

Christmas Family Style

Made in Savannah

Cozy Mystery Series Book Fifteen

Hope Callaghan

hopecallaghan.com

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Cast of Characters

Carlita Garlucci. The widow of a mafia “made” man, Carlita promised her husband on his deathbed to get their sons out of the “family” business, so she moves from New York to the historic city of Savannah, Georgia. But escaping the family isn’t as easy as she hoped it would be and trouble follows Carlita to her new home.

Mercedes Garlucci. Carlita’s daughter and the first to move to Savannah with her mother. An aspiring writer, Mercedes has a knack for finding mysteries and adventure and dragging her mother along for the ride.

Vincent Garlucci, Jr. Carlita’s oldest son and a younger version of his father, Vinnie is deeply entrenched in the family business and not at all interested in leaving New Jersey for the Deep South.

Tony Garlucci. Carlita’s middle son and the second to follow his mother to Savannah. Tony is protective of both his mother and his sister, which is a good thing since the female Garlucci’s are always in some sort of a predicament.

Paulie Garlucci. Carlita’s youngest son. Mayor of the small town of Clifton Falls, New York, Paulie never joined the “family business,” content to live his life with his wife and young children away from a life of crime. His wife, Gina, rules the family household with an iron fist.

Chapter 1

“I don’t know about the star.” Carlita rubbed the bottom of her chin, staring up at her daughter, who was attempting to adjust the blinking star on top of the Christmas tree. “It’s kinda crooked.”

“And it’s kinda old,” Mercedes tapped the tip. “Half the lights don’t even work. We should toss this thing in the trash and buy a new one.”

“We can’t. Your father bought that for me for our first Christmas after we got married.” Carlita’s expression softened as she remembered their tiny efficiency apartment in Queens.

The kitchen was so small, Carlita could wash dishes, boil water and grab milk from the fridge simply by turning around. Money was tight back then and they lived on a shoestring budget. Most days, the only thing inside their old freezer was the metal ice cube trays that stuck to your skin and took a sledgehammer to lift the release.

Tears filled her eyes as she thought about her deceased husband, Vinnie. The holidays were always the hardest. Thanksgiving hadn’t been as bad, but with Christmas fast-approaching, Carlita was struggling.

Part of the reason could be because the family would all be together. Paulie, his wife, Gina, and their three young ones would be arriving soon.

Vinnie, Carlita’s eldest, and his wife and new baby had arrived the previous day and were downtown doing some last-minute Christmas shopping while Shelby, Tony’s wife, took care of Vinnie’s infant son.

The sadness passed as she thought about Pirate Pete’s special surprise for later that day. Despite Carlita’s best attempts, he’d refused to share a single hint about what was planned.

“I think we should give the star a place of special honor on top of the fireplace mantle and break down and buy a new one,” Mercedes said.

“We’ll see.” Carlita tossed a small amount of tinsel near the top of the tree, well out of reach of Grayvie, the family cat, who was fascinated with the silvery stuff. “For now, it stays.”

Mercedes hopped off the ladder and joined her mother to admire the twinkling lights and savor the aroma of the freshly cut pine tree Carlita’s son, Tony, had shown up with the previous night. “This is the perfect tree.”

“Tony did a good job picking it out.” Carlita tucked the small ladder back inside the hall closet and wandered to the balcony.

There was a chill in the air, and although she didn’t care to see any of the “white stuff,” she didn’t mind the cooler weather.

A car coasted past the alley, and the echo of Christmas music drifted up. “*...in a one horse open sleigh.*”

Mercedes slipped outside and joined her. “Brrr.” She rubbed the sides of her arms. “It’s feeling more like the holidays.”

“At least it’s not the holidays in Queens,” Carlita joked.

“Definitely not.”

There was a flurry of movement across the alley as the neighbor, Elvira Cobb’s, back door flew open. Elvira emerged before turning back and motioning in a most unfriendly manner to someone inside. “Then don’t bother.”

The door slammed, and Elvira, a thunderous expression on her face, stormed past.

“Hey!” Carlita cupped her hands to her mouth. “Everything okay?”

Elvira abruptly stopped and slowly made her way over. “Yeah. How’s it going? The rest of your family show up yet?”

“Vinnie and Brittney got here last night. Paulie and his tribe should be here anytime now.”

“Better you than me,” Elvira said. “I’m heading over to the prison to visit with Zulilly. I gotta get going. Visiting hours end soon. I’ll see you later tonight.”

