The Bunny Trail

THE JOURNALS OF BASTIAN ACETI

Book 1 of The Bunny Trail Series

DJ Tombe

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Bash,
who was brave enough to embrace who he truly was,
even when the world did not always understand.

This book is also dedicated to my son,
who doesn't fit society's mould but is perfect, nonetheless.

And this book is dedicated to all young adults
who may be afraid to show your true colours.
Never forget that you are beautiful, exactly as you are.

MESSAGE TO THE READER

The Bunny Trail book series was written by my Papà, Bastian, who was not a native English speaker.

You might notice that parts of his three journals have a few grammatical errors and possibly wording that a native English speaker may not have used, but overall, I think he did quite a good job. My goodness, I don't think I could write three books, no less in a foreign language. However, I suppose that by the time he died, English *was* one of his native languages.

It was never my plan to make Papà's journals public, but shortly before my uncle passed away, he asked me to. I did as he asked, and I'm glad I did.

Papà was a truly lovely, incredibly unique, and very talented individual, yet society never fully accepted him for who he was. However, he was loved by his family, including me, unconditionally, and I appreciate that I was able to witness that. I realize today that society can be so unkind and judgmental. Maybe if just one person can see themselves in this story and realize that it's okay to be exactly who they were born to be, then it's all worth it.

Over time, I will be making all three of his journals available for free for anyone who would like to read them. Yes, I will be putting the books online to purchase, but only because I know some readers, like me, prefer to hold a book rather than read it on a screen. However, I am not asking or expecting you to purchase any of these.

I hope you enjoy reading Michael and Bunny's story.

(By the way, in case you are wondering where they ended up, I have the two scrolls from Bakken framed and hanging up in my office. I look at them daily and think of the two sweet children they must have been, once upon a time.)

DJ

bunnytrail.info

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"Thou wilt go now, rabbit. But I go with thee.
As long as there is one of us, there is both of us."

--Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

Michael (a.k.a. Bastian)

1 CHAPTER ONE: MEETING BUNNY
(A PAIN THAT I'M USED TO)

Until I was 18, it made me ill to look at myself in the mirror.
I was born a monster. This is not an exaggeration. I don't really want to go into it much, but I was born lacking a nose and with some scarring over much of my face and most of my upper torso. So, you can only imagine how many friends I had as a child.

I have three brothers, and they were my only childhood companions. They are Michele, Giovanni, and Luca, and they are eight, six, and four years older than me, respectively.

I was never close to Michele. It almost seemed as if he had never lived in our family home. He was handsome and popular, with plenty of places to go.

I was closest to Giovanni (Gio), who was six years older than me. However, his fascination with me stemmed more from his wanting to be a physician like my father, so I was like his own personal medical project.

He enjoyed making sketches and plans for what my nose might look like when I turned 18, at which age I would be permitted to have a new one constructed for me. Any earlier than age 18 would be difficult, as one's body continues to grow and change until then.

And, finally, there was Luca. By far, Luca was the best-looking of all of us brothers, and he had quite a few beautiful girls chasing him around in his teens. It was too bad that they never caught on that he was gay. Luca was rarely around as he had his own life and friends. I always knew he loved me, but we just didn't have much in common.

Thirteen was a tough age for me. All three of my brothers had left home by then, either living away at college or getting their own apartments. And Michele was planning his wedding to his beautiful fiancée, Greta. Her family had their own business near Milano, and Michele was living with them, working for her father part-time and starting his Laurea Magistrale, the Italian equivalent of an MBA.

But I was left out of it all.

Everyone was moving on without me, and I was an island stuck in the

basement of our house.

My room was built specifically for me, as I didn't like neighbourhood kids walking past our home, staring at me through the front gate and into our house. It wasn't the older kids ridiculing me that made me sad. It was the younger children who were genuinely terrified of me and the way I looked.

As I could not attend school with my siblings, my father chose to educate me at home. And through this "education," he did his best to convince me that the good Lord would not give me a situation that was more than I could handle.

What a load of crap. It was torture.

I was not what I would call "living," and by 13, I wanted to end it all. The truth is I had wanted to end it all ever since I could remember, but every time I tried to find a way out, I couldn't go through with it. It made me hate myself even more. I was a freak, *and* I was weak.

