

The Mobster's Daughter

Rachel Scott McDaniel



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To my kids, Drew and Meg.

*Chase your dreams fiercely.
And know I love you forever.*

CHAPTER 1



SEPTEMBER 28, 1923
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

S napping wind yanked at the letter in my hand, and my fingers tightened, the crisp edge biting into my palm. The sharp scrawl on the envelope had faded. The ink on the page within had disappeared in worn creases. But I'd committed every word to memory. The vague phrases and lone coin had revealed a crucial message—he needed me.

An ocean had once separated Papa and I, but according to the attendant at the baggage check, the gap had now narrowed to a mere eight blocks. Stomach rolling as if I was still on the S.S. Colombo, I forced myself to walk farther into the bowels of Pittsburgh. My first glimpse of this city had been back at Union Station. The architecture of the railroad depot mirrored my homeland, with its high ceilings and arched entrances, but the more I progressed into this unfamiliar area, the more my wariness rose.

Smokestacks lined the distance. Their blazoned mouths puffed ashen vapors, charring the atmosphere. The buildings diminished in

grandeur and increased in decay. Layered with soot, they stood—some leaned—like wounded tin soldiers blackened with gun powder.

After passing several more streets, the stir of people had thinned. Disturbingly so. I glanced at the dulled street sign, my thoughts tangling like the webbing of trolley cables hovering over me. Had the gentleman manning the shoeshine stand advised me to turn right at Wylie Avenue? His Italian accent proved thicker than his earlobes, and—while Madre Chamberlin had instructed that I only speak English in America—I'd succumbed to my native tongue. The man's brows had risen in surprise, but the camaraderie of a shared language had loosened his hardened mouth, and he'd steered me in the right direction. Or so I hoped.

Muscles still aching from the drugs the doctor had forced down me during my challenging time at sea, I trudged forward for the final two blocks. A man hauling wooden crates packed with glass jugs loomed toward me. He sneered, and I jumped out of his way, my elbow skimming the stone wall framing a cigar shop. I scrunched my nose at the grimy residue on my red sweater. Was all of Pittsburgh this neglected? Or only this sad district? I feared the latter. Which only confirmed my mission in coming here. Papa had fallen on hard times.

Papa.

I eyed the letter in my hand. The last one he'd sent. The reason I'd journeyed so far. Papa had been so consistent in his correspondence over the years, almost religiously so. Then to stop writing me altogether? No, something had to be wrong. Papa never missed one month, let alone four in a row. What if he'd had fallen ill? What if...

My vision blurred, the colorless surroundings fading into each other. I had to get to him. Blood pulsing in my ears, I hastened my steps. A few determined blinks cleared my eyes from biting tears. *Papa*

is okay. If not, I would've known. One doesn't lose a sliver of its soul without feeling the devastating ache.

Smoke-filled heavens obscured the sun, blocking any light on this cement jungle, forbidding me from judging the time. Was it nearing six in the evening? Seven? And what about my trunks? In my haste, I'd forgotten to ask the baggage attendant if they'd hold my things until tomorrow. Too late to turn back now.

I rounded the corner, the pace of my feet matching that of my heart. Papa had begun each letter—*To my precious Catarina*—but would he even recognize me now? Would he think I resembled Mamma? The earthquake that had ripped through my village had stolen everything in my world. Today, I'd get a piece back.

A dark automobile rattled through the intersection. The driver caught sight of me and slowed the car. My heart punished my ribs, but I kept moving. The car, now rivaling the pace of a garden snail, crept alongside me. I felt the man's unsettling stare but refused to glance over. Thankfully, I only had one more block to Papa.

The car jolted forward, the shriek of tires jarring my bones. Then as forceful as it lurched, the vehicle braked, stopping cold. The man let out a stream of tobacco which landed dangerously close to my shoes. I couldn't help but peer at him. His weathered face framed eyes colder than the breeze rolling off the Atlantic. His lips curled back in a snarl, and he sped off.

I released a shaky breath. What was going on? Were the locals trained to recognize an intruder? Having been raised by missionaries bent on helping the poverty-stricken, I'd been accustomed to the slums. Could navigate without fear through the beggar-burdened streets. But here? Something was noticeably different. An eeriness settled about me, as if the air itself whispered a complaint against my presence.

