

*Weddings* BY *Bella*

BOOK ONE

# Fools Rush In

A NOVEL

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## Prologue

If Uncle Lazarro hadn't left the mob, I probably wouldn't have a story to tell.

Okay, so he wasn't actually *in* the mob, he only sold vacuum cleaners to a couple of guys who were. In the '70s. In Atlantic City, New Jersey. Before I was born.

But still, mob ties are mob ties, right? And we Rossis certainly know how to take a little bit of yeast and puff it up into a whole loaf of bread—which means we've managed to elevate Uncle Lazarro's story to folklore status. And why not? As my mama always says, "A little extra spice never hurts the sauce, just gives it more flavor."

Depending on who you ask, it was a Damascus Road experience that did it. Uncle Lazarro swears he was blinded by a bright light that drove him backward to the ground, just like the apostle Paul in the book of Acts.

My Aunt Bianca, God rest her soul, told the story a little differently. In her version, Uncle Lazarro was hit by a bus on a city street late at night while walking home from a bar in a drunken stupor. She said the headlights came at him like two

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glowing snake eyes just before the kiss of death. She always exaggerated her s's when she said the word *sssnake*, which made the story more exciting.

Afterward, Aunt B. would lift her tiny silver crucifix to her lips, give it a kiss, then roll her eyes heavenward and mouth a silent prayer of thanks to the Almighty—not just for sparing her husband's life, but for returning his sanity and his religion.

Regardless of whose story you believed, Uncle Lazarro ended up at the Sisters of Mercy hospital in Atlantic City, where the nuns got ahold of him and led him to the Lord. He called it a “come to Jesus” meeting, and his eyes filled with tears every time he spoke of it.

According to my pop, my uncle gave up selling vacuum cleaners that same night. From what I hear, he was never quite the same . . . and neither was anyone else in my family. Funny how one event can change absolutely everything. In our case, it set the wheels in motion for the whole Rossi clan to end up in the most illogical of places—Texas.

Transitioning my story from the East Coast to the humid South would be impossible without mentioning my uncle's love for pizza. It's one of a million things we have in common, particularly when it comes to deep-dish, heavy on the pepperoni. He's also keen on coffees, especially the flavored ones with the foam on top. So when he came up with the idea to move to Galveston Island in the late '80s to open Parma John's—a pizzeria featuring the ultimate in Italian coffees—everyone took the news in stride.

Likely, my parents were intrigued by Lazarro's suggestion that they join him in this new venture. My pop, heaven help him, has always been lactose intolerant. I'm still not sure what motivated him to follow after this mozzarella-driven

Pied Piper. Probably just his overwhelming love for his older brother. Love and loyalty—these have always been powerful opiates in the Rossi family. I’ve found them to be both a blessing and a curse.

How my uncle settled on Galveston Island is another story altogether, one that involves the untimely passing of my beloved Aunt Bianca, may she rest in peace. Upon her deathbed, she mumbled these strange and startling words: “Toss my ashes into the Gulf of Mexico.” At least we *think* she said the Gulf of Mexico. My mother insists she must’ve meant Galva Messio’s, her favorite shoe store. Then again, my mama is always looking for an excuse to shop.

Regardless, the entire Rossi clan ended up in Texas, a far cry from Atlantic City not just in miles but in personality. Transplanting the whole group of us—three adults and five children—was no small feat. And the little things nearly proved to be our undoing. For example, I spent the better part of my elementary years figuring out how to transition from “you guys” to “y’all,” something I thought would never come naturally. Now I can “y’all” with the best of ’em.

Turns out Galveston Island was the perfect place to grow up and the ideal setting for a family business. In fact, it turned out to be *such* an ideal setting that my pop, probably weary with the whole cheese thing, decided to open a business of his own—Bella’s Wedding Facility.

And that’s pretty much where my story begins.

# 1

## Mambo Italiano

To be twenty-nine and single in an Italian family is one thing. To be twenty-nine and single with a wedding facility named after you is quite another.

From the day my father opened Bella's, I knew I would never marry. I had enough working against me already. Legs as skinny as Uncle Lazarro's walking cane. Interfering family members, who sabotaged every relationship I ever attempted. Now this. What were the chances someone would actually propose to a building's namesake?