Before Carlita could ask her what she meant, she was gone, hurrying to the end of the alley where she climbed into one of her company vans and drove off.

“What did that mean?” Mercedes asked.

“I don’t know,” Carlita shrugged. “Who knows with Elvira. I wonder how she and Zulilly are doing.”

Elvira’s daughter, who was incarcerated, had nearly disowned her mother after some family issues recently surfaced. Although the majority were not Elvira’s fault, her daughter had placed the blame squarely on her mother’s shoulders.

Carlita turned to head back inside when she caught a glimpse of Paulie’s family van turn onto the alley. “They’re here,” she said excitedly as she grabbed Mercedes’ hand and dragged her daughter through the living room. She didn’t release her grip until they were down the stairs and out of the building.

She could barely contain her excitement as her youngest son exited the van. “Paulie. Carlita greeted him with a hug before pulling back. “I can’t believe you’re finally here.”

“Hey, Ma.” Gina joined them. “You’re lookin’ good. That boyfriend of yours must be treatin’ you right,” she teased.

“He is.” Carlita grinned. Yes, life had been good. Pete was spoiling her with date breakfasts, flowers for no reason, calls and texts to let her know he was thinking about her.

The van’s side door flew open. The triplets scrambled out and flung themselves at her. “Nonna.”

She did her best to hug them all at the same time as they chattered excitedly.

“We saw a dinosaur on the road,” Gracie announced.

“And a hippopotamus,” Noel lifted her hand over her head. “He was this big.”

“Maybe someone asked for a hippopotamus for Christmas,” Carlita held her granddaughter at arm’s length. “You’re getting so big. Why, you’re almost as tall as me.”

“We’re hungry,” PJ, her son’s namesake, announced.

“I have some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with your names on them.” Carlita ruffled his hair and turned to Paulie. “You grab the stuff while I take the kids upstairs.”

“Thanks, Ma.” Paulie leaned in and gave his mother a quick peck on the cheek. “We’ve missed you.”

“And you have no idea how much I’ve missed all of you.”

Mercedes stayed behind to help Paulie and Gina unload the van and carry their bags across the alley to Tony and Shelby’s place while Carlita led her grandchildren inside.

First up was feeding the hungry trio. She filled three plates with sandwiches, along with a handful of chips and apple slices. Carlita had finished pouring juice when her cell phone chimed. It was a message from Pete:

“Meet me at Merry Bay Park on the other side of the Talmadge Memorial Bridge at six sharp. There will be dinner, drinks, and entertainment courtesy of me and the motley crew of The Flying Gunner.”

Carlita had heard the name before. “Isn’t that South Carolina?” she texted back.

“It is.” Pete “winked” and then added, “no more questions.”

“We’ll be there. The whole crew, I hope you’re ready for all of us,” she replied.

Mercedes appeared in the doorway. “The van was jam-packed. I thought Brittney and Vinnie had a lot of luggage.”

“Speaking of them, they should be back anytime now.” Oddly enough, Brittney’s two bodyguards hadn’t yet made an appearance, although Carlita knew they were in the vicinity.

One of them, Ricco DeGrassi, had accompanied her son and daughter-in-law to Savannah several times. She hadn’t met the other one, Roxy Ciccone, yet. Roxy also happened to be her tenant, Luigi’s, replacement – a woman Luigi referred to as a “real tool.”

“Nonna. I’m still thirsty.” Gracie slid out of her chair and held up her empty juice cup.

“I got it.” Mercedes grabbed the glass. “Any update on Pete’s surprise?”

“As a matter of fact, he just sent me a text, telling us to meet him at Merry Bay Park.”

“Merry Bay Park,” Mercedes repeated. “We’re meeting him in South Carolina?”

“It would appear so.”

There was a loud banging outside the hall and then the sharp *tap* of high heels on the wooden steps.

“Brittney is back,” Mercedes mumbled under her breath as Carlita’s daughter-in-law breezed in. Following closely behind was her eldest son, Vinnie, his arms full of boxes as he struggled to squeeze through the door.

“Downtown Savannah is a madhouse,” Brittney said breathlessly. “I had no idea there were so many people in Savannah. It felt like New York City.”

“We have a lot of out of towners in for the holidays,” Carlita reached for several of the packages. “Let me help.”

“Roxy and Ricco have the rest.”