Could I claim this place as my new home?

My answer came in the form of painted black letters on a slab of wood.

Salvastano Bakery.

Oh, that familiar name. My heart swelled as if filling with a thousand songs, a lively burst of music purposed only for moments like this. I sailed across the street, my oxfords clicking a joyous cadence against the cobblestone. On the other side, my vision registered the storefront as something crunched beneath my feet.

Glass.

The windows of Papa's bakery had been shattered. The shards strewn across the spit-stained walk. The wooden siding pocked with—I gasped—bullet holes? The address my father had faithfully signed on my letters were skewed on the broken entrance door. Why was his bakery destroyed? My eyes narrowed and peered inside the building. Everything was gutted. Hollowed and broken.

Where was Papa?

A low whistle from behind punctured my thoughts, and I spun on my heel. Two men, mouths curled around cigarettes, stood as if they'd been there all day.

"A little late to be traipsing Rumrunners Row, miss." The gentleman's height intimidated me as his gaze roamed from my wool hat to my weakened knees.

Rumrunners Row? I swallowed and inclined my chin despite the unease weighting my gut. "I'm looking for Hugo Salvastano." Aside from a nervous warble, I pronounced the words to perfection, not a hint of my Italian heritage slipping.

"You and about a million others, sweetheart." The other man with floppy hair took a bold step toward me, something glinting in his granite eyes. "Though a pretty young lady like you shouldn't get mixed up with a murderer."

My fingers flew to my breastbone. Wrong move, considering both men's gaze latched onto my chest. I cleared my throat which sounded as if I'd swallowed the chunks of glass beneath me. Maybe they'd heard me wrong. "Hugo. Hugo Salvastano. He's the one I need to see."

Tall Man sucked air through his teeth and sunk onto a mildewed barrel. He patted his thighs as if beckoning me to plop onto his lap. "How about you tell me why you're seeking a coward who plugged his own brothers and then a cop? Sorry to ruin your little plan of *working* your way into his good graces." Smoke billowed from his cigarette, tangling in the shadows. "You're a pretty little thing, but the Salvastano empire is no longer. Big Dante runs the show now."

My breath stabbed my lungs. What was he talking about? Papa *killed* Uncle Lorenzo? Uncle Pedro? That couldn't be right. But then, why had the bakery been destroyed? Why had his letters stopped coming? I eyed the return address on the envelope in my hand, now aware that he'd never shared the location of his home. I'd assumed the building of his bakery was also where he'd lived, like it'd been back in Spirelli. But one glance at the small storefront revealed otherwise.

Oh, Papa, why the secrets?

Was he running from justice? Were these men—whose faces appeared as honest as Mussolini's speeches—actually telling the truth? Fatigue that had lingered at the shores of my soul came flooding in with the force of an ocean. My eyes struggled to control the rush of moisture, losing the battle when a tear spilled down my cheek.

"Look, Benny, you made the dear cry." Floppy Hair's voice dripped with mock compassion. "Big Dante has room enough for everyone, baby. But you have to start at the lower rungs before climbing your way up." His arms stretched forward, reaching, but I jumped back, smacking my foot off a wooden crate.

This Benny person tossed his cigarette on the ground and stood. “We’ll be easy with you.” His venom-drenched words pulsed dread in my veins. “Honest.”

Caging a scream, I sprinted down the sidewalk in the direction from which I came. Heavy footsteps sounded closer and closer. My gaze darted, searching for a shop, any place, I could duck into. All was closed tight for the evening. I wouldn’t make it to the station before they reached me. Rounding the corner, I attempted to catch a glimpse of them over my shoulder, but—

Smack.

The impact dipped my hat over my face, but I could still spy the badge.

il Poliziotto.

I’d collided into a policeman. A rather large one. The attackers halted their steps but didn’t retreat. My shoulders heaving and breaths cutting, I slid behind the officer’s commanding build.

“Are you giving this lady trouble?” The officer’s deep voice held an accusing edge, but to me, the tone was as soothing as Mamma’s lullaby, a sense of safety unfurling within me.

“Just trying to show her how things are done around here.” Floppy Hair taunted. “And you’re interrupting.”