*Bella.* My pop said he chose the name because I was such a beautiful baby. His face always lit up when he told the story of the first time he laid eyes on me in the hospital nursery. "What a vision of loveliness, bambina!" he would say. "All wrapped up like a piggy in a pink blanket with those big brown eyes peeking out . . . You were every papa's dream!" Of course, he could never finish the tale without shouting "Bellissimo!" and kissing his fingertips with dramatic flair.

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I always loved that story.

My mother, known for her brutal honesty, opted to reveal the truth in the trickiest of ways—by showing me photographs. Not only was I the homeliest baby on Planet Earth, my bald head appeared to be oddly misshapen. No wonder they kept me wrapped up like a sausage. They were afraid I'd scare the neighbors.

I'm told by Aunt Rosa—Mama's older sister—that the head thing got better as I aged—kind of like a melon coming into season. And my hair, a mop of long, dark curls, eventually covered up any remaining imperfections. Still, I never completely trusted my father's stories after that. So when he announced his retirement from Bella's a couple of months ago, I wasn't quite sure I believed him.

Only when he added “Bella will take over as manager, and we will all work for her!” did I take him seriously. But why in the world would he pick me of all people—a melon-headed spinster with skinny legs and a penchant for pepperoni?

In spite of my reservations, I eventually came to terms with my new position, even looked forward to the challenges ahead. Right away, I came up with the idea of changing the name of the facility, opting for something modern and trendy. I chose Club Wed, hoping it would draw clients from the mainland for one of our advertised themed weddings. Country-western. Medieval. Hawaiian. Forties Swing. You name it, I planned to offer it.

Only one problem—I'd never actually *planned* a themed wedding before. We Rossis had only hosted traditional ceremonies and receptions. And now, with less than two weeks before my first Boot-Scootin' bridal event, I found myself in a world of trouble. I needed a deejay who knew a little something about country-western music, and I needed one yesterday.

I did what came naturally when in a jam—picked up the phone and called my best friend, Jenna. She answered on the third ring, breathless as always.

“Parma John’s, we deliver.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I heard her voice above the strain of a familiar Dean Martin song. I started to say more, but she continued on before I could get a word in.

“Would you like to try our special of the day—a large Mambo Italiano pizza with two cappuccinos for only \$17.95?”

“Skip the cappuccino. Let’s go straight for the cheesecake,” I said.

“Bella?” She let out a squeal. “Is that you? Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I love it when you give me the spiel. Makes me feel special. And hungry.”

“You *are* special.” She let out an exaggerated sigh, and I could almost envision the look on her face.

If I didn’t know her better, I would think she was schmoozing—trying to bamboozle me into buying the Mambo Italiano. But Jenna was the real deal, “a friend that sticketh closer than a brother,” as the Bible would say. Or, in this case, closer than a vat of melted mozzarella.

I explained my predicament. As I started to ask for her help, she put me on hold and never returned. I listened to three rounds of “Mambo Italiano” before finally hanging up. Some things were better handled in person.

After a hurried good-bye to my parents—who were scouring the World Wide Web for a great deal on a European vacation—I raced out of the door, hoping to find the deejay of my dreams. Only when I reached the driveway did I realize I had company. Precious, my Yorkie-Poo, circled my feet, trying to weasel her way into both my car and my heart.

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“Oh no you don’t,” I scolded. “This is a canine-free catastrophe I’m facing.”

Three minutes later, I found myself belted into the front seat of my SUV, headed out onto Broadway with a Yorkie-Poo—whose disposition did *not* match her name—wrapped around the back of my neck like a lumpy mink stole. Some battles just weren’t worth fighting.

We made the trip to Parma John’s in record time. As I pulled onto the Strand—Galveston Island’s historic shopping and business Mecca—a sense of wonder came over me. The cobblestone sidewalks put me in mind of an earlier time, before the 1900 storm that had taken the lives of so many. And to think the historic buildings were still standing after the recent devastation of Hurricane Ike—what a testimony! Somehow, the two-story brick buildings along the Strand had proven to be as stalwart as most Galvestonians.

