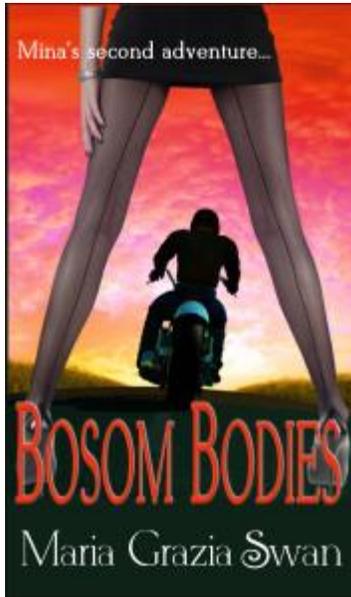


Chapter 1

December 1990



Employees must wash hands before returning to work.

Mina stared at the sign posted on the mirror above the sink. She still couldn't grasp the fact she was one of them, *the employees*.

How could she have let Ginger, her yoga instructor, talk her into doing this? How? They weren't even really good friends. From yoga to waitressing at Bosom Bodies? She glanced at the curly red wig, the thick, fake lashes fluttering like butterfly wings. The image looking back from the mirror was a full size version of that doll. What was it called? Orphan Annie? No, not that one, oh, Raggedy Ann. Mina's eyes moved to her black top, stretched to the max over her foam-

padding bra. This was no ordinary padding. The falsies had foam nipples to create the illusion of bona fide implants. *Viva l'America*. Two large, sparkly Bs marked *the spots*. According to the marketing people, the Bs stood for Bosom Bodies. Mina had her own version, Big Boobs! And to make sure everyone noticed them, the letters were imbedded with pretentious rhinestones. The kind Paola used to call, "circus diamonds."

"If Paola saw me like this..." She said it out loud. It had been over a year since her mother's death. Mina still found herself talking to her and thinking of her as she did when she believed Paola was her sister.

"There you are." One of the other waitresses peeked in the bathroom door. "People are hungry. Orders are getting cold. What's your problem? Wanna get fired your first day on the job?"

"*Magari*. I wish," Mina mumbled. She checked her red mini skirt, adjusted the uncomfortable top with the nametag that read "Ginger" and went to serve those hungry people. Barbara, the manager, hired Ginger, the real Ginger/yoga instructor, and since she hadn't started working yet, no one else knew what Ginger looked like. The only person aware of the switch was Barbara, and she already clocked out for the evening. Two more days and Mina's career as a redhead, big-busted waitress at Bosom Bodies

would be over because Ginger would be back from her impromptu honeymoon. She didn't know how Barbara would explain the new Ginger to the rest of the staff, and she didn't care to know. The last time Mina waited tables was fourteen months earlier in October 1989. Before Paola's death, before Mina met Brian. She wasn't going to think about Brian now.

Her high heels clicked on the concrete floors of the smoke-filled restaurant. The loud music and the chattering noise could cover up cannon fire, never mind the annoying shoes. Round tables, higher than regular dining tables, with stools to match, occupied most of the large room. The rest of the space was taken by a well stocked bar. Men of all ages, shapes and means warmed most of the seats. They must all come for the food, Mina thought as she stretched on her toes to be able to hear the orders. Even in high heels, she was the shortest waitress there, and the least busty, the least giggly and, at twenty-four, probably the least young. Then again, she wasn't depending on the generosity of these men to make rent.

"Ginger, psst," Angelina beckoned from the other side of the glass separating the kitchen from the main room, "I put your plates here to keep them warm. Take them."

Angelina's English was marginal, but her intention to help Mina/Ginger was clear enough. She was the only ally in this whole place. Mina suspected it had to do with the accent, sort of a bonding factor. Angelina sounded Latina and probably had cultural similarities to Mina's Italian background. She looked so young to Mina. How did she end up here? In this...restaurant? Mina could see past Angelina's sweet smile. She could read the sadness and uncertainty in the young woman's eyes. They reminded her of her own eyes, her own feelings those many years ago when she first stepped off that plane at Los Angeles International.

She grabbed the warm plates and tried to make sense of the orders. She couldn't read her own handwriting. *That's what using computers will do to you!* Eyes watching her? She turned around. The kitchen helper, a short dark-haired man, was looking at her. His name was Diego. The girls talked about him, calling him the silent type. Mina wasn't even sure he understood English. Something about his piercing eyes made her uncomfortable. She gave Angelina a smile of thanks and scooted to her assigned tables.

It was nearly midnight by the time she walked out of Bosom Bodies.

Only Diego, a cashier named Lisa, and Mina remained. Angelina and another waitress left a few minutes earlier. Due to corporate policy, Mina had to change clothes before leaving, so she looked even more silly with the idiotic wig and fake lashes wearing her jeans and the Ultrasuede coat, which was Paola's last gift. She was thankful she didn't know a soul on this side of town and aimed to keep it that way.

Her ragtop Bug was parked at the back of the building inside the fenced area reserved for *the employees*. There was that funny word again.

Enough rain drizzled from the night sky to allow December to be taken seriously even in Southern California.

