

SPELLS & OREGANO

BOOK TWO

THE SECRET SPICE CAFÉ

by Patricia V. Davis

“Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.”
~ *Oscar Wilde*

Prologue

Bensonhurst, New York, Good Friday, March 29, 1991

The bad man was back and Mama was afraid.

She pushed Santi into the kitchen cupboard under the sink. Shoved next the drain pipe, he could barely fit. When he opened his mouth to protest, she pressed her hand against his mouth.

“*Statti tsitto!* Be quiet!” Mama spoke Sicilian only when she wanted her sons to know she meant business. “Promise me you won’t come out. Promise me you won’t let him know you’re here, no matter what happens. *Promise* me, Santino!”

She also used their full names.

Santi didn’t want to promise. He wanted to stay with her, to protect her. He wasn’t a baby. He was six. But Mama’s eyes looked so, so scared when she whispered to him, that to make her feel better, he promised. Before he was left alone in the dark, before the cupboard door closed completely, Santi saw her hands shake.

Those shaking hands would be one of his last memories of his mother.

In the confined space, the sound of his blood rushing faster and faster through his veins was louder to him than the fist he could hear pounding on their apartment door. He pressed his lips together so he wouldn’t cry out when the bad man shouted his mother’s name.

“Gina! I know you’re in there. Open up, goddammit, or I’ll break this fucking door down!”

When the bad man kicked against the wood, Santi’s whole body jumped. He wanted *Nannuzzu*. Oh, how he wished for his *Nannuzzu*. And he wanted his brother too.

But *Nannuzzu* and Luca were at the Brooklyn Bridge, for the Way of the Cross. Luca had

had laughed at him when Mama told Santi he had to stay home just because of his stupid cold. Why did Luca always get to do things he couldn't? His brother was always so lucky. And now look what'd happened — he had to hide in the dark. He had to hide, and he was scared, just as scared as Mama was.



Elliot Abramson lived with his wife in the one-bedroom apartment downstairs from Gina and her sons. He'd been deaf in one ear since he was seventeen, when, while in the infantry in WWII, a 37mm artillery shell had exploded closer to him than a shave with a straight-edge razor. As a result, he walked with a limp and kept the sound on his TV up way too high, whenever his wife wasn't around to tell him to lower it, that is. "If Satan himself knocks on our front door, we won't hear him, Eli," was her fondest saying.

She had the right of it. Today she was out playing mahjong, and Eli didn't put it together soon enough that the strange sounds he heard were coming from the outside hallway, not from the old John Wayne flick. He turned down the volume to listen with his good ear.

Oy, not again. It was Rocco Miceli making all the racket. For more than five years, he'd been witness to the hell his young landlady was being put through by her estranged husband.

Eli empathized with Rocco's condition. But the banging on his wife's door and the screaming threats? That was too much. Things were getting way out of hand. One of these days, Gina or one of those cute twin boys of hers was going to get hurt. Eli knew she'd never call the cops. Poor kid still held onto the hope that her 'real' husband would return someday. When he heard the flimsy door crack as Rocco slammed his body against it, he didn't waste time. Regardless of what Gina would want, he hurried over to the phone as fast as his bum leg could get him to it.



Gina was devastated to see Rocco step into her kitchen over splinters of wood. He'd demolished her front door. It was unfathomable to her that he was capable of that kind of violence. People had warned her. Friends, family, had all said that one day he might completely snap. No matter what they'd told her about his condition, she still couldn't bring herself to believe that he'd ever truly harm her or their sons.

Now, here he was — the man who'd adored her, who'd treated her like a princess ever since they were teenagers — looking at her in a way she'd have never imagined he could or would. It was a look that had her quaking right down to her bones.

As he came toward her, she stood in front of the sink, her hands clenched together in an effort to steady herself, the backs of her trembling legs pressed firmly against the cabinet that held Santi. She knew why Rocco was here. He wasn't getting anywhere near her baby.

"You changed the lock," was the first thing out of his mouth. "Why would you do that?" He was breathing so hard he could barely get the question out.

Gina heard the genuine bewilderment in his voice. "Oh, Rocco." Fresh compassion washed over the terror. She'd never stop hurting for him. Ever. No matter what. "Have you forgotten? I had that lock changed months ago. The *last* time you tried to break in."

"What are you talking about? I never did that. Who's making you say these lies about me?"

She stayed silent as she stared back into his long-lashed, southern Italian eyes. First thing about him she'd fallen for back in high school. Even the nuns hadn't been able to resist the flirtatious fun in them, she remembered. Now, she saw nothing in them but madness.

