

Prologue

"I want her dead!" Vincent DeSienna slammed the palms of both hands on his antique mahogany desk. The normally collected man's outburst startled the other man in the room.

Aldo Tartaglia, the family attorney, the consigliere to the DeSienna *brugad*, put his hand up. He made a motion that indicated they needed to keep their volume low. "When was the last time this office was...cleaned?" Tartaglia's bushy eyebrows arched to form an arrow toward his receding hairline.

"An hour ago. Don't treat me like an amateur, Aldo. Don't you think I'd check?"

"Under normal circumstances, absolutely. But these aren't normal circumstances." Tartaglia had walked into Vincent's office a moment earlier and sat down opposite his client. "What's going on, Vince?"

"Trace Sheridan. That's what's going on. I want that bitch in front of me. And then I'm going to kill her." His voice was cool, his demeanor shameless.

Aldo focused on Vincent DeSienna. Vincent was an impeccably dressed and charismatically handsome man. His Latin heritage was reflected in his olive skin, dark hair, and high-bridged Roman nose. If he had one outstanding feature, it was his cold, steel-gray eyes. When he pinned someone with those, that person knew he or she, most likely, would not get out of that room alive.

DeSienna stood and walked to the bar. He grabbed a decanter half-filled with bourbon and topped off a shot glass. A frustrated sigh escaped him and he held his glass toward his attorney. He nodded and downed the shot with a harsh growl.

Aldo joined him at the bar. "Still no luck finding her?" He took the decanter and poured Vince another shot.

"How can someone just disappear off the face of the earth like this? She hasn't shown up or called in to work, hasn't been near her apartment, no one has seen her or heard from her. None of my guys can find her. Everyone leaves a trail. She's just vanished."

"She pissed a lot of people off, Vince, maybe someone already capped her."

DeSienna swallowed the second shot and fastballed the glass into the wall across the room, where it shattered. "If that's true then I want whoever killed her found and brought to me."

"And then what? Kill that person for killing her?"

"Yes! Yes, because to be denied the pleasure of taking her out myself would be unacceptable. This is too personal. My father saved her from a street life of poverty. She was a fucking latchkey kid of a crack whore, for Christ's sake. My father took a chance on her; he welcomed her into our family with open arms. He was like the father she never had."

"Treated her like his own kid," Aldo said in agreement.

"Better," DeSienna said, bitterly. His resentment was ferocious. "He was so blinded by her, he never saw it coming."

"All due respect? Neither did you."

"And don't think I don't kick myself for it. I never liked her, Aldo, you know that, never trusted her, but my father kept telling me to get beyond it. He said I was jealous."

"I always thought it was because you wanted to get in her pants, and she wouldn't."

"No one with a real dick will ever get into those pants. Unless it's by force."

"Such a waste. It's a crime against nature a woman that gorgeous is a lesbian."

DeSienna glared at him. "Lesbian? She's a fucking dyke. She's got more balls than most of my men. My father is an old fool who was taken in by pretty eyes and a nice pair of tits. Ten years she worked for him. Ten years. Then, suddenly she breaks faith."

"She should have known that would be an automatic death sentence." Aldo rubbed his forehead.

DeSienna stopped short of laughing in his attorney's face. "Really? She should have known? Why? She set Nick up, got him busted, and then she entrapped Sal," DeSienna said, referring to his brother and his cousin, "and all my father said was: 'Maybe they needed a lesson.'" He walked back to his desk and sat on the corner. "Both times, it should have been me, too. The night she got Nick, I

was supposed to be with him. Same thing with Sal. The night my father went to that warehouse, it was supposed to be me. I want to find her and end it before it is me.”

Aldo had heard this same rant many times in the forty-eight hours since the *Capo di tutti capi*, Vittorio, had been arrested and held without bail. The fact that Trace Sheridan had orchestrated his arrest was a blow the old man wasn't easily recovering from. He had groomed the ambitious woman for greatness in his organization, had sent her to the police academy, pulled silent strings to get her assigned to Union City's finest, and used her to make evidence disappear in any case involving the DeSienna crime family. She was the perfect bad cop, until she turned.

“If someone hasn't already done it, she's a dead woman walking, Aldo.”

“What I don't get is why? It doesn't make sense. She had it made with Vittorio, she was making money hand over fist. Up until a month ago, she was fiercely loyal to him and then, boom, she starts working for the commissioner. Do you think he got something on her and she worked out a deal?”

“He must have offered her more money,” DeSienna said. His eyes moved to the left; Aldo recognized this as a sure sign he was lying.

“Vince, the commissioner could only wish he had more money to play with than your father. What aren't you telling me?” Aldo's tone was cautious but suspicious. DeSienna remained quiet. “Vince?”

“Maybe she suddenly got a conscience,” he said, defensively.

“Only if it were surgically implanted. A conscience wouldn't have let her do what she did to Vittorio.” Aldo studied his client. DeSienna's cold eyes reflected a hint of guilt. “Did you do something to start this pile of shit rolling downhill? Because that makes more sense to me.”

“Are you accusing me of something, Aldo?” Vince gave the attorney his coldest glare, but Aldo was one of the few people it didn't work on.

“Vincent, I have known you since you were five and clinging to your father's pant leg. I know when you're hiding something. I'd rather you tell me now than later, before there's any more damage.” Aldo's authoritarian inflection made DeSienna pause. “Maybe it's still salvageable.”