Mina noticed something peculiar about her car. Maybe it was the reflection from the streetlight, but the car looked lopsided.

"Hurry up," Lisa the cashier said. "I need to lock the gate, I'm already late. The sitter will charge me overtime."

"Hey, I'm sorry. I think I have a flat tire." Mina walked around her car and, sure enough, it was the front tire, passenger side^{3/4}as flat as her chest beneath the padding.

She could call Triple A. Her membership was current, wasn't it? It would take time, and Lisa wanted her out of there. She opened the hood and remembered the spare tire was sitting in the warehouse of West Coast Software where Mina left it to make room for moving boxes. That was last week. She had forgotten about the tire.

"*Maledizione!*" She slammed the hood close.

The male voice came from behind her. "So you're Italian."

Mina turned. Diego stood looking down at the flat tire. She was surprised at his perfect English, no accent, yet he understood Italian? Italian swear words. *How about that?*

"Lisa, go ahead, go home. I'll lock the gate as soon as we take care of Ginger's car." Mina stopped herself short of explaining her name wasn't Ginger. She bit her lip and avoided his eyes. The man made her feel self-conscious. How old was he? And what did she care? Lisa started the engine of her small, beat-up truck, waved to Diego, ignoring Mina and drove off in a blast of unmuffled engine and Michael Bolton's falsetto.

“Do you have a spare tire?” Diego asked.

“If I did, I would have already taken care of this.”

“Oh, you change your own tires? In the dark, while it rains?”

She hated him. Smart-ass. That was one American expression she found fascinating and mostly to the point, especially on this occasion. How would that translate into Italian? Not very well. Smart *furbo*. Ass.

“Do you want a ride home?” Was he talking to her?

She looked around. The only vehicle left in the fenced space was her Volkswagen with the flat tire. “A ride? On your shoulders?”

“Suit yourself. Your car will be safe until tomorrow, but there aren’t any cabs around here.” He glanced at her heels. The streetlights played hide and seek with his expression. Even so, she knew he smirked. “See you tomorrow,” he said.

Mina watched him walk to the side of the building. She didn’t know what to do. The damp wig itched. Her leaden feet ached. She wasn’t used to being on her feet for so many hours. All her prickliness left her. She wanted to sit in her car and wait for the sun to come up or this restaurant from hell to open, so she could use a phone. Who would she call? Brian was on a flight to Europe with his loony mother, and Mina hadn’t dared tell Paco about moonlighting as a waitress in this place. *Maledizione*.

The rhythmic, engine growl preceded him as Diego cruised around the corner on a shiny monster Harley.

“Last chance.” He looked even smaller on that huge thing. He revved up the engine and waited. Mina approached him, still unsure. He steadied the bike by firmly planting both feet on the pavement. He wore fancy black boots. Who was this Diego, really? A substitute for a honeymooning cook?

“I don’t have an extra helmet.” He strapped his under his chin. “How far do you live? I don’t want to get a ticket because you aren’t wearing one.”

“I’m wearing a wig. It’ll soften the blow if I fall.”

He didn't smile.

She moved up beside the motorcycle and sent a mental thanks to the corporate policy that made her change clothes. She could never straddle that metal horse wearing a short skirt. Even with her jeans, she had trouble. Her legs were too short and she had to lean on Diego's back to get on.

"Do you need anything from your car? Is it locked?"

"No and no."

"What do you mean? You didn't lock the car?"

"I never lock the car. Just go. Let's get it over with it. I'll have someone come over in the morning and fix the tire. Go."

He turned and clicked the padlock on the gate without getting off the bike. "Yes, ma'am, but tomorrow is Sunday. Most places will be closed."

She shrugged in the dark as he steered through the front parking lot. The instant they reached the road they gained speed. The bike glided under a canopy of twinkling holiday lights decorating the streets. A whiff of wind lifted her wig. Damn! She held on to Diego's waist with one arm while trying to keep the wig from flying off her head with the other. Diego patted her hand. Mina sensed he did it just to annoy her. He must have picked up on her discomfort. Soon they crossed the bridge and were in Newport Beach.

"Okay, you can drop me off just up the hill." She yelled into his back. She had no idea if he could hear her with that helmet.

"What hill?" He heard her. Good.

"Bayside Condominiums."

He whistled. "You live there?"

"Your Harley would look right at home in the garage." She remembered a magazine article about Elizabeth Taylor having a Harley-Davidson. She felt pretty sure Ms. Taylor didn't play with cheap toys. "You can let me off at the gate, thanks."

He removed his hand from hers, made a sharp turn to the left and stopped the bike with the motor running. “*Buona notte,*” he said without turning his head.

Jerk. She struggled but got off the shiny machine without too much huffing and puffing. She knew her wig was askew. She pulled it off, tucked it in her pocket, and hurried to the gate. She waved to the old man minding the gate when she walked by. Her hair felt glued to her scalp after all the time spent wearing that wig. One set of the fake eyelashes were stuck shut. She tried to open her eye, but it only fluttered. The guard winked back.