"Answer me, dammit! Who's telling you to say these things?"

She bit down on her lip when he gripped her shoulders, and willed herself not to call out for help, not to glance down at the cupboard behind her. “Nobody’s telling me anything, Rocco. Please. Please listen.” She pressed her palm against his chest. “You need help.”

“Don’t say that to me!” In what Gina hoped might be a glimmer of lucidity, he responded, “I *can’t*. Don’t you see? I can’t go back to that hospital, Gina. The things they do to me there ... I can’t function with what they give me.”

“There might be other drugs, other things to try —”

“No. You don’t get it. They make me ... I ... I can’t think. I can’t feel anything.” His hands, still at her shoulders, squeezed. “I can’t make love with you.”

She closed her eyes briefly against the pain of those words. How could she explain that they hadn’t lived together, haven’t been lovers for more than five years? She knew she shouldn’t, and yet she couldn’t help but touch him again. She stroked his face. “Why, Rocco, why? *Why* did this happen to you after so many years out? I just don’t understand. I’ll never understand.”

Seeing her soften toward him, he took his chance. He pressed his lips to her forehead. “Let me have the boy, Gina. He’s dangerous.”

She went rigid at once and pulled back from him. “No, he *isn’t*, Rocco. He’s just a kid. We’ve been over this and over this.” She heard the shrill desperation in her voice, and knew that Santi was hearing it too. Please God, let him stay put, she prayed.

Willing herself to speak calmly, she reasoned, “Rocco, this idea you have about him — it’s just another strange thing that’s come into your head. Don’t you see that?”

His grip on her shoulders tightened. “If he stays with you, he’ll hurt somebody, I’m telling you. He needs to come with me. I need to take him underground.”

She saw it, then. His expression altered just enough, in just such a way, for her to see that

she'd misjudged how ill he was. It dawned on her all at once what he might be capable of, what he might do. Quick as lightning, she reached out behind her, blindly, to the countertop next to the sink, and fumbled for the wooden knife holder. Grasping one of the knives, she swung it out toward him.

"Get out," she whispered. "Get out, *now*. You're not getting near either one of my kids!"

Her body went cold when, for a moment, he looked almost amused by her bravado. In a flash, his manner changed again, and with no effort at all, he twisted the knife out of her hand. She heard it clatter when he threw it behind her into the sink. She tried shoving him next, but it was like pushing a pile of boulders. She kicked him in the shin, ducked away from him, and ran. He jerked her back by her hair before she could get to the phone.

"Get off me! Get off!" She pummeled and scratched at his hands.

Without letting go of her hair, he swung her around to face him, and roared, "Where's Luciano? Where's Santino? Where are my sons, goddammit?"

"They're not here!" she flicked a glance at the sink, and was horrified to see that the cupboard door was now slightly ajar. Trying to stall — to *think* — she told Rocco part of the truth. "They're with my father. At the bridge."

He released her at once, and stumbled back from her like a drunk. "The bridge?" The change in him from rage to frenzied panic flummoxed her. "They're at the *bridge*?"

Standing there in the bright, homey kitchen, where his little boy was hidden from him and the wife he cherished shrank from him in fear, he saw only one bridge — a smoldering one that had been blasted to pieces. He saw human body parts flung across torn and twisted rails. He saw the corpses of his men scattered on the sandy, weeded bank. He saw mothers and babies with straight black hair and sun-browned skin floating lifeless among the dead fish in a river that

was red with blood. He saw a jeep in flames on its side, two Marines still trapped within, screaming as their flesh burned. He'd gotten there too late that time.

This time he wouldn't.

Gina went ashen when he pulled a P226 out of his jacket. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God, Rocco — where did you get that? You're not allowed to have that!"

He made for the ruined door. "I have to save them."

"No! You can't go out with that." As frightened as she was, as lightweight and tiny, it was a tribute to how much they'd once loved and trusted that she stepped in front of him, a powerfully-built, trained Navy Seal.

But in his delusion, she wasn't his little Gina. She was an enemy intent on sabotage.

"Get out of my way!" He picked her up and flung her behind him as easily as his sons flung their toys, and kept on. Rocco didn't know what he'd done until he heard the sickening crack of her head hit against the corner of the kitchen countertop. Turning from the steps, he saw her, on her back on the linoleum tile, her shoulder bent, her neck twisted at an angle that made his blood run cold.

That's when he remembered who she was.

