

FOLLOW YOUR HEART • BOOK 2

All Summer Long

*A San Francisco
Romance*

MELODY CARLSON



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Melody Carlson, *All Summer Long*
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Tia D'Amico was sick of pasta. Not sick of consuming it—no self-respecting member of an Italian family would admit to as much. She was tired of making it. Whether it was fettuccine, tortellini, rigatoni, cannelloni, or even today's special—ravioli filled with spinach, ricotta, and morel mushrooms—she'd grown weary of the process. That was embarrassing to admit. Especially when she used to love the sweet simplicity of mixing semolina and eggs and watching the shiny machine do its magic until the dough was just right, followed by the process of rolling, pressing, molding, cutting, drying, and finally serving up the pasta to the restaurant's appreciative guests. Pasta used to make her happy.

“This is not why I went to culinary arts school,” she told her uncle as he carried a crate of seafood into the kitchen. Uncle Tony was her father's brother as well as her boss and favorite uncle. With his dark grisly beard and faded denim shirt, he looked more like a crusty fisherman than a prosperous restaurateur, but there was no one better to teach her the ropes of the restaurant business than her uncle.

Her short-term plan, after graduating, had been to return to her hometown in Norton, Washington, and to work at D'Amico's for a season or two. Long enough to build up her résumé, and then she'd move on to something bigger and better. Unfortunately, nothing bigger or better had surfaced in the two years she'd been here. But, to be fair, with all the hours she was putting in at the popular Italian restaurant, she had little time to job hunt—or have a life.

“Why *did* you go to cooking school?” Uncle Tony dropped the crate onto the maple butcher block with a loud thud. “You were on your way to becoming a perfectly good chef before you went off to that fancy-dancy school in Seattle. And what you didn't know, I was happy to teach you. If you ask me, *cara mia*, you just wasted a bunch of your papa's hard-earned money on a silly pedigree.”

“It's not a pedigree.” She wrinkled her nose at him as she rolled the cutter across the pasta dough. “I'm not a poodle.”

“Getting generous with your filling there.” He poked a puffy ravioli square. “Trying to make me go broke? Put me out of business?”

“Yeah, right.” She laughed. “Like that's going to happen.” It was no secret that D'Amico's was the most popular restaurant in the small town in northern Washington. Tia's great-grandparents had started it with only eight small tables shortly before World War II. Since that time it had more than quadrupled in size, and when Uncle Tony retired next year and his son Marcus took his place, it would become a fourth-generation business.

“Phone for Tia,” Marcus called from the dining room. “It's Aunt Julie on line two.”

“Aunt Julie?” Uncle Tony frowned as Tia reached for the

kitchen phone. “My baby sister is calling to talk to *you*, not her big brother?”

Tia made a face at her uncle as she greeted her aunt. “Uncle Tony is about to throw a knife at me if you don’t at least say hello.”

“Tell big bro hey for me. Give him my love, then tell him I called to talk to *you*.”

Tia relayed this information, then asked Julie, “What’s up?”

“Well, Roland’s father passed on a couple months ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Tia told her. “I hadn’t heard. Give Roland my love.”

“Thank you. But it’s not like we were surprised. Roland’s dad was pretty old. He’d enjoyed a good full life. Really, that’s not why I’m calling you, Tia. Here’s the deal . . . Roland’s dad left us a boat.”

“A boat?” Tia used her free hand to run the cutter between the ravioli squares. Julie had called to talk about a boat?

“Not just any boat. It’s this beautiful luxury yacht. Well, actually it’s a luxury yacht in need of some TLC, but that’s another thing. The real reason I’m calling you is because Roland has given the yacht to me, and I would like to turn it into a restaurant.”

“A restaurant?” Tia stopped cutting ravioli.

“A really upscale restaurant with sunset dinner cruises and birthday parties and anniversaries and weddings and all sorts of fun events.”

Tia felt her interest rise. “You’d run this floating restaurant on the San Francisco Bay?”

“That’s my plan.”

“Wow, that sounds really fun.”

