

## CHAPTER ONE

“Sally Donovan, I don’t believe it.” The elderly woman sadly shook her head at me.

“How could you do this?”

“Mrs. O’Brien,” I began.

She waved me off. “Please. No excuses. You should have given me some warning. My horoscope was right. I never should have left the house this morning.”

“It’s not like it was deliberate!” I cried out.

Mrs. O’Brien continued to breathe heavily, like an obscene phone caller. “I need a moment. I—well—I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” My head baker, Josie Sullivan, rolled her eyes so far back in her head that I worried she’d make herself dizzy. “This is getting way too weird. Before you throw yourself off the nearest bridge, Mrs. O’Brien, I promise that we’ll have more jelly thumbprint cookies on Monday.”

Mrs. O’Brien stared wistfully into the nearly empty display case. “But I had my heart set on them. Make sure that you set them aside for me, okay? I guess I’ll take a dozen chocolate biscotti instead and two dozen of the shortbread cookies.”

Josie muttered a curse word under her breath as she quickly assembled a pink bakery box. Mrs. O’Brien was busy talking to herself as she removed the money from her purse. I hoped she hadn’t heard Josie’s comment. There was never a dull moment in my Sally’s Samples, my cookie shop. While I understood where Josie was coming from, I could never be as forward. With world problems like hunger and inflation, it was hard to believe that a customer would get so upset when their favorite cookie sold out. Mrs. O’Brien needed to either start ordering ahead

of time—or get a serious grip

“And don’t forget my fortune cookies,” she called out. “I get three—one for each dozen, right?”

Josie opened her mouth, but I quickly elbowed her in the side. “Yes, of course, Mrs. O’Brien.”

“Remember, Josie, the customer is always right.” Mrs. O’Brien proudly tossed her head and paid for her cookies. The silver string of bells on my front door tinkled merrily, as if they too were happy with her departure.

Josie slammed the display case door shut. “Honestly, that woman is a kook. ‘Sally doesn’t have my favorite kind of cookie. Why do these terrible things always happen to me? Oh, my goodness, the world’s about to come to an end!’”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the comical face she made. Josie and I had been best friends since the age of eight and knew each other better than we knew ourselves. Josie didn’t have any patience for whiners. She’d had a rough upbringing, much more difficult than my own, and had learned to appreciate the simple things in life.

We went into the back room, and Josie patted a chair next to the wooden table where we prepared our goodies. “Come on. Sit down before you fall down, Sal. You’re nine months pregnant. Stop overdoing it. We can’t have you going into labor until the open house is over with tonight.”

I ran a hand over my bulging stomach and laughed. “I’ll do my best to hold the baby in until then.”

My second child wasn’t due for another week. Even though it wasn’t far off, I’d convinced myself that the baby wouldn’t make an appearance tonight. Cookie, my two-year-old

daughter, had been two weeks late, and the doctor warned me to be prepared in case it happened again. My husband Mike kept reminding me to pack a bag for the hospital.

With some difficulty, I lowered myself into the chair and exhaled sharply. “It’s so good to get off my feet. Some days I feel like I’ve been pregnant forever.”

Josie snorted. “Yep. I’ve been there a few times myself. Four, to be exact.”

“Watch out,” I warned. “I’m catching up to you.”

“Feel free.” Josie laughed. “You can even pass me if you’d like. My baby making days are long over with.”

Josie and her husband, Rob, had four boys who ranged in age from five to fifteen. Josie had her first child at the age of nineteen and, while unprepared for motherhood, she had mastered it like everything else she did. There was so much to admire about her. Josie had gone to culinary school and specialized in baking. There wasn’t a cookie out there that she couldn’t make. In addition to her busy homelife and working full time, she made specialty cakes on the side for additional income.

“When I grow up, I want to be just like you,” I teased.

