

Chapter One

It had been a matter of time. But that knowledge didn't lessen the hollow ache that welled up inside Julia De Luca as the mourners dropped roses into the hole where her mother's coffin lay. The priest's pale, lined face appeared white against his dark robe. Head tilted skyward, he lifted his eyes and one hand as he pronounced his final prayer for Gianna De Luca.

Julia's fingers, moist under the August sun, clutched the slick stem. She stepped forward and let her rose fall to join the others. Silently, the petals hit the wooden coffin. She lifted her eyes from under a wide-brim straw hat and panned the small cluster of mourners. Her mother's friends from church, some long-ago colleagues. No relatives. Only her.

"She's in a better place, Julia, you know that," came the soft words from Sylvia, her mother's former best friend. *No*. Julia corrected herself. *My mother's best friend*. Just because her mother's last years had slipped away as a result of Alzheimer's didn't make Sylvia any less of a friend. The woman had visited her mother at least monthly over the last three years.

Julia offered a half smile and a nod. The women leaned toward each other for a tight, lingering hug. When they pulled apart, Julia said, "Thank you for being there for her, Sylvia." From experience, she knew it was hard to visit the memory care center and make conversation with someone who stared at the wall without speaking or slept through the visit. It was required of a daughter, but not of a friend, bless her. Sylvia had been her mother's faithful friend for over thirty years.

Sylvia shook her head, as if dismissing the gratitude. "*You* were there nearly every day, Julia, especially toward the end, despite running a successful business. I don't know how you did it."

Julia shrugged. It hadn't been a choice. It was her mother. "We all do what we have to. I knew we didn't have much time together and I wanted to be there as much as I could. I have competent employees who kept the ship afloat on the business side of my life. They were very understanding, too."

Despite the cold block still weighing down her insides, a stray thread of contentment pushed through her sadness like a stubborn seedling. Her interior design business had kept her sane over the last years of her mother's decline. She'd thrown herself into projects and new designs, her sadness driving her to risky, out-of-box creativity, and it had paid off. Her reputation had shot well above obscurity in the last year and a half, to the point that she was sought by local celebrities, big hotel chains, museums, and event spaces.

Her work was a satisfying anesthesia, an effective pain-blocker, at least during working hours, which extended far into the evening on most days. "I'll be taking the next couple of weeks off to regroup and go through Mom's storage unit." She swallowed. What would *that* be like without her anesthesia for two weeks?

Sylvia nodded, but her brows knitted with sympathy and concern. "I hope you'll get some rest as well. And don't be alone too much, Julia. I know you do that sometimes. Call me if you want to talk or be with someone."

"I will." She laid her hand gently on Sylvia's shoulder. "Thanks for the reception you prepared. You didn't have to arrange all that. It was a lot of trouble."

"No, not really. And it was my honor. For Gianna. She was a treasure to me for over thirty years. Friends like that don't come along every day. I'll miss her. I *have* missed her." As she looked away, her eyes filled and her face took on a misty expression that suddenly made her appear older. She looked back at Julia and the upbeat thrust of her voice seemed forced. "And don't feel like you have to stay at the reception for too long. I think people will understand."

Julia was grateful for Sylvia's acknowledgement of an accepted fact, that post-graveside receptions were difficult for family members. She'd have to spend a minimum of time, nonetheless.

She hugged Sylvia more tightly the second time. "See you in a bit."

Turning away from Sylvia, Julia stared at the hole where her mother lay, a last gaze before she closed her eyes. "Bye, Mom," she whispered. When she opened them, several tears spilled down her cheeks. Her mouth and throat were dry and perspiration trickled between her shoulder blades. She shifted her gaze to the stone alongside her mother's fresh grave. A grave for Joe Connelly, the disembodied name of a father she'd never met. Her mother had wanted to be buried next to Joe, concluding the ending chapter of the Joe Connelly thread of their lives.

It was about time.

Julia's gaze roved over the remaining guests in Sylvia's living room. They chatted quietly or refilled their paper plates from a table with canapes, quiche, fruit, and mixed nuts. During nearly two agonizing hours of the reception, she'd hugged mourners and answered questions about her mother. Some attendees hadn't seen her mother much since her retirement over ten years earlier. Most hadn't seen her at all in the three years since she'd moved to the memory care facility.

"Wasn't your mother really young to have Alzheimer's?" The question came from one of her mother's former hospital colleagues whose name escaped her.

"Not really. It was within the normal range. She was seventy-five when she was diagnosed and seventy-eight when she passed." Julia swallowed on the hard words, still too fresh. She'd done research on the disease and none of it had been encouraging. "My mother also struggled with emphysema, which likely made everything worse." And sped up her departure.

When the woman wandered away back to the food table, Sylvia sidled up to Julia and said, "You need rest, Julia. You've been through a lot. Why don't you go on home? Of course, I don't mind if you stay. It's up to you, but don't feel obligated to stay."

"Thanks, I am pretty tired." She gave Sylvia a grateful smile and didn't wait for the suggestion to come again. Soon on the freeway, she put distance between herself and sadness. Just then, home wasn't the destination in view nor a place where her heart would receive solace.

