

Chapter One

Thursday

"Dammit to hell!" Alex Montoya crumpled the bank's letter and hurled it at the trashcan.

Way to start the day on a crummy note.

"Bastards!" He leapt to his feet and slammed his foot into the metal can. It bounced and rolled, spewing an arc of paper across the floor. Pain shot through his toe, giving him another reason to curse.

Nostrils flaring, he wrestled his temper under control. He sucked in deep breaths and willed his head and heart to quit pounding. Hands splayed against his desk, he stared at the red-splashed financial reports littering the surface. Blatant visual evidence of the restaurant's huge cash drain didn't improve his mood or his blood pressure. Reservations, sales, and cash flow had plummeted when news about Tim Stevens' misdeeds hit the airwaves and exploded in the newspaper, on the internet, and God only knew where else.

He'd expected the initial hit. He hadn't anticipated *weeks* of crappy business.

But this... he stomped on the crumpled letter as if he could grind the bad news into the carpet. He hadn't worked his ass off becoming a chef for *this*. Their three-generation family business was not going down the drain while he was in charge.

He snatched up the phone and punched in the number for Desert Accounting. "Holly Price."

No "please." No "may I." Just, *put the woman on the phone*.

Now.

"I told you not to call me." Holly's distant tone made her sound like a complete stranger.

At least she hadn't sent him to voicemail. He might've finally committed a felony if she had.

"You have to fix this." His hand tightened around the phone. "You backed me into this position."

"I didn't make this mess. Tim Stevens—your partner— did."

Holly's tone stayed level. It was the professional, CPA, I'm-in-control voice that infuriated him.

"*Silent* partner. I invested with him. Period. He ran things."

"You're still his partner."

Dammit. He'd regret joining forces with Tim Stevens for the rest of his life. He strode across his office, his cell pressed to his ear. He jerked aside the curtain and stared at the parking lot which should've been full of cars. "You stirred everything up. If you'd left it alone—"

"It was all going to come out anyway." Holly cut him off—another habit of hers that annoyed him.

He stormed around the office. "You didn't have to drag my name into it. I didn't do anything wrong."

"I don't have any idea what you did or didn't know. It *was* your business, after all."

"My investment. Not my business." His free hand lashed through an arc that encompassed the office and the restaurant beyond it. "I'm a chef, remember?"

Holly stayed silent. He could imagine her weighing the pros and cons. For a second, he hoped she might actually offer something helpful.

"Last I heard, the Prosecuting Attorney's office is still investigating—the entire business."

"Then talk to him." Alex's blood pressure spiked again. "Do you know what happened this morning? My bank threatened to cut off the restaurant. The bankers, who were my 'best friends'

because I was a 'best customer' a month ago, will barely talk to me. This bullshit is hurting my business, my family. People won't come here to eat. My mother cries herself to sleep.”

“Gee. Sorry to hear that.”

How could Holly be so unfeeling? He grabbed a fistful of curtain, wishing he could grab her and shake some sense into her.

Her tone penetrated his anger.

Damn. Mentioning his mother was a mistake. The women hated each other. That fact alone should have warned him not to get even casually involved with Holly. To add insult to injury, after hauling his name through the mud, Holly had dumped him for the cop who'd arrested Tim.

Why couldn't women be like his sister Lucia and want to stay home? To have families and be the anchor that held everything together like his mother did? What could be more important than that? Besides, his mother had found plenty of time to meddle in the family—and the family business—after his brothers and sisters were grown.

“What do you expect me to do?” Holly's voice brought him back to his immediate problem.

“Be supportive for once.” He released the curtain. “Remember how mad you were when that ass—that cop you're dating now—was messing with *your* business?”

She made a noise but he overrode her. “Show the Prosecuting Attorney I wasn't involved. You have Tim's records. You were the Stevens' Ventures accountant. You found all that crap he was doing. I need you to stick up for me.”

“I keep telling you. I. Can't. Do. Anything. You aren't my client. I'm not an attorney. I'm out of it. No one is going to talk to me about this case.”

“You're my friend. At least I thought you were.”

“We are friends, but do you want me to risk my license?”

“Of course not.” He prowled the office, shoved the trashcan back toward the desk. “How am I supposed to prove I didn't do something?”

“You can't. Like you said, I've been there. You have to finally grow a pair and own the problem. Talk to the PA yourself.”

“Grow a pair?” Renewed fury surged through his veins. “I live with this problem. Every. Damn. Day.”

“Really? It sounds to me like you want to blame everyone else for your problems and expect someone else to clean up your mess. Well, guess what, Alex? It's not my problem.”

And she hung up.

Alex slammed down the phone and rattled off every curse word he knew in two languages. Head down, he leaned on his desk.

What the hell was he going to do now?