“Give me all the details on the open house.” Josie said, as she went to work frosting the tiramisu cookies for the event tonight. I watched as she measured out mascarpone, vanilla extract, and confectioner’s sugar into a bowl and placed it under the mixer. “I’ll keep this in the fridge until we get to the bed and breakfast and frost the cookies there.”

“Will there be enough time?”

“No worries, I’ll make the time. You said to expect around a hundred people, right? What’s the name of this place again?”

“Bella Vita. It means beautiful life in Italian. And the inn *is* definitely beautiful. You’re

going to love it.”

Josie’s blue eyes sparkled. “Bella Vita. I love the name. I’m so excited about getting away for the night. It would have been even better if your father hadn’t sprung this on us at the last minute but luckily, I was able to find a babysitter.”

“Yeah, well, you know my father. This is typical behavior for him.” Domenic Muccio was an eccentric man who always managed to have a surprise or two rolled up his sleeve. Dad had retired from the railroad a few years back then had gotten busy pursuing his true passions in life. He had gone from blogger to funeral home driver, to self-published author, and now mortuary owner. Life was always full of surprises when he was around.

“How come I’ve never heard of this Guido guy if he and your dad are such good friends?” Josie asked. “Are you sure Guido isn’t a figment of his colorful imagination?”

“Now, now, be nice,” I teased. “Guido’s actually my godfather.”

Her brow furrowed. “Really? So you’ve met him”

“No, I’ve never met him. He was still in Italy at the time of my baptism.” Guido Sorrentino had grown up with my father in Sicily. My father and his family had immigrated to America while he was a teenager, but Guido’s family had remained overseas, and because of this, the two men had gone several years without seeing each other. Out of the blue, Guido phoned my father several weeks ago and told him that he had bought a local bed and breakfast. He then asked my father if he knew anyone who could provide refreshments for the event. The rest, as they say, was history for my bakery.

“My father met up with him last week for the first time in many years. Dad told me that Guido has always wanted to live in America. He decided to check out the Buffalo region when Dad told him about it. Looks like they’re picking up their friendship right where it left off.”

The whirring noise stopped, and Josie removed the bowl of frosting from the mixer.

“Wait a minute. You said that the bed and breakfast is on Sherman Avenue?”

“That’s right.”

Josie snapped her fingers. “It must be the former Agatha Hotel. That dump has been vacant for like fifteen years. Last time I drove past, the place had really become an eyesore.”

“Not anymore. Guido’s had it completely redone. Dad said the inside is gorgeous.”

Josie’s eyes went round like sugar cookies. “Wow. He must have some serious dough because that had to cost a small fortune. What does he do for a living?”

“He was a mason in Italy. Now, I guess, he’ll be an innkeeper. Or bed and breakfaster. Is there such a term?” I joked.

“Do masons make a lot of money?” Josie asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ll have to ask Mike.” My husband owned a one-man construction company that kept him busy year-round. The money was good, but I still needed to work and that was okay with me. I enjoyed running the bakery, despite the fact that I wasn’t much of a baker. Nevertheless, I had come a long way from the teenager who once made chocolate chip cookies with salt instead of sugar. That was one cookie my family would never let me forget.

“Guido is having the open house tonight and planning on opening the inn for business tomorrow,” I went on. “My father met him for lunch a couple of days ago and suggested again that he offer free refreshments to the public. All we have to do is put the cookies out and everyone will help themselves.”

Josie began to scrape the mascarpone frosting into a plastic container. “I’m not too concerned about the money. I know that sounds weird, especially coming from me, but the thought of getting away with Rob for a free night’s stay at an elegant inn. It will be like a mini

vacation for us.”

I grabbed a spoon and dipped it into the frosting left in the mixer bowl, savoring the taste. Sweet, creamy, and rich. “Oh, this is to die for. Yeah, I’m excited about that too. This is the last time that Mike and I will have an evening out for quite a while.”

“Oh, I’m sure that won’t be the case.” Josie’s blue eyes were teasing. “Your parents will be glad to babysit Mikey Junior any time you want them to.”

