

BEHIND THE FRAME

TRACY GARDNER

ON THE WAY HOME, SAVANNA told Sydney to stop in town at Giuseppe's Restaurant. "I have to pick up the catering forms," Savanna said. "I need to work on figuring out the menu for the Art in the Park opening day. If the restaurant can even still handle the event. We might need to find a different caterer. Which is a small thing to worry about," she added as they pulled into the parking space behind Giuseppe's.

"If it falls through, we'll get someone from out of town. I'll help. Let's not decide anything until after we hear from Skylar tomorrow."

The two sisters were surprised to find Mia, the proprietor of Mitten Inn, at the bar, chatting with the young sous chef Savanna had met the other night during the banquet. The bartender was restocking the shelves at the other end of the space, and a woman in a serving uniform stood at the cash register, cashing out the only guests left a half hour before closing. The Italian-American establishment held a warm, inviting atmosphere, conjuring old-world charm with soft lighting, starched red linen napkins on white tablecloths, high-backed wine-colored chairs, and the most delicious aromas wafting through the air.

"Girls." Mia spoke, motioning them over to the bar. "You're Charlotte's girls."

Savanna nodded. "Savanna, and this is Sydney."

"Yes, that's right," the older woman said, shaking both their hands. "Mia James. It's nice to finally meet you."

"You too. We're, uh, sorry for the loss of Councilman Bellamy." One should still offer condolences for the loss of an ex-husband, right? Had they been on good terms? What was proper etiquette for this?

"Thank you. Oh." Mia placed a hand on the tattooed forearm of the tall, thin chef behind the bar. "I'm not sure whether you've met my son? He's finally back home in Carson, where he belongs." She smiled up at him. "Remy, Savanna and Sydney Shepherd. Girls, Remington James."

Remy was Mia's son? Until yesterday, she hadn't even known John Bellamy had been married. Was Remy John's son? Or only Mia's? "We met at the banquet Saturday night. You and Chef Fratelli did such a fantastic job."

"Thanks." Remy pulled a rack of wine glasses across the bar and went to work drying and buffing each one with a white cotton towel and then hanging them over his head.

"Is there any word on that?" Mia looked from Savanna to Sydney and back, her voice now much quieter. "You heard he was arrested?"

Savanna nodded, not sure how much to say.

"Yes. It seems crazy," Sydney offered.

Mia was wide-eyed. "I know! I can't believe it."

"We actually stopped by to pick up the catering menu. I don't know if Joe mentioned anything to you?" Savanna looked at Remy. "About the Art in the Park event?"

He nodded. "He did. I'll grab the packet."

When Mia's son had disappeared through the double swinging doors to the kitchen, and presumably Joe Fratelli's office, she turned back to Savanna and Sydney. "You'll have to forgive him. He isn't a talker. And since the arrest last night, I think he's more than a little concerned about what'll happen with the restaurant, and his job."

"That's understandable," Sydney said. "Is there a manager or someone who can help while Chef Fratelli is out? This must be overwhelming."

"Not really. Apparently there's a manager, but she's almost as new as Remy is. He's planning on working open to close until we know whether Joe will be back to work or not."

Remy reappeared, handing a large envelope to Savanna. "It's all in there. When you're ready, drop it back off, and I'll start putting orders in."

"Thank you. Should I wait, do you think? Until we... know more?" She didn't want to give the man more to fret about than was already on his plate.

A frown crossed his features, and the muscle in his jaw pulsed under his five o'clock shadow. Remy's left eyebrow was intersected by a scar on one end, making Savanna wonder where he'd been—*who* he'd been—before he'd returned home to Carson. She didn't remember ever seeing him. He shook his head. "That's okay. Chef will be back soon, I'm sure. Either way, I know he was looking forward to the job. I'll get it taken care of."

"Great. Thank you," she said again. "We should let you close up. It was nice meeting you. Both of you." Savanna looked at Mia.

“Yes!” Mia smiled at them. “Long overdue. Tell your mother I said hello.”

“Have a good night,” Sydney called over her shoulder as they left. The moment they were in the parking lot, Syd gripped Savanna’s arm. “What. Was. That!”

Savanna stared back at her. “I know! Okay, so John’s ex-wife is Mitten Inn Mia. And Mia’s son is Giuseppe’s new assistant chef? Or temporary head chef, I guess? Do you remember him? Is he John’s son too? Why don’t I even remember Mia? Is it just because we were kids and didn’t pay attention to boring adults?”

Syd pulled Savanna across the pavement to the car. She waited until it was started and they were on their way out of the parking lot. “I do not remember that guy Remy. I’d remember him. He’s around our age, right? Late twenties, early thirties?” Syd glanced at Savanna and then back at the road.

“I think so. Syd.” Savanna took a deep breath. “I’m just going to say it. If Joe Fratelli’s knife was stolen to make him look guilty of killing John Bellamy, who’d have the easiest access to that knife?”

“His sous chef.”

“If we don’t remember Remy James, then where was he—where were *they*? How long ago did Mia open Mitten Inn? When was she married to Bellamy?”