His back muscles tensed under his navy uniform. “No, I’m taking over.”

“This ain’t your territory, Jennings.” Benny shoved a finger into the policeman’s chest. “Remember what Salvastano did to your Pa.”

A small gasp escaped my lips, but none of the men took notice. My rescuer grabbed Benny by his collar and shoved him. The man landed hard on his backside.

The officer—Jennings, was it?—took a commanding step toward the ruffians. “I don’t take kindly to threats.”

Benny skittered to his feet and tugged Floppy Hair's arm. "Big Dante will hear about this. Mark my words." He released a string of cusses as they both darted off.

The officer's gaze followed them down the road until they disappeared. After several pounding heartbeats, his stare shifted to me. "You shouldn't be here."

The need to hide my appearance had me scrambling for the handkerchief in my pocket and pressing it to my face. Here was hoping my hat obscured the rest. There was no telling if any of my features resembled Papa's and I couldn't take the risk. Those men had claimed Papa had killed this man's father? Plus my uncles?

The officer's massive hand cradled my elbow, but I tugged away.

"Let me escort you home." His voice was noticeably gentler than before. "I wouldn't want Big Dante's men getting ahold of you."

I had nowhere to go. Papa was to be my haven. He was to welcome me with an embrace that bridged the seventeen-year span of our separation. He was to smell of Toscano cigars and home.

A sob sank into my bones. I didn't know what world I'd stepped into, but I wanted out. Away from men who accused my Papa of murder. Away from policemen who could discover my identity and haul me away.

I scrambled from the officer and his questioning blue eyes, hoping beyond hope I'd be able to navigate my way to the station. But what then? It wasn't until I reached the third block without stopping that I realized my empty hands.

I'd dropped my handkerchief and . . . Papa's letter.

CHAPTER 2



9 MONTHS LATER

I stepped back from the microphone, famously dubbed by KDKA broadcasters as ‘the tomato can’ for its tubular appearance and angled away so the world couldn’t catch my sigh. My accent had almost slipped on the second verse of the song, winding my nerves tauter than a violin string.

Feeble moments like those were dangerous. If anyone ever found out that the voice radiating from the radio belonged to Catarina Salvastano—that I was actually the mobster’s daughter—I would lose everything.

So Catarina Salvastano had been buried in the grimy cracks of Rumrunners Row and Kate Chamberlin had risen in her place. It had taken some adjusting, but the persona was crucial for survival. Kate Chamberlin, my adopted identity since my first evening here, sounded as native to Pittsburgh as Heinz Ketchup. The American missionary family I’d left behind in Italy wouldn’t mind if I borrowed their surname.

I ran my index finger along the beige “monk cloth” inside Studio A and waited for the program director’s signal. The velvet-blanketed walls from ceiling to floor proved excellent for acoustics, but not so good for the familiar panic snaking across my chest. While the room boasted the radio transmitter, instruments, microphones, chairs, and two fake plants, the ample space lacked what I needed at the moment—an outside view. My eyes slid shut, and I imagined the horizon. A place where I wasn’t closed in. Trapped. Picturing the beautiful scope of the vast Spirelli sky dusted with soft pinks and calming blues, my heart relaxed. My breathing evened.

So much for leaving behind my past.

My eyelids opened to catch Mr. Fleck tugging levers and twisting dials on the transmitter box. With a satisfied nod, he gestured a thumbs up, meaning Studio B had overtaken the broadcast.

“Another solid performance, my friend.” Peggy set down the xylophone mallet with a beaming grin. “You make performing to the masses look so simple.”

I returned her smile with a more delicate one and collected my folder, even though it hadn’t contained the necessary song sheet. How could I have mistakenly placed last week’s selection into its leather pockets? And today of all days.

“Did you catch Stella’s face when you mastered the final section?”

“No.” I’d been too focused on not losing my job. I’d been commissioned with the important task of singing *The Town Hall Waltz* in honor of Manchester, England tuning in. My boss, Frank Conrad, had been testing the shortwave transmitter and informed me there’d be extra listening “guests” for today’s performance. Good thing I’d taken the time to memorize the song or I’d be making a fool out of myself in two countries. So no, I didn’t have cause to throw glances Stella

Kromer's direction. Though I did wonder why the gossip-peddling secretary sat in on my airtime?