Ricco followed Vinnie in, juggling a towering stack of boxes. “Hey, Mrs. G.”

“Hello, Ricco.” Carlita offered him a warm smile. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Same here. Where do you want these, boss?”

“Put them in the bedroom,” Brittney motioned to him. “As soon as you’re done, I’m going to run next door to get baby Vinnie. It’s time for his nap.”

Ricco dropped them off and backtracked to the doorway. “Hustle up, zips. We ain’t got all day.”

A woman with jet-black hair appeared. She glared at Ricco. “If you call me zips one more time, we’re gonna take it outside.”

Carlita did a double take at the husky voice, her eyes following the stocky woman as she carried an armful of packages to the hallway.

“What’s a zips?” Carlita asked to no one in particular.

“It’s a mafia slur,” Mercedes whispered in her ear.

There was a light rap on the door.

“Grand Central Station. C’mon in,” Mercedes quipped.

Paulie and Gina, who was holding baby Vinnie, stepped inside. “We saw Vin’s car pull in and told Shelby we’d bring the baby over.”

Baby Vinnie took one look at his mother and started to wail.

“Poor Baby V. It’s nappy-nap time,” his mother sing-songed. “Thank you for bringing him here.” She cradled her son in her arms as they bounced their way to what was Mercedes’ bedroom, the one she graciously gave up for her brother and his family.

Ricco and his partner passed them in the hallway, pausing when they reached the living room. “Have you met Roxy, Mrs. G?” he asked.

“Not yet.” Carlita extended a hand. “Hello. I’m Carlita Garlucci.”

“Mrs. Garlucci.” Roxy shook her hand, her eyes traveling up and down her as she sized Carlita up. “Heard a lot about you.”

“Good, I hope.”

“Roxy and I are on our way out.” Ricco hooked his thumb in his belt loop. “We’re gonna hang with Luigi for a few.”

“*You’re* gonna hang out with Luigi. I’ll be downstairs keepin’ an eye on the place,” Roxy jabbed her finger at him. “As in, doin’ my job.”

“Whatever.” Ricco shook his head in disgust as he followed Roxy out of the apartment.

“They strike me as an interesting duo.” Carlita slipped past her son and stepped into the kitchen. “Now that the children have eaten, I have some snacks for the adults.”

She removed an antipasto platter from the fridge and set it on the dining room table. There were meats – prosciutto, salami and pepperoni, three kinds of cheeses, nuts and olives, and bread.

Gina licked her lips as she eyed the platter. “This is the most gorgeous antipasto platter I’ve ever seen.”

“Ma worked hard on it,” Mercedes said.

Carlita stood back and watched as her children gathered around the table. Their voices filled the apartment and it was a sweet sound to her ears. Her family was once again, all together. There was only one person missing.

“Hey, Ma.” Tony slipped away from the crowd and joined his mother in the kitchen. “What time are we caravanning to Pete’s surprise?”

Carlita repeated what little information Pete had given her. “It involves meeting him in Merry Bay, The Flying Gunner, dinner and drinks.”

“Ah.” Tony lifted a brow. “South Carolina, eh? There’s not much on the other side of the bridge.”

After munching and catching up, her children headed out. Tony returned to the pawn shop to close for the night. Vinnie and Brittney went to check on the baby. Paulie and Gina, along with their tribe, returned to Tony and Shelby’s new apartment to work on the sleeping arrangements.

It gave Carlita enough time to straighten up and change into a warmer outfit before meeting everyone in the alley to discuss the travel logistics.

Tony, who was familiar with the area, offered to take the lead with the siblings sandwiched in between Carlita and Mercedes, who would be bringing up the rear.

“What do you think about Roxy?” Mercedes climbed into the passenger seat as her mother slid behind the wheel.

“I dunno. I got the feeling she was sizing me up. How about you?”

“Same here. I stopped by Luigi’s place while you were getting ready. Ricco was hanging out with him, but there was no sign of Roxy. I don’t think Luigi likes her.”

“I get that impression too.”

Mercedes consulted her watch as her mother pulled onto the street. “I texted Sam before we left. He’s on his way there to meet us. His last tour ended at five.”

The caravan of vehicles crossed the bridge and followed the signs to Merry Bay Park. The main parking lot was full, forcing them to continue to the overflow lot.

Carlita tapped the brakes as they coasted around the corner. “Would you look at that?”

End of Sneak Peek - Christmas Family Style Next Week!

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