“I know! And I got to thinking I’d need a top-notch chef,

and I remembered how you graduated from that culinary school last year. I got to thinking you might be just the ticket.”

“Seriously? You’d consider me for a position like that?”

Uncle Tony stopped sorting the shrimp, pausing to scowl at Tia.

“Absolutely. The thing is, I need more than just a chef, Tia. At least to start with. I need someone with youth and ideas and lots of energy. Someone to help me get things going, to assist me in getting the boat set up as a lovely restaurant. Do you think you’d be interested?”

“Of course!”

“When can you come down here?”

“I don’t know.” Tia covered the mouthpiece on the phone. “Julie is offering me a job. She’s starting a restaurant. She wants to know when I can start.”

Uncle Tony just shook his head in a defeated way. “When does she need you?”

“When do you need me?” Tia asked.

“Is *now* too soon?” Julie giggled. “Tony will kill me.”

Tia looked at Uncle Tony. “She says ‘now.’”

Uncle Tony rolled his eyes. “My baby sister knows I could never say no to her. Better go home and pack your bags, *cara mia*.”

“Uncle Tony is telling me to go home and pack!” Tia exclaimed.

“Fabulous! Call me back when you get home, and we’ll go over the details. I’ll start looking for flights. Do you really think you can leave right away?”

“No reason I can’t.”

“Great! My goal is to get the restaurant running by mid-summer. Roland thinks I’m crazy, but I think it could happen.

Anyway, you better let me talk to my big brother before you hang up. I have a feeling I owe him big-time.”

Tia handed the phone to Uncle Tony. And as she continued to happily cut the ravioli, she listened to her uncle making a huge pretense of grumbling and complaining, acting like Julie was stealing the best cook he’d ever had and going on about how it would ruin his business. It was all baloney, but he seemed to be enjoying it. Besides, maybe it took leaving a job to get the appreciation you deserved. Tia wasn’t even sure she cared right now. The good news was that she was getting out of this little Podunk town! Life was suddenly good!

She’d only been to San Francisco once before, but she had fallen in love with the unique city on the bay. She’d been sixteen when Aunt Julie had invited her down there for the summer. Tia had known her parents’ marriage was on the brink just then. But she’d pretended to be oblivious during her visit at Julie’s. It was easier. And she’d suspected her aunt’s generous hospitality was an attempt to give Tia’s parents a chance to work things out without an observer around. But by the time Tia got home, it was over. Mom moved on to a new life in Florida. It had been just Tia and Dad since then, although her dad had started dating someone last year. Maybe their romance would progress better if Tia was out of the picture.

“You’re still here?” Uncle Tony feigned surprise as he hung up the phone. “I thought you’d be on your way to the airport by now.”

“You don’t really want me to quit today, do you?” She peered curiously at his gruff, unshaven face. Her uncle was like a lobster—hard and crusty on the outside but soft and sweet underneath.

He shrugged. “Maybe finish the raviolis first.”

“Seriously? This is really my last day?”

“Sure. It sounds like Julie needs you. Roland is having some health issues, going into early retirement. She thinks this restaurant boat idea is just what they need.” He shook his head. “But I’m guessing it’ll sink them.” He chuckled. “No pun intended.”

“Sink them?” She spread out another sheet of waxed paper and laid the freshly cut ravioli on it.

“You remember when I had my boat. Thirty-two-foot beauty, inboard-outboard, cabin that slept six. My big plan was to take it on the Sound during my free time.” He sighed. “Free time—ha!”

“I do remember that boat. It was really nice, but I never got to go out in it.”

“No, it was *not* really nice. It was a hole in the water that I threw money into. I only took that stinking boat out once. The rest of the time it was in the boat shop getting fixed.”

“Oh.”

“They say the two happiest days in a boat owner’s life are one”—he held up a finger—“the day you buy the boat, and two”—he held up a second finger—“the day you sell it.”

“Really?”

“Trust me. I don’t make this stuff up.”

“Well, Julie didn’t *buy* her boat—it was a gift. So maybe that’s different.”

