

PROLOGUE

“Let’s go home,” Nikki whispered, her lips quivering. Even her toes, squashed into the sharp points of her strapped Mary Janes, wouldn’t stop shaking. “Liz...”

“Hush,” her sister hissed as she swung open the side door of Mangiamo’s. Nikki held up the small battery-powered lantern, and the shiny countertops in the kitchen glowed.

Nikki’s knees knocked under her navy blue skirt and she pressed them together. Her father’s employees left the restaurant hours ago, around midnight or so. Everything inside was still except her heart, which had been hammering in her chest since she and Liz snuck out of the house. Somehow Liz had secured the key to the side door of Mangiamo’s, but she wouldn’t tell Nikki why they needed to get inside.

“No one knows,” she whispered as the door creaked closed behind them. No one would find out she and Liz were here.

Their parents and older brother were asleep in their large home, a few blocks up Murray Hill. As she and Liz snuck down to Mayfield Road, the usually bustling streets in Cleveland’s Little Italy were draped with an eerie fog. The silence unnerved her—even the alley cats had stopped howling for the night.

As Nikki followed her sister across the kitchen, Liz pulled a second key out of her purse.

Nikki gasped. “Where did you get—”

“I told you to shut up,” Liz barked as she pushed the key into the lock of another door—a door that kept the kitchen staff out of their father’s private lounge.

Nikki leaned closer. “Papa’s going to kill you.”

“He’ll have to catch me first.” Liz laughed, sounding more like she was twelve than twenty-one.

Her sister teetered daily between the frivolities of her youth and the weight of adulthood. The shiny red barrette in her bobbed black hair matched the red bow on her scalloped dress. Even in the dull light, she exuded glamour.

Until this moment, Nikki never thought to ask why Liz was dressed to the nines—she was still trying to wake up after her sister shoved her out of bed in the middle of the night, saying she needed help. She hadn’t told Nikki why they needed to come here, but it didn’t matter. Nikki always seemed to be on call for her older sister, and Liz knew it. She covered for Liz whenever her sister slipped away to visit one of Cleveland’s many nightclubs.

But never before had Liz tried anything as daring as breaking into Mangiamo’s back room. Their father’s sanctuary.

Their brother was allowed inside this room when invited—and he bragged about it often—but Salvatore never talked to either of his daughters about the place. Didn’t really talk to Nikki at all. She knew the extent of his fury, though, and she feared him almost as much as the spineless henchmen who bowed to him like he was God on earth. She’d never bowed, but she usually cowered when he was around, hoping he wouldn’t notice her. He rarely did.

Her sister wasn’t afraid of anything, including their father. She had the gift of being able to charm almost any man. If their father

discovered them trespassing in his den, though, no charm would work. Discipline would be swift. And painful.

The knob turned in her sister's hands, and as she cracked open the door, the stench of cigar smoke mingled with the lingering smells of spicy sausage and cheese from the kitchen behind them.

"Liz—" she repeated.

Liz grabbed the lantern from Nikki's hands. "Tell me if someone comes to the front door."

Light illuminated the gray stone that lined the narrow staircase below them. Her sister stepped down and slowly descended into the dungeon.

Nikki propped the door open with her heel, waiting in the darkness. She had thought there was a small room in the back of the restaurant, not a basement, but she wasn't surprised. Secrets bound their family together like the tangled silk threads layering the web of a black widow.

The girls at Nikki's school envied these seemingly luxurious threads, but she knew that the Cardano money only covered the secrets with a blinding sheen that most people couldn't see past. She and Liz knew the truth, and they were trapped in their family's web for the rest of their lives.

Her mother refused to talk about their family's secret life, and her father usually refused to talk to her, period. Silence stopped even the walls of the Cardano mansion from sharing their secrets, but the walls knew. They knew about her father's mistress over on Woodland Avenue. They knew about the bitter tears her mother shed. And they knew about the dirty money that surged through her family like water from a fire hose, money that never seemed to extinguish the smoldering inside her father for more.

Nikki watched the light in her sister's hands turn the corner at the

bottom of the steps, and she rested her back against the post, praying Liz would hurry.

Light from the city lamps trickled in through two small windows at the side of the room, illuminating the shiny tops of the kitchen ovens and the draped tables that filled the dining room. Instead of windows by the imposing front door there was a wall filled with paintings of Italy.

The restaurant couldn't possibly support the Cardano family lifestyle, nor could the factory where her uncles refined sugar, but there was always plenty of money. Some mornings she walked down the stairs and the dining room table was hidden under silvery green mounds of cash. Someone supplied her father with thousands and thousands of dollars at least once a week, but she didn't know who paid him, nor did she want to know. She just wanted to rush out the door each morning before the others woke up to join her friends at Saint Anthony's.

Their mother liked to pretend that her husband's business ventures were perfectly legitimate as she tried to induct her daughters into the high society circles like they were members of Cleveland's elite. Two years ago, Liz began rebelling against the dog-and-pony show and decided to flaunt herself in circles not so pleasing to their mother. The more their mother and father disapproved, the happier Liz seemed to be.

Salvatore ignored Liz's exploits for a long time, but everything changed in July. For the past three months, her father had kept Liz home around the clock, under surveillance. On the rare occasion that her father let Liz go outside the estate, she was escorted by two of his bodyguards.

Tonight, however, the man who was supposed to be standing guard outside Liz's door was sleeping beside it instead. Nikki assumed Liz, with her smooth words and alluring smile, offered him a couple of drinks from the stash she snuck into her room under her longer dresses.

The lantern light blinked below her.

“Liz?” she called in a hushed voice.