I took the cookies Josie made earlier and began to place them inside a plastic tote. “Well, we don’t know for sure it’s a boy.” If it was a girl, she would be loved as much as Cookie, but Josie knew that I wanted a boy. My mother had insisted that I was carrying the baby differently this time, which to her meant a grandson was on the way.

“I’m so glad that my mother-in-law is taking the boys tonight. After the open house, Rob and I are going to order in some dinner and eat in front of the fireplace. You did say all of the rooms had them, right?”

“Guido said ours did because we have suites. There’s one for my mother and father, you and Rob, Gianna and Johnny, and Mike and me.”

“Wait a second.” Josie looked up from arranging snowflake cookies in the container. “Who’s going to watch Alex and Cookie if your sister’s going?”

Alex was my nephew. He would be three in March, and was nine months older than Cookie. “My grandmother’s taking care of them tonight.”

Josie cocked her head to the side. “Are you sure they won’t be too much for Rosa?”

“Grandma offered to do it. Vernon will be there to help her.”

“He’s not exactly a spring chicken either,” Josie remarked. “The man must be pushing eighty.”

“Bite your tongue. The two of them are ageless.”

Vernon Baker was my Grandma Rosa’s fiancé. He had reentered her life a few months ago after a fifty-year absence, and they’d taken up right where they had left off. It seemed strange to think of Grandma Rosa as bride-to-be, but they had made no secret of the fact that they wanted to be married as soon as possible. Vernon told our family that they had already spent too many years apart, and he didn’t want to waste another moment.

“Those two are proof that *love* never dies, no matter how many years pass.” Josie sighed dreamily. “It’s so romantic how they found each other again.”

Grandma Rosa and Vernon’s love story was one for the books. They had first met and fallen in love when my grandmother was a young girl in Italy. At the time, Vernon had been a soldier on a brief reprieve during the Vietnam War. My great-grandparents, whom I had never met, did everything they could to drive a wedge between the couple. They claimed it had been because Vernon wasn’t good enough for her, but Grandma Rosa told me that it was due to Vernon not being Italian.

After Vernon left Italy with a promise to return someday, Grandma Rosa waited to hear back from him. Two years had passed without a word, and she feared that he had been killed during the war. My great-grandparents arranged a marriage for her with a mutual friend’s son, and Grandma Rosa left for America shortly afterward with my grandfather. She did not find out until many years later that her parents had stolen the letters Vernon had sent her. Fast forward fifty years to when Vernon saw my grandmother on a television dating show taped in my bakery. It was an epic love story.

Josie gave a delighted shriek. “I’m so excited about tonight. This is a great way to spice up winter with a fun getaway. And it will be even cozier because we’re supposed to get a couple

of inches of snow tonight.”

“We live in Western New York,” I remarked. “When *don’t* we get snow in the winter?”

“True,” she admitted. “But I was thinking that snow and a roaring fireplace set the tone for a romantic evening.”

I laughed out loud. “Excuse me. Have we met? I’m nine months pregnant. Does it look like I’m going to have any romance tonight?” With swollen ankles, back pain, and major heartburn, it wasn’t a priority for me.

“Whoops. Sorry. I forgot for a second.” Josie’s mouth quirked up at the corners. “Anyway, I don’t think I’ve been to an open house at an inn before. It sounds like a good way to drum up new business by offering free champagne and cookies. Too bad there’s no dinner, but like I said, Rob and I will have something sent in.”

“No dinner, but we will get a full breakfast tomorrow morning!” All I seemed to think about was food these days. “It’s cooked to order, and you can have anything you like. It’s the next best thing to having my grandmother make it for you. Plus, I’m looking forward to sleeping in late.”

Josie snapped the lid on the tote with a satisfying click. “Sundays are the best. Don’t get me wrong, Sal. I love my job, but it’s nice to have a day off once in a while.”