"Gina!" He ran to her and knelt by her side. "Oh, no, no." Lifting her hand, he touched her wrist. "Not my baby, not my Gina. Oh, God, please no." He laid his ear against her chest, willing her heart to beat. "Please, God. No!"

It was a warm spring day for New York, and Gina had left the apartment windows open. Even so, Rocco's wails of torment nearly drowned out the sirens, the slamming of car doors outside the building, the sound of feet drumming on the pavement.

He was very clear now, on where he was, what he'd done, and what was taking place. He

could hear them as they came into the building, their voices and questions to the old man who lived downstairs distinct and commanding through the door he'd split apart. When they started up the stairs to the apartment, cautiously, guns drawn, he leaned down over his wife, and, like the prince who'd kissed Snow White, he pressed his lips to hers.

“Gina,” he whispered, “I love you. I’m sorry, my baby, my beautiful girl. I didn’t mean to hurt you. You know I would never have hurt you.” He put his gun to his temple. “I’m coming with you now.”



Huddled under the sink, Santi eyes and lips were clenched shut. He couldn’t feel his legs. They hadn’t gone numb the way they sometimes did when he stayed in one position for too long when he was watching TV. It was as if there were a nothingness where they should have been. But he could feel his stomach. It felt like it did when he had to go to the bathroom and didn’t know if he could hold it. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears as though it were separate from his chest, in the cupboard with him somehow, there in the dark. But that couldn’t happen. None of this could be for real

Wake up. *Wake up*, Santi, wake up. The words spun round and round in his head.

Any minute he’d open his eyes and he’d be in his bed, for sure. Then he could get up and fall asleep again on the soft, fluffy throw rug next to Mama’s bed. She never chased him away, always pretended she didn’t notice he was lying there, so he wouldn’t feel ashamed that he was scared.

That’s all this was — a terrible nightmare.

But then he peeked out and saw the bad man drop to his knees next to Mama and cry and

cry. Now he knew who the man was.

When he heard the police, his hysteria pitched. They'd find him. They'd know it was his fault Mama was hurt so bad, because he'd stayed hidden, because he hadn't jumped out to help her, like Batman would.

As he pulled back behind the cupboard door again, he heard two gunshots — one right after the other — *Kapoom! Kapoom!* The sounds were so loud and so close, scarier than when he heard them in the movies. That's when he knew that this wasn't a nightmare, that they'd shot him, and he would die now because he hadn't helped his mother. That's when he screamed.

He screamed for his brother, "Luca! Luca!" His brother was magic. His brother was the only one who could make it all stop.

He was still screaming Luca's name when they pulled him out of the cupboard.



Luca was having fun even though he kind of wasn't supposed to since it was Jesus's Dead Day. Luca always found a way to have fun, no matter where he was or what he was doing. It was fun being outside, looking out at the water and the skyline. The Verrazano was his favorite bridge, even though it was hard to pronounce. It was fun holding a lit candle in his hands. No way Mama would have let him hold one if she were here, but *Nannuzzo* said he was big enough. Besides, Luca knew a secret trick to keep the candle steady, so he wouldn't accidentally set fire to any of the ladies' hair, like happened sometimes when people weren't careful.

Nobody knew about all the tricks he could do except for Santi. Sometimes, even Santi thought he was making them up. Like last year, when they were both here, all of a sudden he

could understand what the priests were saying while they prayed. He'd asked Mama what language they were speaking and she told him it was Latin. He'd whispered to Santi, "I can speak Latin," and Santi said, "Shut up. No, you can't, you liar."

But Luca was telling the truth. He could speak Latin. He didn't know how he'd learned it, just as he didn't know how come he could do the magic tricks that he saw David Copperfield do on television. David Copperfield was his favorite magician, and Luca could do almost all the magic he could do, except make the tigers or the pretty girls disappear. Luca didn't have any tigers, and he didn't know any pretty girls except his mother, and if he made her disappear, he thought she might scold him. He did make Leonardo, their turtle, disappear once, but Santi said if he didn't bring him back he would tell.

He wished his brother were here now. He knew Santi was probably still mad at him for teasing him this morning. He felt bad about that, but Santi was so much fun to tease that sometimes Luca couldn't help himself. Everything was so serious to Santi. If Santi were here, he'd probably tell Luca that he shouldn't call it "Jesus's Dead Day." But he still might smile about it a little. If Luca managed to make Santi laugh, that was his best magic trick of all.

Nannuzzo gave him a nudge. "Uh oh. Get ready. *Signora Zarcone's* coming over."