I parallel parked next to the sidewalk, not far from the Confectionery, one of my favorite places. Inside, children nibbled on taffies and licked the edges of ice cream cones. I’d spent countless hours in there as a child. Didn’t hurt that Uncle Laz had befriended the owners. In fact, he’d made his presence known throughout the district, often giving away pizza and coffees to his fellow merchants at no cost. One thing—maybe two—could be said of my uncle above all others. He knew how to win over people, and he had the strongest work ethic of anyone I’d ever met. Next to Rosa, of course. She lived with us and worked round the clock to keep us all fed. She worked from sunup till sundown most days, rarely complaining.

Making my way past several of the shops, beyond the throngs of flip-flopping tourists, I finally landed in front of Parma John’s. Seeing the sign out front still made me smile.

Though I'd been young at the time it went up, the love and care that went into it would remain with me forever—the same love and care that went into the design of the shop and the creation of the foods and coffees on the menu.

Stepping inside, I found the shop filled with a larger-than-usual crowd, particularly for a Monday. No wonder Jenna had left me hanging. Likely, she was up to her elbows in sauce and sausage and would hardly remember I'd called in the first place.

I slipped Precious into my oversized purse, then noticed the sound of teenagers' voices raised in song. How Uncle Lazzaro got these high schoolers hooked on Dean Martin was beyond me, but they seemed to have the lyrics to “Mambo Italiano” down pat. I found the choice of music quite clever. My uncle should've considered a career in marketing.

Or wedding planning.

Surely, if someone in my gene pool could come up with a themed pizza, I could carry through with a themed wedding, right?

I caught a glimpse of my older brother, Nick, and gave him a wave. My baby brother, Joey, buzzed around cleaning tables but managed to flash a warm smile my way. I hollered out, “Hey, Professor,” and his cheeks flushed. No doubt he was tired of the name family members had given him after he'd acquired his associate's degree at Galveston Community College. Others in the family teased Joey—all five foot five of him. His long ponytail and tattoos set him apart from the others, but I secretly favored him. Who could resist such a kindhearted nature? And that servant's heart! Wow. We should all have a heart like that.

As predicted, I found Jenna behind the counter, helping with the pizza prep. She looked up as I approached, and a

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dazzling smile lit her face. Until she heard Precious yapping from inside my purse. “You can’t bring that little demon in here,” she scolded.

“She’s no demon,” I argued as I pulled the handbag a bit closer.

Precious chose that moment to let out a growl. I peeked inside the purse, and she bared her teeth at me. I quickly closed her back inside, then turned to my best friend with a forced smile. “She’s getting better.”

“Sure she is.” Jenna shook her head. “You’re in denial, Bella. That dog needs a therapist. And why you would bring her in here—”

“Shh.”

“Do you want the health department to shut us down?”

“I’ll only be a minute,” I whispered. “I just need your help with something.”

“If your Uncle Laz gets wind of this, he’ll fire me.” Her eyes grew large, and I couldn’t help but laugh. My uncle would never fire Jenna. Next to my brother Nick—who now managed the place—Jenna worked harder than any of his employees.

I watched my best friend’s expression change immediately as she took in my new blouse. “Oooh, pretty. That color of green looks great against your olive skin.”

She dove into a dissertation about her pale self, and I listened without comment, as always. Could I help it if the girl had been born with red hair and freckles and skin as white as the gulf sand? To be honest, I found her enviable. What I wouldn’t give to have her petite frame. And those perfectly shaped legs! Where could I go to find a pair of those? Frankly, I thought Jenna was about the prettiest thing I’d ever seen, especially if you factored personality into the mix.

Still oohing and aahing, she brushed the flour off her hands, then reached out to touch the sleeve of my blouse. “See now, you can get away with wearing this style. You’re tall enough to pull it off. But me . . .” Off she went again, on a description of her too-short stature and her inability to wear decent clothes as a result. I’d never really considered myself tall—five foot seven wasn’t Goliath, after all—but Jenna apparently did.

Precious let out another growl, and I shifted gears, ready to get to work. “Thanks, but I’m not here for fashion advice. I’ve got a problem. A real problem.”

“Oh, that deejay thing?” She turned back to her work. As she ladled sauce onto a large circle of dough, she added, “You need someone with country-western experience?”

“Yes.” I shifted the purse to my other shoulder, hoping Precious would remain still and quiet. “Do you have any ideas?”