"Her face was more sour than drinking a whole can of pickle juice." Peggy's soft laugh tinkled like the chimes she'd played earlier. "One day she'll be sorry for that silly name she calls you."

Killjoy Kate.

Yet not far from the mark. The more stories I'd heard about Papa's dealings the more my soul crumbled to ash. The fire of life extinguished. I had no desire to carry on frivolous conversations, especially on the topics that consumed Stella's attention. *Men and dance halls*. Besides, the less I talked, the better chance I had of disguising my accent. The better chance of no one making the connection between the Salvastano line and myself.

I pressed my lips together. Papa, who always had a ready smile that punctured his cheek with a deep dimple, was the alleged man responsible for fueling all the stills in Pittsburgh. Under the pretense of the bakery, he'd supplied yeast to the bootleggers, had run a notorious speakeasy. A violator of the prohibition. A murderer of the innocent.

I pushed a stray lock behind my ear, wishing I could tame my thoughts just as easily.

I followed Peggy into the room adjoining the studio, filed the music into the tall cabinet, and exited into the hall. My lungs expanded as I peered out the window. The eighth floor of the Westinghouse plant provided a substantial view of East Pittsburgh.

Murky clouds hovered unvarying in their shade. A severe contrast to Spirelli skies, but I remained still—like usual—taking in the expanse. The other buildings utilized by the engineering empire filled my vision. From whooshes and hisses of the generators to piercing steam whistles, this place buzzed with activity. It was the pioneer in technology. But to me, it'd become my convent. My safety. On the

fringe of the Steel City, I was tucked far enough away from the tremors of the Salvastano manhunt, but close enough to hear rumors in case Papa was found.

Peggy nudged my shoulder. "I know who you are."

Those five words gripped me by the throat.

"You're not Killjoy Kate. Never will be." She turned serious hazel eyes on me, her voice emphatic. "You're the giving hand that brings an extra lunch for the janitor. The kind face that smiles at me when I hit a clunker on the bells. That gentle voice that sings to orphans on your days off."

Relief spun through me even as suspicion raised my brow.

Peggy's mascara-caked lashes batted sheepishly. "My uncle delivers ice to St. Paul's orphanage. He told me about you."

The gentle man with the wagon and aged mules was her uncle?

Peggy looped her arm through mine. "You don't talk much, but there's more to you than words. You're all goodness."

I offered a tight-lipped smile. If only Peggy knew about the tainted blood coursing my veins. This façade bred enough deception to fill the Allegheny River. The current of my lies threatening to pull me under at any given moment. I glanced at Peggy's innocent face. Could I confide in my friend? Reveal the devastating truth?

No, I couldn't. And for the same reason I had devised the charade in the first place—because of the danger. Not only was the federal bureau after Papa, but so were the opposing crime lords. There was much to fear about those who ran Pittsburgh's underworld. I'd heard too many stories about how mobsters would target the relations of their rivals. I didn't want to imagine what those gangsters would do to me if they discovered who I was.

The less Peggy knew, the safer she'd be.

“And I can see why you do this every day. You’re gazing out at your blessings.” Peggy motioned to the window. “It’s a great reminder to be thankful for where God put us.”

My craving for this view wasn’t as noble, considering the need had been birthed from tragedy. A time when death had caged me. I stiffened against a chill and clamped my stare on a sparrow in flight. *Oh, to be as free.*

“It’s nice to remember, you know? That even on our rough days, we’re part of history.” Peggy expelled a dreamy sigh. “This radio thing has really taken off. What if we became famous? Wouldn’t that be something?”

That would spoil my goal of becoming invisible. “You’d do well in the spotlight.” Peggy had a cheery disposition and didn’t have a family of murderers. I allowed myself one more glimpse of the outside world before heading toward the cloakroom.

Peggy placed a hand on my elbow. “So I know that it’s a gorgeous day to have lunch outside, but...” A conspiratorial smile split her freckled face. “I have it on good authority that the Casino brought back the fig pudding.”