Signora Zarcone knew Luca's mother's family, the Castellettis, way back from when both families had still lived in Sicily. She'd once told Luca that she remembered when *Nannuzzo* was born. That almost seemed impossible. He wondered how old *Signora Zarcone* was compared to Jesus.

"*Figgiu beddu*. Beautiful little boy!" Mrs. Zarcone zeroed in on Luca, engulfing him in the overpowering scents of fried meatballs and Jean Nate After Bath Splash. His grandfather managed to snatch the candle he was so proud of just before he dropped it.

Mrs. Zarccone was too intent on pinching Luca's cheek to notice. "*Beddu!*" she declared again. "You're so handsome." She nodded to his grandfather. "*Ciao, Paolo. Comu si? Your grandson's getting so big, God bless him.*" When Luca rubbed his cheek, she cackled. "Where's your brother today, eh?"

"He had to stay home, *Signora*. He's sick." Luca smiled at her even though his cheek was throbbing. *Signora* Zarccone reminded him a little bit of the witch who made the poisoned apple. Her back was so hunched that she wasn't all that much taller than he was. She smelled kind of funny too. But she was okay. Any minute now she'd open her handbag and pull out something for him — a piece of gum or chocolate, maybe even a quarter.

Mrs. Zarccone made *tsk*-ing sounds. She peered at him. "You got the eyes of your father, that *povero pazzu*. Which one are you — Luciano or Santino?"

Paolo Castelletti stiffened at the comment about his son-in-law being a 'poor crazy one.' People saying things like that, it was disrespectful to his daughter. She was the one to feel sorry for, raising two boys by herself, and putting up with that bastard's antics, besides. Like hell Rocco was crazy. Nobody got shell shock ten years after the fact, no matter what the doctors said. It had to be drugs. Not only that, the whole neighborhood knew better than to mention him in front of the twins. They'd been told nothing about their father, and now, from the look on Luca's face, he knew he'd have questions to field. To distract the boy, Paolo answered the old bat himself.

"It's Luciano, *Signora*. You can tell them apart because Santino doesn't have a birthmark, but Luciano does. See?" He pointed to just above the neckline of the boy's t-shirt. Mrs. Zarccone leaned in closer and gasped. Luca's birthmark was bright red, and in the perfect shape of a star.

“*Madonna mia!*” She crossed herself. “He’s got the devil’s mark.”

Paolo went from insulted to furious. Old lady or not, he wanted to slap her. Putting his arm around his grandson, he pulled him away. “*Buon giorno, Signora,*” he said, his voice tight. “Have a good Easter.”

Luca tugged the hem of his grandfather’s suit jacket as they walked away to follow the rest of the procession. “*Nannuzzo,* why did *Signora Zarcone* say those things?”

“Eh.” Paolo dismissed her with feigned casualness. “Pay no attention. She’s old. She’s probably senile.”

Luca didn’t know what ‘senile’ meant. “But do I? Have my father’s eyes, I mean?” That had caught his attention more than her denouncement of his birthmark.

Paolo hesitated before answering. “You have beautiful eyes. And yes, they are like your father’s. But your smile — now *that* is just like your mother’s.”

The answer pleased Luca. He took his grandfather’s hand as they walked along together and he thought about his mother’s smile. It was beautiful too. Like his father’s eyes, he supposed, although he’d never seen them.

But, he could see them. Just like that — a picture of his father’s eyes, his father’s entire face — appeared inside his head, clear as crystal. Why he was so sure it was his father, why that face seemed familiar, he didn’t know. It should have been a good feeling to finally be able to see him, if only in his mind, but there was something ... something that didn’t feel right.

He stopped short, as dread, abrupt and inexplicable, filled him. He could see his mother now too, lying on what he recognized were the worn, yellow squares of their kitchen floor. Her eyes were closed. Her face looked too white against her black hair. She was lying too still.

Luca’s breathing went harsh and rapid as he saw Santi next. And Santi was screaming.

Mama! Mama! Luca! Help me! Help me, Luca!

Paolo looked down at his grandson's bowed head. The little boy had started shivering as though with fever. He was squeezing Paolo's fingers so tightly that the arthritis in his joints ached. "*Chi ce?* What is it, Luca?"

Luca looked up. "I want to go home. I want Mama. I want Santi. Santi ... *Santi!*"

The next thing Paolo knew, he was running back across the bridge, his knees nearly buckling from the weight of a shrieking Luca in his arms. He had no idea what the hell had happened, but the child was having some kind of panic attack.

Mrs. Zarcone crossed herself again as they ran by.

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