Guilt washed over me. “I’m sorry you can’t have a vacation right now, Jos, but I expect to be back to work a few weeks after the baby comes. Then we can work out something.” I was being overly optimistic. It might be my cookie shop, but the thought of running the business without Josie for any length of time terrified me. In the five years since the bakery had opened, Josie had taken three vacations: quick excursions to Las Vegas and then Florida with me and a cruise with my family. She always arrived early to work and never got sick. There was no such

thing as a perfect employees, but Josie came close.

She waved a hand in the air, as if swatting at a fly. “No worries, Sal. I’m fine. Maybe Rob and I and the kids will take a camping trip this summer, and I’ll ask for a week then. I’ll be sure to give you plenty of notice. Now let’s get these cookies into the car so that we can get over to Bella Vita on time.”

“Let me lock the front door first.” I went into the storefront, turned the sign around on the door to read *Closed*, and snapped the lock into place. As I started to walk away, a banging on the glass startled me. I turned and peered through the slits in the blind. A short, elderly woman dressed in black was mouthing something at me as she shook her fist. “Oh no.” I sighed.

“Who is it? What’s wrong?” Josie asked.

I gritted my teeth in annoyance. “It’s Nicoletta.”

“Don’t let her in!” Josie shrieked.

“Jos, don’t do this to me. You know that I *have* to let her in. She’s seen me.”

“Cripes.” Josie threw her hands in the air. “When are they going to stop letting that woman loose on the streets of Colwestern?”

Nicoletta Gavelli was the thorn in my proverbial rosebush. She had lived next door to my parents for over thirty years and was good friends with my Grandma Rosa. That was where any similarities between the two women ended.

Everyone adored my grandmother. She was a terrific cook, never judged people, and always gave sound advice. Mrs. Gavelli, on the other hand, had taken an instant dislike to me after she found her grandson Johnny and I playing doctor in her garage when I was six years old. It didn’t matter that Johnny had initiated the game and was two years older. Mrs. Gavelli had instantly branded me a hussy. As fate would have it, Johnny was now married to my younger

sister, Gianna, and Mrs. Gavelli was linked to me for life. Some days I had to wonder what terrible thing I'd done to deserve such a fate.

I unlocked the door, and Mrs. Gavelli blew in like a nor'easter. She narrowed her dark eyes at me and scowled, making the lines in her face more pronounced. My father always got a kick out of saying that Mrs. Gavelli would be his next customer. She was never amused.

"Sally Donovan." Mrs. Gavelli made a tsk-tsk sound as I shut the door. "You close five minutes early. What's a matter with you, missy? You know I gonna be here."

Josie put her hands on her hips. "No, we *didn't* know, old lady. And if we had known, you'd better believe that we would have shut down a half an hour ago."

Josie and Mrs. Gavelli were always at each other's throats. If I didn't know any better, there were times I suspected that they even enjoyed it.

"We have an event to cater tonight." Josie stacked the chairs on top of the dainty white tables. They were all covered with beige tablecloths that my grandmother had crocheted for me. "And we're not going to be late because you need a fortune cookie fix."

Mrs. Gavelli grunted in response and brushed past me. She was dressed in her usual outfit of a black housedress, stockings, and Birkenstocks. It didn't matter if it was ten or ninety degrees outside—she always dressed the same. "I gotta have my fortune cookie. I need to see how my luck run tonight."

Josie peered out the front window. "How did you even get here? You can't drive in the dark."

"Ronald bring me." Mrs. Gavelli studied the contents of the bakery case and tapped her bony finger against the glass. "I want those two. No, not those. The two in back."

Ronald Feathers was Mrs. Gavelli's eighty-something-year-old boyfriend. The only

outstanding characteristic about Ronald was that he had more hair in his ears than on the top of his head. He was also hard of hearing. I didn't know if that was a result of all the hair inside his ears, but it had to be a good thing where Mrs. Gavelli was concerned.

The only thing more terrifying than Mrs. Gavelli behind the wheel was to watch Ronald put the pedal to the medal. DMV should have taken his license away years ago. Last week, he had backed out of Nicoletta's driveway and almost hit the neighbor across the street as the woman tried to collect her garbage cans.