Any other day, I would favor the tranquil courtyard by the library over the congested cafeteria. But fig pudding was the food of angels. My stomach rumbled its agreement. “Casino it is.”

We strolled the stretch of hallway, Peggy filling my ear with chatter about some handsome gentleman who attended her church.

Harold Arlin stepped in from the stairwell, his youthful face slightly flushed from the multi-floor climb, his arms loaded with folders and papers. “Nice segment today, ladies.” His tone rumbled so rich and deep, it was no wonder his audience regarded him as the ‘Voice of America’. Harold’s gaze bounced between us until settling on me. “I

overheard the boss singing your praises in his office to good ole H.P. Davis. How you single-handedly saved the station last week.”

A slight smile curved my mouth. Frank never missed an opportunity to brag about me to the vice president of Westinghouse. The man had his doubts when Frank had hired me—upon the insistence of his wife—as Frank’s personal secretary without any references. My typing had been adequate, my organizational skills even better, but it wasn’t until Frank happened upon me singing at my desk that things had turned in my favor. When I’d admitted I could play piano, too, he’d given me a position as a KDKA musician. “I didn’t do much. Just sang a song.”

Peggy chuckled, blonde curls dancing on slender shoulders. “Harold, you should know by now that Kate dismisses every compliment thrown at her.”

“Doesn’t change the truth though.” He gave a friendly wink. “She sings much better than Greer Donnelly any day of the week.”

I bit back a laugh. Everyone knew Miss Donnelly was one of the most sought out singers in the country, possibly the world. But her popularity instantly declined among Westinghouse workers—especially for Harold—when she hadn’t appeared for her interview with him. The place had fallen into chaos. With no one else having anything prepared, I had stepped in.

“Before I forget, this is for you.” Harold shuffled the paperwork until he could balance the stack on one hand and offer me an envelope with the other. “It was left in your broadcasting mailbox. Your first fan mail, maybe?” His mouth stretched into his signature grin. “No writing on it. Makes me think your admirer is someone from the inside.”

Peggy giggled and my brow scrunched. All I had done was fill in the vacant slot by singing the lullaby Mamma sang over me so many nights. The same gentle melody I’d clung to while trapped under debris

those many years ago. The soothing words that'd echoed in my soul my first night in Pittsburgh when I'd returned to the train station only to encounter my boss's wife. I would always be grateful to Flora Conrad for seeing more in me than a sobbing heap on the depot bench.

Peggy peeked over her shoulder at Harold's retreating form into Studio A, and then at the letter. "You know what that is, don't you? I bet you that's from Robert Fuller." She wagged her brows, and heat crept up my neck. "The poor sound man has been making moony eyes at you for weeks. He nearly dropped the microphone stand on my foot last Tuesday when you strode into the room."

"I'm sure he's not interested." I had done my best to make my appearance as unimpressive as possible. As if stepping into the role of Killjoy Kate, I'd routinely dressed in bland, saggy clothes. The rising trend for hairstyle was the bob, chic and just below the chin. I piled my dark locks behind my head in a boring, fat bun. "There's no name on this. It could've been slipped into my box by mistake." I'd never received anything unmarked before. If it was from my KDKA superiors, it would boast the stamped letterhead and not be concealed in a blank envelope.

"Aren't you gonna open it?" Peggy pulled ajar the stairwell door and regarded me with a saucy grin. "If it's not Robert addressing his undying affection for you, I'll buy you fig pudding for a week."

Pulse humming, I broke the envelope's seal. I eased out the paper, but it was blank as well. Odd. I unfolded it, and a card slipped out, falling onto the cement stairwell landing.

I retrieved it and peered at the single marking—a red capitol "S". The top half of the letter morphed into a snake.

Peggy's gasp echoed off the block walls, and she leapt back as if the ink serpent was real. "The Salvastano snake."

Salvastano? I blinked at the card in my hand.

Surely, Papa wouldn't send this. How could he? He didn't even know I was in Pittsburgh.

"Oh dear. Oh dear." Peggy fanned her pale face. "I've heard of it but never seen one with my own eyes."

I placed a hand on Peggy's arm. "What are you talking about?"

"This is known around Pittsburgh as *The S Threat*." Her nervous eyes rounded. "Receiving that card is a death sentence."