When her sister didn’t answer, her gaze wandered back toward the six rows of tables that separated the kitchen and the front door. The chairs and table settings appeared to be in their proper place; there was no hint of the loud patrons who had departed four hours ago and no bloodstains left from the man shot inside the parlor back in March.

Nikki shivered. Did the man’s ghost stay behind to haunt those who’d murdered him?

She glanced back down the staircase, at the light bobbing on the wall below. She should have asked Liz why they needed to come here in the middle of the night, but it was much safer to play along than ask questions.

A sharp click sounded in the dining room, and her heart leapt. Turning, she squinted in the dull light, but nothing moved. No one was in the restaurant at this hour, she told herself. No one but her and Liz.

She whispered her sister’s name one more time, but Liz didn’t respond.

Holding her breath, she pressed her hands against the doorframe and pretended to be one of the Sicilian statues in her father’s pictures. If the murdered man had come back for vengeance, perhaps he wouldn’t see her. Surely he would know she didn’t have it within her to hurt a soul.

She peeked around a column as the front door crept open and a man walked inside, built thin as a rail and a good head taller than she was. The evening was warm, yet he wore a dark overcoat and hat, the uniform of a Cleveland Mafioso.

And he looked very much alive.

She stepped down into the stairwell. If anyone except their father caught her and her sister, they might bump them off, and there were no guarantees with their father.

She and Liz had to get out of here.

Nikki locked the door behind her, and as she rushed down the stairs, she struggled to catch her breath. Air didn't come until she reached the bottom, but even then, her breathing was shallow. The room in front of her seemed to spin.

Steadying herself against the wall, she took a deep breath and hiccupped.

The basement was one room, a dank space fortified with cold stone and a solitary brown hat rack that hovered in the corner. An old table stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by folding chairs, where the men probably dealt business ventures along with their cards. At the side of the room, a much shorter set of steps led up to a storm door.

Liz swiveled around by an open closet door, a narrow metal box clutched in her hands. "I told you to stay upstairs."

"But someone's—" Nikki didn't finish her sentence. The door above her swung open, banging into the wall. Apparently her father wasn't the only one with a key to this place.

Liz shoved the lantern into Nikki's hands and tucked the metal box under her arm. Then she stepped toward the second set of stairs. Nikki followed her lead, but at that moment, the storm door began to shake. Someone else was outside.

Liz swore and grabbed Nikki's arm, shoving her into the closet. Liz squeezed into the tight space beside her and yanked the door closed, the lantern shining like a beacon until Liz punched the button on top. The closet turned black.

On the other side of the door, Nikki heard muffled voices as several men greeted each other. At this time of night, surely this meeting wouldn't last long. They'd finish whatever deal they'd come to resolve

and disappear back into the night. She and Liz would escape minutes later, going home to the safety of their beds before daylight. No one would be the wiser.

Her ear pressed against the door, Nikki strained to listen to the men's words. Rough talk about the Puglisi family, interfering coppers, and the blessed Volstead Act floated under the thin crack beside her feet and burned her ears. They were making a pact to work together under the nose of the government.

A hiccup swelled in her throat again, and she swallowed hard, holding her breath for a good minute. When she finally released her breath, her hand raced to her mouth to squelch another hiccup, but in her panic, her fingers knocked the lantern in Liz's hands. She groped for the lantern in the darkness, trying to stop its fall.

Liz reached out to catch the lantern, but when she did, the metal box in her arms fell to the floor, and the crash echoed around them.

Nikki froze.

Liz swung open the door to the closet, pushing Nikki in front of her, and Nikki stumbled forward. Chairs slid back, and the men at the table opened their coats. She saw her father's face first. The anger etched in his eyes. And there was another emotion she'd never seen before.

Fear.

Her brother sat there, stunned. And all three of her uncles.

There was another man beside them. A man with bushy blond hair.

Nikki watched in horror as the blond man reached for his gun.

"Stop, Heyward," her brother yelled, but she could see the malice in Heyward's eyes. He wasn't going to stop.

"Blast it, Nikki." Liz shoved her toward the storm door, her eyes still focused on the blond man. "Run."

Heyward shouted, commanding the others to shoot. Nikki snapped out of her stupor when she saw the gleam of his gun. Racing up the stairs, she slammed open the storm door and burst outside.

Cool air flooded over her as a gunshot echoed down the alleyway. Lifting her skirt, Nikki ran into the billows of the fog, but with every step, her sister's face trailed her. The faces of the men haunted her soul.

Another thread for their family's web of secrets. A thread she could never escape no matter where she fled.

CHAPTER 1

August 1929

Shadows danced along the sculpted wings of an angel trumpeting from the tombstone's spire. In the starlight, the angel looked like she was about to take flight over the columned mausoleums on the hillside and the placid lake below, over the shady alleyways along Mayfield Road and the sugar refineries and stills that supplied Cleveland with the hooch that had turned their beautiful city into a bloody battleground.

Only an angel could see and hear what went on behind locked doors in Little Italy, but Detective Rollin Wells and the rest of the police force were supposed to find out who was supplying the goods to make liquor. And they were supposed to stop it.

Leaning against the trunk of a red maple, Rollin lifted his fedora and raked his fingers through his thick hair. Tree limbs brushed over the angel and the other tombstones in front of him, the warm breeze dusting the engraved heads of lambs, eagles, and lions. Everyone on the hillside was resting in peace except him and his partner. They'd been waiting more than two hours in the old cemetery, but it was long past midnight now and no one else had joined them.

Lance Dawson flicked a match to light a cigarette, and the orange glow between his fingers flickered like a firefly in the darkness. He took a long drag and then held out his silver case. "You wanna smoke?"