“What happened to Armando?” she asked as she spread a thick layer of chunky white mozzarella. “He’s a great deejay, and I’m sure he could handle any type of music.”

I sighed as she mentioned my middle brother’s name. “He’s in love.”

“So what?”

“So . . .” I reached over the counter to grab a pepperoni and popped it in my mouth. In between bites, I explained, “He’s moved off to Houston, never to return again.”

“Oh, come on. You know how he is. He’ll be back in just a few weeks. His relationships never last that long. He only dated me for nine days, remember?”

“You were both in junior high at the time,” I reminded her. “Besides, I don’t have a few weeks. Sharlene and Cody are getting married in less than two weeks, and they’ve got

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their hearts set on a country-western theme, complete with line dancing and the Texas Two-Step.”

“Sharlene and Cody? Do I know them?”

“Nope. They’re both from Houston. And that’s the goal here, to draw in customers from the mainland. But if I can’t pull off even one wedding on my own—and let’s face it, I’ve never done a themed wedding before—we’re going to have to close the facility.” My heart twisted inside me as I spoke the words. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents. For that matter, I didn’t want to disappoint *me*. I needed to make this thing work—and I would, with God’s help.

As we chatted about my problem, an incoming pizza customer—a twentysomething construction-worker type—made his way to the counter with a cell phone pressed to his ear. His skin glistened, and his damp shirt carried that “I forgot to put on my deodorant this morning” aroma. I stepped aside to give him the floor. He carried on an animated conversation with the person on the other end of the line, one that didn’t appear to be ending anytime soon. I could see Jenna waiting for an opportunity to take his order, but finding a spot might be difficult.

Finally his speech slowed a bit, and my best friend, ever the savvy one, jumped right in with a polite, “Can I help you?”

He put the person on the phone on hold a moment and glanced her way with a wrinkled brow. “Um, sure. I’ll have the, um, the . . . that Mambo thing. With the frappuccinos.”

“The Mambo Italiano—our spicy sausage pizza—with two large *cappuccinos*?” she corrected him.

“Yeah. Whatever.” While pulling cash from his billfold, he dove back into it with the person on the other end of the

phone. I wasn't deliberately listening in, but my antennae went straight up into the air as I heard him mention something about a deejay.

After he hung up, I couldn't wait to ask. "Did you say deejay?"

The guy turned to me with a quizzical look on his face. "Yeah."

I reached into my bag, nearly forgetting the dog until I bumped up against her and she let out an aggravated yip. I came up with an ink pen. Reaching for a scrap of paper, I added, "And he works here—on the island?"

"Well, yes, but . . ." The guy rubbed his whiskery chin and gave me a funny look.

"Would you mind giving me his number?"

"I guess not." With a shrug, the confused stranger glanced at his cell phone. He squinted to read the number, then said it aloud. I scribbled it down with relief washing over me.

"And would you say his work is good?" I shoved the pen back into my purse.

"Oh, he's the best on the island." He slipped his phone into the back pocket of his jeans and narrowed his eyes, perhaps trying to figure me out. "He comes highly recommended. I've seen him in action several times over, and his clients have never been disappointed."

"And how is he with country-western music?" I posed the most important question of all. Whoever I hired would have to know his stuff in this area. Heaven knew I didn't.

"Country-western music?" My new hero shrugged. "It's his favorite. How come?"

"Oh, just curious." I reached out and shook his hand, adding, "Mister, I think you might've just saved my life."

"Really?" As he reached up to swipe a hand through his

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thick blond curls, his cheeks reddened. “Go figure. I just came in here to order a pizza.”

“No, you came in for far more than that,” I explained in a whisper. “I believe this was a divine appointment.”

“Divine appointment,” he repeated as if trying to make sense of the words. He reached to pick up the two cappuccinos Jenna had prepared for him. I heard him muttering the words again as he made his way to a nearby table.

I gave Jenna a “Go God!” wink, then turned toward the door. I’d nearly made it when Uncle Lazzarro’s voice rang out from the kitchen.

“Don’t you let me catch you bringing that dog in here again, Bella.”

“Yes sir!” I gave him a playful salute, then, with a spring in my step, headed out to face the rest of my day.