Sundays, so how about you start the day after tomorrow?"

"Sounds good." I nodded. "What time?"

Anthony thought for a moment. "Come on in at noon. We're running short on dough, so you can start laying up a fresh supply. We need to freeze more. How's that sound?"

At that moment, a vision of Dylan entered my mind. The pain in my heart was so sharp, it managed to dull my senses. There was no reason to suspect Anthony had anything to do with Dylan's murder, but he'd spent a lot of time here and it was the last place his car was seen before the accident. This could prove to be a dead end, but I was

determined to find out what had happened and who was involved. I owed that much to my husband.

“Tessa? Did you hear me?”

I jerked my head up and forced a smile to my lips. “Sounds perfect.”

We walked back around the counter and into the kitchen area where Vince was placing anchovies on a pie. The prep table was open, displaying a range of toppings such as pepperoni, sausage, olives, peppers, and various types of cheeses. Vince didn’t strike me as the most organized of cooks. Dough, spatters of sauce, and toppings speckled the work surface. I was a stickler for a tidy kitchen.

“Let me grab the new hire forms from my office, and then I’ll see you out,” Anthony said in a cheery tone as he left me standing there with Vince.

Vince looked up as Anthony walked away. He noticed me watching and raised an eyebrow in return. “I guess congratulations are in order,” he said sourly, his former friendly face now twisted in a scowl.

Before I could respond, he strode across the room and disappeared into the cooler, slamming the door behind him.

Anthony emerged from his office and handed me I-9 and W-4 forms. “If you could fill these out and bring

them back with you on Monday, that would be great.” The phone rang, and he gave me a quick pat on the shoulder. “Enjoy the rest of the weekend. You can go out the kitchen door if you want.” He reached past me and picked up the phone. “Slice. Pick up or delivery?”

I was headed in the direction of the back door when it burst open, engulfing me in a rush of chilly air. A skinny boy who looked about fifteen, different from the one I’d seen earlier, almost knocked me over. They seemed to be coming at me from all different directions. His lips twitched into a grin when he saw me. “Sorry, honey.”

I hated it when anyone younger than myself called me honey. The kid’s eyes boldly scanned me up and down. “So, who are you? Vince’s new babe? Or maybe Anthony’s getting a little action on the side?”

Besides the obvious smart mouth, the kid had dyed platinum-blond hair and a narrow face as white as flour with sunken cheeks. His eyes were bloodshot, as if he hadn’t slept in days. He held a black warmer bag in his hand and wore jeans with holes in the knees.

“Shut up, you two-bit punk.” Anthony had ended his phone call and moved back across the room toward us in time to hear the wisecrack. “Eric, this is Tessa. She’ll be

working here from now on. You treat the lady with respect or *else*. Understand?"

Eric snorted. "Yeah. Whatever."

Anthony stuck a finger in Eric's face. "We've been getting complaints all afternoon that you've been running late. I even had to give one guy a free pizza because he was so pissed off."

"I couldn't help it. My car stalled," he complained.

"Sure, it did." Anthony folded his arms over his chest. "Keep it up. You can easily be replaced."

Eric opened his mouth to say something, then shut it without comment. He pushed past me and grabbed the pizza boxes Vince had set on the work table.

"See you Monday, honey," Anthony called over his shoulder as he went into the office and shut the door behind him.

Eric rushed past me to hold the door open, like a gallant gentleman. "So, sweet thing," he said. "You married?"

Being near this kid was causing my skin to crawl. "My husband died in an accident a few weeks ago." My voice shook slightly as I said the word *accident*, but I wanted to gauge his reaction.

"Bummer." Much to my dismay, he continued to walk

alongside me as I fumbled for car keys in my purse. "What kind of an accident?"

This part was so difficult for me to say. Would it ever get easier? "His car caught fire, and then he crashed into a tree."

He stopped dead in his tracks and turned to me, veins bulging in his neck. "Wait a second. Are you Dylan Esposito's old lady?"

Now it was my turn to ask a question. "You knew my husband?"

The smile faded from his lips. "Yeah, I knew him. Anthony treated him like his son."

"Sounds like it bothered you." I forgot the revulsion I felt for the kid for a minute, curious to know what exactly he'd thought of Dylan. Maybe he'd been jealous of his relationship with Anthony.

He laughed bitterly. "Nah, not *me*. But—" He stopped, paused, and looked around. "Let's just say that not everyone at Slice liked your husband."

I inhaled sharply. "Who didn't like him? Vince?"

He ignored my question as he pulled open the door of his rusted, dark-red sedan with the *Slice* sign on top, depicting a single piece of pizza hovering in the air above

the remainder of the pie. “I heard your old man tell Anthony once that you were an awesome cook.” Eyes that had been dull and listless now regarded me with interest. “How come you want to work in a hole in the wall like this, and why would Anthony hire you?”

This kid was more intelligent than I’d given him credit for. “Why wouldn’t he? I love Italian food, and my husband loved Slice. I think it would help me to work here—make me feel closer to him.” Sure, that part was bogus. I felt the closest to Dylan in our own home, but hopefully Eric wouldn’t see through my ruse.

Eric laughed. “Yeah, right.” He got into the car, and the window whirled down as he continued to watch me thoughtfully. “Tell you what. Maybe you could fix me a private dinner sometime, and we’ll have a nice, long chat about your husband.” His eyes roamed over me one last time. “See you soon, beautiful.”