“She may not have bought the boat, Tia, but she will end up paying for it. Take it from me. I know what I’m talking about. And even though you’re determined to go down there to help her with this crazy plan, I’m warning you, it could turn into a big fat mess.”

Tia considered this as she continued cutting ravioli. “Are you saying I shouldn’t go?”

He closed the freezer door with a loud bang. “No. I think you should go.” He came over to the pasta station with a somewhat sly smile. “It will be a learning experience for you.”

She held the pasta cutter up in the air. “You mean like the school of hard knocks?”

“Maybe a little, but I can tell Julie really needs you.”

“And *you* don’t need me?” She frowned at him.

“Of course I need you, *cara mia*. You are irreplaceable. But it’s June and kids are home from college. I’ve already turned several job hunters away. I can find someone to cover for you.” He winked. “Until you learn your lesson and come back to me.”

She laughed. “You seem awfully sure of yourself.”

“Time will tell.” Uncle Tony grabbed her head, planting a kiss on her forehead. “I hope you have a great adventure, *cara mia*. You deserve it.”

“Thanks.”

“Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” He winked again as he headed for the door.

“For sure!” She laughed as he left, then returned to putting generous dollops of filling on the ravioli dough. She knew D’Amico’s would continue on just fine without her, but to her surprise she felt a tiny wave of sadness to think she was leaving. Since she was a little girl she’d always loved this place—the smells, the sounds, the sights—but most of all she had loved the feeling of family and heritage, of being a part of something bigger.

Even so, it would be exciting to be part of her aunt’s new venture—and to be part of San Francisco too! The change

would definitely do her good. As she pressed the top layers of thin dough around the mounds of filling, her favorite memory of San Francisco flashed through her mind. She sighed happily as she let it play out like a movie.

It had been late August and the last day of the sailing camp that despite Tia's adolescent reluctance, Aunt Julie had insisted she attend. At sixteen, Tia had felt too old for any sort of camp. Fortunately, she'd been wrong. It was no ordinary camp. The two dozen campers got to be the working crew of a forty-foot sailboat. The captain and first mate, a twentysomething married couple, taught the teens sailing terminology and how to handle all the elements of the boat. The youthful crew basically kept the boat sailing smoothly for a whole week.

Although the bulk of Tia's working time had been spent in the sailboat's galley (after it was discovered she was the best cook of the bunch), she was forced out on deck for that final day. It had been purely magical. No trace of fog and just a gentle breeze. The bay was topaz blue and smooth as glass, and the sky was azure and cloudless. But best of all was the boy she got partnered with for the day. *Leo Parker*. Tall and muscular, Leo had sandy blond hair and ocean blue eyes—and all the girls had been drooling over him for the whole week.

But as the day progressed and Leo helped her with the ropes and sails, patiently explaining some of the training she'd missed while cooking down below, Tia had felt a real connection with him. When the day was over and the boat was docked with their duffle bags all piled on deck, the two of them had crowded together in the narrow bowsprit, looking out over the water and the other boats. Totally out of the

blue, Leo had leaned over and kissed her on the lips. She still got slightly dizzy just thinking of that amazing moment—her first kiss. But as quickly as it had come, it was over. Suddenly everyone was grabbing their baggage, saying good-byes, and disembarking to go home with their families.

“Tia!” Marcus exclaimed as he burst into the kitchen. “Is it true? You’re really leaving us?”

She smiled at her favorite cousin. “Afraid so. Think you can get by without me?”

He frowned. “I doubt it.”

“Sorry, but Aunt Julie needs me just now.” She put the last ravioli on the tray. “But if your dad’s right, her project will sink even before it starts, and I’ll be back here older and wiser.” She untied her apron and hung it on the rack by the door.

“Well, have fun anyway. And give Julie my love.” He hugged her and wished her luck, then returned to the dining area. Tia removed the red bandana she’d tied around her hair that morning, got her bag from her locker, and finally gave the large, well-equipped kitchen one long last look before she quietly let herself out the back door. She felt a strange twist of melancholy as she left, but as soon as she stepped out into the summer sunshine, she broke into a happy dance. Life was waiting for her!