

CHAPTER 1

It's in his blood.

You don't believe him? Listen to this.

Buddy Mercurio's father worked for the Chicago Outfit during the Depression, running a network of books and keeping the local precinct cops in line. Before that, Buddy's grandfather handled Al Capone's bootlegging operation. Yes, *that* Al Capone. Before that, back in Naples, Buddy's great-grandfather was capo for the preeminent Camorra clan in Campania. Before that . . . who knows? A Mercurio probably sold counterfeit Michelangelos to gullible popes. A Mercurio probably supplied dice to the Roman legions and took a healthy cut of the action.

Mercurios don't play by the rules, Buddy tells anyone who will listen. Mercurios make up their own rules, follow their own laws. They're born pirates, outlaws, rogues, and desperados. It's in their blood.

Buddy's father is killed in the Ardennes, the Battle of the Bulge, when Buddy is six. His mother remarries and moves the family to St. Louis. Those aren't happy years for Buddy. The family bounces around from cold-water flat to cold-water flat, each one smaller and more squalid than the last. Buddy's stepfather drinks away whatever money he manages to earn burning trash or hosing down slaughterhouse walls. A real bum, a loser, so Buddy's mother beats Buddy and his brothers. Does that make sense? Not to Buddy it doesn't. His mother hammers them with a wooden spatula until the bruises bloom on the backs of their thighs. She goes about it solemnly, devoutly, daily, like she's saying the rosary.

Buddy's almost expelled freshman year of high school for breaking into gym lockers, but he talks his way out of that jam. He is almost expelled

sophomore year for losing his temper and breaking a punk's nose. But he talks his way out of that jam too. The principal likes him. Teachers too, even though Buddy barely squeaks by in most of his classes. Buddy knows when to crack wise and when to shut up. You have to pick your spots.

Expelled senior year for smuggling booze onto campus and selling it to the freshmen. Buddy doesn't bother trying to talk his way out of that. By this point Buddy has taken the measure of secondary education. A textbook can't teach you anything about life.

He has to get out of St. Louis. The dreary winters, the air gritty with coal smoke. It's going to kill him. He gets a job setting up pins at the local bowling alley. The owner of the alley, when he's busy at the bar, lets Buddy count the night's receipts. A grave error. Within a month Buddy has enough money for a bus ticket. He's read about Las Vegas in a copy of *Life*. He's gawked at the photos. A place like that can't be real.

And now, 1961, here he is: the top of the world. Vegas is everything Buddy imagined and more, the city a convertible speeding down the highway, a soft whisper in your ear, a pounding heart. At night the glow from the Strip can be seen from miles and miles away, as if a flying saucer from some distant planet just landed in the desert. Maybe it has!

Vegas is an open city, a peaceable kingdom, a miracle of criminal cooperation. The New York families, the Chicago Outfit, the New Orleans mob. Los Angeles, of course. Cleveland, Detroit. It's the United Nations of crime. Buddy, twenty-two years old, works for the man himself, Sam Giancana. Well, Buddy works for Vincent Salvo, who reports to Pete Bommarito, one of Sam Giancana's top guys. The Outfit, when it comes to corporate structure, is as stiff and rigid as IBM. But Buddy is climbing the ladder fast, building a reputation for himself. Sam Giancana has an eye on Buddy. Whenever their paths cross, Sam winks and says, *Heya, sport*.

Buddy gets a prime booth at the Golden Steer. He sits next to the stage when Louis Prima plays the Casbar Lounge. When Buddy steps up to a table at the Stardust, the dealer slides over a stack of chips. Not bad for a kid who—just a couple of years ago—climbed off the bus with a cardboard suitcase coming apart at the seams.

What Buddy loves most about Vegas is how brand-spanking-*new* it is.

Bright, clean, hardly anything more than a few years old. Buddy drives a Jewel Blue Chevrolet Biscayne straight off the dealer floor. He rents an apartment with air-conditioning, an electric range, paint so fresh you can still smell it. St. Louis was old and crippled and dying. Vegas squeals like a brand-new baby, big deep breaths and the blood pumping.

The work is right up Buddy's alley. He's a talker the way Gene Kelly is a dancer. Vinnie Salvo, his boss, always sends someone along with Buddy, but Buddy usually tells the gorilla to wait in the car. Honey catches more flies than vinegar. "We've got a problem," Buddy will say sadly, earnestly, like he and the guy late with the dough are in this together.

Buddy isn't what you'd call classically handsome. Not quite enough forehead, not quite enough chin, a bit too much nose. But he's got a nice head of hair and his dark eyes hint at intriguing depths. And don't forget: he's a silver-tongued devil.

He dates showgirls from Lido de Paris, Les Folies Bergere, Holiday in Japan. He dates backup singers for Nat King Cole and Frankie Vaughan, cocktail waitresses from the high-roller rooms. A different girl, or two, every weekend. His social calendar is full. A gentleman, he always brings flowers. He opens doors, lights cigarettes, never misses a beat.

Vinnie Salvo's wife tells Buddy he needs to find himself a nice girl and settle down. Settle down? Fat chance, Mrs. Salvo, fat chance.

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May of '61, balmy and sweet, the mountains softening and the hotel pools opening. A rumor reaches Buddy: a girl at the Hacienda so beautiful she'll stop your heart. Buddy scoffs. The Hacienda? Nobody worth knowing spends a minute at the Hacienda. It's a dud, a snooze, the only hotel and casino in Vegas without mob ties. The crowd: families, tight-fisted yokels. There's a go-kart track, a miniature golf course, and (get this) a puppet show.

Still, Buddy's philosophy, when it comes to the ladies, is to leave no stone unturned. He rolls down in his Chevy Biscayne one Wednesday afternoon to have a look at this alleged Greek goddess. She works in the lobby dress shop, the only salesgirl on duty at the moment, and . . .

She's a looker, sure. Not bad. But his heart doesn't stop. Buddy, don't forget, dates the crème de la crème. This girl is tall and lanky, no curves to speak of, with blond bangs and a ponytail. Nice legs, blue eyes. Not bad at all.

That's his first impression from across the shop, watching as she steers a grumpy matron from the dressing rooms to the floor-length mirror.

"Be right with you, sir," she calls.

He pretends to browse. She leads her customer back to the dressing room. Buddy eases around so he can peek down the hallway. The girl is rummaging through the customer's purse.

"Take your time, ma'am," the girl calls over the curtain. She finds the wallet and plucks out a couple of bills, leaving the rest of the cash so the customer won't notice anything missing. "Would you like me to bring you the one with the cap sleeves?"

The girl glances over, notices Buddy. She's caught red-handed, but she doesn't blush, doesn't rattle. Instead she just gazes coolly back at Buddy. *Now* his heart stops. *Now* he's in love. Because he can see, plain as day, glowing like Vegas in the night, the truth about this girl:

It's in her blood too.