Instead, she wove through the suburb into the next town and sought the familiar brick building. A few shoppers and strollers roamed the sidewalks. She parked along the street and unlocked the metal door of her shop, De Luca Interiors. She stepped through the doorway, leaving the busy sounds of Saturday out on the streets. The air inside was stuffy, since the shop had been closed for a couple of days. Just being within its walls lifted a weight from her chest.

Her design shop was a world apart from the cemetery and from her mother's memory care center, where she'd spent countless hours over the last year. In the gray dimness, her fingers fumbled and found the switch. Light flooded the space. It had the feel of a living room, with comfortable beige chairs in soft leather around a low table covered with design books. Underneath the seating area sprawled a huge oriental rug in beige and navy blue. Off-white counters, tables, and racks displayed samples of color, texture, and patterns. One entire wall built from multicolored used brick created a trendy yet vintage-looking backdrop for framed photos of Julia's designs of homes, hotels, and offices.

Julia crossed the store to the color palettes on the far wall. She stood and stared at them. Sighing from a deep place inside her, she allowed the soft turquoise and dusty rose to penetrate her like a balm. She smiled and relaxed her shoulders as tension released like a metal lock suddenly opened.

Her appreciation of color was cheaper than a therapist and more effective. It had always been healing for her, going back to her childhood. She'd grown up the only child of a single mother who'd immigrated from Italy in her twenties. Even then, Julia had been the one to decorate their sequence of small apartments in New York. She remembered clearly how much she'd craved the virtual "excitement" that color could bring to a drab, inexpensive urban dwelling. Her mother had often taken her to fabric stores where she chose bright patterned lengths of cloth to cover their shabby furniture, the coffee and dining tables, the windows. Every surface she could beautify. If it wasn't suitable for fabric, she used paint.

She'd also put together outfits from her mom's thrift store purchases. "You have the flair, my Giulia," her mother would say, her still-strong Italian accent so familiar and charming to her. "You can make anything out of everything, my amazing child." No one was surprised when Julia attended design school in New York and began working at a large design firm there while still in her twenties.

A lifetime ago. The memories turned like pages of a scrapbook, those of a rising career, a failed marriage, friends come and gone—these were filmy images, no longer sharp in her mind. Her mom had always been there in the background, supporting her, offering sage advice when asked. She'd been a solid presence during some hard experiences, both for herself and for Julia.

Julia could say she'd miss her mom, but Gianna had been "gone" for the last three years. It was as though she'd lost her back then, gradually. Of course, along with mourning there was relief. Relief that the indignity and waste of her mom's final state were over. And if Julia were honest, it would take *her* time to recover from the rhythm she'd had to keep, stretched between her mother's needs and her own company and employees. But taking off two weeks might not have been the best idea.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time, Mom.” Her words filled the quiet of the empty shop. She’d have to go through her mother’s storage unit, something she should have done ages ago. Her mother hadn’t needed anything inside it for years, but Julia had put off the task of emptying it out. That was one thing she could do during her time off, which would likely be much too long.

In the pocket of her linen dress, she felt a vibration. Someone had just texted her. For the last few days, she’d received sporadic showers of emails and text messages—condolence from her employees, acquaintances, and friends. Those messages did bring comfort, diluting the sting of her aloneness. Especially consoling were the frequent messages from Marissa, Eden, and Sydney, women who’d become like sisters. The four of them had been friends in college twenty-five years earlier. Years of sparse contact followed, threaded together only by Christmas cards and Facebook updates and the occasional phone call. But in the last couple of years, following the loss of their marriages, whether through widowhood or divorce, they’d begun getting together twice annually for a girls’ weekend. That bi-annual retreat was a lifeline for each one of them. Too bad the next one wouldn’t be for another three months at Thanksgiving.

She’d heard from her friends at least three times each that week. The current text was possibly one of them checking in on her, aware that her mom’s service had taken place that day. Julia typed the code into her smartphone and scanned her text messages. Two from her employees, Crystal and Jake, one from Billy, a suitor who wouldn’t take no for an answer, and Eden. She clicked on Eden’s message.

You are right now at this very moment in our thoughts and prayers, Julia, with truckloads of virtual hugs and kisses. A thread of warmth snaked through her grief as she read Eden’s message. She couldn’t stop a slow smile from stretching across her face. Especially now, their friendship was vital. She kept reading: *But that’s not quite enough for our Julia. So, we’re all coming to see you. Tomorrow, in fact.*

Julia’s mouth dropped open. “What? They’re coming tomorrow?” Her eyes kept scanning the message. *I hope that’s okay with you. We’ve been on the phone together discussing what we can do to support you during this time and we decided there was no substitute for hands-on hugs and loving on you! So, let me know when you get this. Eden.*

She let the welcome news sink in. As she did, the weight rolled away and was replaced by an airy, carefree lift she hadn’t experienced in over a year. A chuckle escaped her throat as she typed, *Yes! That’s okay! Let me know when you’re coming and I’ll be ready. I took off some time, so this is perfect!*

A perfect way to put off the inevitable. Only a weekend, but she’d take what she could get. If ever there was a time when she needed to see Eden, Sydney, and Marissa, this was it.