"I told you, we need to get moving," Josie said.

"Bah. You not that busy." Mrs. Gavelli shook her finger at me. "And this one here—she got no business running around in her condition. Missy, you go home and wait for baby to come. You so big I dunno how you even move. You sure it no twins? Maybe triplets?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or be offended. "No. There's only one."

"Humph." She gave me a disapproving look. "Doctors—they be wrong sometimes. You got cravings?"

"Excuse me?"

Mrs. Gavelli's face had impatience stamped all over it. She spoke slowly, enunciating every syllable with her broken English as if I were a child. "The cravings. They must be satisfied or your baby get born with birthmark in middle of face."

"Stop scaring her," Josie said. "That's an old wives' tale."

Mrs. Gavelli grunted. "Bah. I no old, and I no wife. If there something you want to eat, you gotta satisfy the craving. You no mess around with this stuff. What you eat today?"

The entire conversation made me uncomfortable. I tried not to picture my baby with a gigantic wart in the middle of his face. "Pickles and garlic. I had a small garlic pizza for lunch."

“A-ha!” Mrs. Gavelli sniffed the air around me. “I got it all figured out now.”

Josie shot her a look of disbelief. “Figured out what?”

“Sally, she gonna have girl,” Mrs. Gavelli declared.

“And you can tell this because she had garlic pizza for lunch?” Josie’s eyes widened.

Mrs. Gavelli stared at Josie as if she had pizza coming out of her ears. “No. You listen up, girlie. If prego eats garlic and then smell like it, that mean she have boy. If she no smell, then it be a girl.”

Josie barked out a laugh. “That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“You go laugh.” Mrs. Gavelli tossed her head. “I be around long enough to know everything. Ask your grandmama if you no believe me.”

I reached down deep inside for some patience. It wouldn’t solve anything to start a fight with the elderly woman. There was no winning for me. My only desire was to get rid of Mrs. Gavelli and close up the bakery so that we could get over to Bella Vita. “Did you want anything else besides the fortune cookies?”

“Sal,” Josie began, but I shook my head at her. It was easier to give in to the woman’s demands and be done with her.

I had some difficult reaching far back in the case with my bulging belly blocking the way, but I managed to grab two fortune cookies with a piece of waxed paper and dumped them into a paper bag. At this point, I would have given Mrs. Gavelli the entire tray to get rid of her.

In order to receive a free cookie, customers were required to make a purchase. The fortune cookies were my bakery’s trademark. They were homemade and dipped in chocolate or Nutella and topped with sprinkles. The real attraction for customers were the messages contained inside. They were often ominous and sometimes came true. I constantly told myself that they

were merely coincidences.

“Here you go. They’re on the house,” I said. “Sorry to rush you, but we really need to leave.”

Mrs. Gavelli snorted. “You two think you so important. Well, you not the only ones with places to go. That why I need my cookies.” She snapped one open, read the message, and made a face.

Josie made a face. “Can’t you read that later?”

Mrs. Gavelli ignored her and read the message out loud. “*Things are not always as they appear.*” She shook the strip of paper at me. “This stupid. What it mean?”

“Nothing, Mrs. G. They’re for fun, remember? You can’t read too much into them.”

Mrs. Gavelli stuffed the message into her coat pocket. “I got no time argue. Places to go, people to see.”

“Right,” Josie chuckled. “Ronald doesn’t count.”

“That show how much you *not* know. Ronald, he come too.” Mrs. Gavelli stuck her nose proudly in the air. “We get invited to fancy smancy event. It an open house.”

My stomach twisted into a giant pretzel. I could only hope that the woman was talking about real estate.

Josie swallowed hard and exchanged a nervous glance with me. “Where exactly are you going, Nicoletta?”

She patted her chest with her hand and belched. “It called Bella Vita. And I gonna be their special guest.”