DeSienna drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It will only be salvageable when we stop her. And there's only one way to do that.”

“What sent her on the warpath, Vince?” His question was met by dead silence. “Goddamn it all to hell, Vincent, tell me!”

“All right!” DeSienna yelled back. “I challenged her, okay?”

“Challenged? Or threatened?” Aldo asked, wisely.

“It may have come off sounding like a threat.”

“May have. I see.” Aldo nodded. “And just exactly what was this...challenge?”

DeSienna cleared his throat, his cockiness apparently in check. “The fucking bitch was always one-upping me with my father. I was so tired of hearing about Trace Sheridan this and Trace Sheridan that. He treated her like she walked on water. I'm his oldest son and he never gave me the recognition he gave her. She taunted me with that. So I told her to enjoy it while she could because I would make my father believe that she would turn on him and her pretty little ass would end up dead or in prison.”

“You're not saying that actually scared her into beating you to it?”

“No. The bitch laughed at me. But ambushing her and nearly killing her and her detective partner must have.”

Aldo put his hand over his eyes in disgust. “That was supposed to be gang-related. That was you? You and your ego. What were you thinking? That she would actually back off from you? She didn't get to be as ruthless as she is by being a stupid woman. Look what it's cost the family!”

“I know.”

“You better find her.”

“I know!” There was a tense silence between the men.

Aldo folded his arms. “Her mother's not hiding her?”

“Nope. We've been watching and listening.”

“Friends? Lovers?”

“She doesn't have anyone permanent. Never has.”

“Patrol partners?”

“Her latest one is in the hospital, recovering, and she hasn’t been near him. Her only other partner got out of law enforcement after he got shot. He’s like a scientist now or something. My sources tell me they don’t communicate anymore.”

“What if you don’t find her?”

DeSienna looked at the family attorney, his confidence once again restored. “That’s not an option. Trace Sheridan and I will see each other again. And I can’t tell you how much I’ll enjoy making that icy gaze turn to fear. That’s what I want to remember the last time I look in that bitch’s eyes.”

Chapter One

Rachel Young blinked, at first thinking the sun was playing tricks on her, and then prayed the man lying face down on the ground in front of her was not dead. She approached the still form with caution and gently prodded him with the barrel of her gun. There was no movement. She looked for obvious wounds — such as bullet holes, slash marks, rope line around the neck — but saw no evidence of any attack, nor did she see any blood.

She took into consideration the recent sinister events in her life that prompted the concern this might be a ploy. If it wasn’t, this man was hurt and she couldn’t just leave him there to die, to suffer alone until wolves, buzzards, or God knew what else finished him off. Still guarded, she knelt down to study the situation more closely. Since Rachel saw nothing on the cowboy’s back to indicate any injury there to be concerned about, she rolled him over with great effort to inspect his front.

She started at the man’s boots, which didn’t look like any cowboy footwear she was familiar with, then noticed that his denim trousers also seemed different...or maybe it was just the way they fit over the slender lower frame. As her eyes traversed up the inert body, her focus was suddenly drawn to his face. She had never seen him before and, having grown up in Sagebrush, she thought she knew everyone. The possible exception was the saddle bums who moved through town at any given time, picking up just enough work to earn them a sufficient amount of money to get them to the next town.

Her gaze centered on the drifter’s striking face and her heart skipped a beat. The features were sculpted, with high cheekbones and a tan complexion that indicated possible Indian or Gypsy heritage. He had long dark eyelashes and shaggy, black hair cut in a style she’d never seen on any man in these parts. His nose was slender, almost feminine, but it seemed perfect on his face. His lips looked soft and they were slightly parted, which immediately made her heart pump faster. Emotion washed through her but it wasn’t fear.

Her hand brushed down the cowboy’s jawline. Rachel felt no stubble, no evidence of a beard, and she guessed, despite his long and well filled out form, that this man must be young or he did have some Indian blood. Transfixed, she had to mentally chastise herself to not spend so much time admiring his face and continue to search for injuries. Her free hand moved down to the stranger’s denim shirt and felt for anything out of the ordinary. She wiggled a finger through a tear in the fabric and touched something odd. She unfastened the metal buttons and opened the garment to reveal an unusual looking wrap, a binding of some kind. She spotted a circle of blood approximately the size of her fist and figured she’d found the wound that had rendered the stranger unconscious.

Rachel brushed the odd stretchy material of the binding and put her fingers on the dark, moist area that appeared to seep blood. As she separated the layers of the wrap to see what type of wound she was dealing with, she reached skin and found a small jagged cut that did not look like a bullet hole or a knife slice. Her eyes grew wide when she noticed something else as well.

Cleavage.

Startled, she glanced back up at the fascinating face and found herself looking directly into intense, sky blue eyes. Before she could speak, a hand grabbed her wrist and held her in place securely, strength she was surprised to find in a woman.

“What are you doing?” the stranger asked tersely. Her voice was raspy and its register was a low alto, one that could be mistaken for a callow male.

Rachel was terrified and confused. “N-nothing...I...I was checking to see if y-you were hurt.”

The dark haired woman must have realized how tightly she was holding Rachel’s wrist, as she loosened her grip then let her go. Rachel lost her balance, fell back on her butt, and dropped her rifle. She scrambled backward, snatched up her gun, got to her feet, and fixed her weapon on the strange woman.

“Who are you? Why are you dressed like a man?” Rachel’s voice was shaking but her aim was steady. *What in heaven’s name have I stumbled onto?*

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