When summer came around, I realized I hadn't set foot outside in months. I didn't eat much, so I had no muscle mass, and my skin was a sickly shade of pale. If I wasn't terrifying enough before, I certainly was by that point. And my room accurately reflected how I felt inside. I lived in squalor. My family's housekeeper, Marta, knew better than to come downstairs, so my father left it up to me to clean (or not clean) my room as I saw fit.

It was late May, and I could see the trees swaying in the spring breeze, so I cracked both the door to my room and the door that led to the outside steps and up to the courtyard. I hoped that the fresh air would help the new stench that had emerged, the source of which I could not locate.

As I pushed the outer door open, I could hear my father speaking to someone in the courtyard. This person had an unfamiliar voice, which was unusual, as Papà never entertained guests. The gentleman spoke Italian fluently, but it was a different dialect. Even without seeing his face or how he was dressed, it was clear that the soft-spoken man was not highly educated. However, his voice was gentle and kind.

It was so ridiculous, but I remember feeling jealous of my father at that moment. Jealous of the man he was talking to. Jealous of people who could have a casual conversation without having others shirk back or run off or make some hurtful comment.

I hated them for being normal.

Instead, I felt lifeless. I often wondered, "Am I still alive?" I would have no way to know if I were dead. Technically, yes, I was breathing, but I was just going through the motions—eating, breathing, sleeping, repeat.

I was not productive, not bringing anything of worth into the world, and I had absolutely no hope that joy could ever exist again. I had no one. I felt uninvited to my own life, taking up space that could have been used for something much more useful than myself.

I sat on the edge of the couch and chose to openly pray to a God that I didn't think existed. How many times had I sat there before, pleading to this

imaginary entity? But I was out of options.

Without a thought, I began to pray. For what exactly, I do not know. Just something.

The words barely escaped before I heard a scurrying in the corner of the room. This sound was coming from the opposite side, so I was between the creature and the door I needed to escape. I slowly looked toward the sound, expecting to see a rat or a small wild animal.

Instead, I saw a tiny, chubby hand.

It was reaching for a platter of cookies sitting on a low bookshelf. The plate was precariously teetering on top of the books, ready to fall at the slightest movement.

Although there were seven biscuits, that chubby hand could not locate one. Instead, it kept pushing them from one side of the plate to the other, always slightly out of its grasp.

Very slowly, I saw a tuft of brown, curly hair peek over the bookcase, and then two brown eyes. Those eyes looked at the plate, and two hands came up to grab three cookies in each. Then, the two fists expertly snatched the last cookie, using only the fingertips of the pointer finger on each hand. Finally, when all seven were secured in those two little fists, the half of a face looked over at me quickly. Those eyes stared right into mine and glared at me. Slowly, the eyes and tuft of hair lowered, disappearing behind the bookshelf again.

I sat motionless, unsure if what I was seeing was true. Was that a child? No, it couldn't possibly be. I would have certainly seen someone come into my room. But, if it was, how was he or she not afraid of me? If anything, this little creature was challenging me. That could not be right.

I didn't have to wonder for long as there were sounds of choking coming from behind the bookshelf. The child stood up, coughing furiously. A fat little girl in a brown, dowdy dress had stuffed an entire cookie in her mouth and was choking on it.

I ran over to her and told her to spit it out. She did nothing. I repeated myself. She did nothing and was starting to turn a bluish shade of purple. I put my finger in her mouth and made a sweeping motion that my father had done to me years before when I was choking on part of a biscotto.

She ejected the cookie and proceeded to vomit all over my floor.

I bent down and asked if she was okay. She just stared at me. I asked her again.

She gave me an angry look and replied, "What?"

I was surprised. This child looked Italian. She was in Italy. Yet she was speaking English.

I knew just a bit of the language from my studies, so I asked her forcefully, "Are you okay?"

She nodded yes and jerked her hands away from me, thinking that I would ask for the cookies back.

"You can keep them," I told her. "I don't want them."

I slowly sat back down on the couch, perfectly still, at eye-level with her standing.

She looked around disapprovingly. "You live here?"

I nodded. I could not believe this child showed no reaction to how I looked. I was stunned.

She then asked, "What's your name?"

"Bastian."

(My name is pronounced: "BAHZTiy-ahN." My father is half-German, and he once told me he wanted to give me his name, a solid German name, which he believed would help me find strength in life. He told me my name meant "venerable.")

She scrunched up her nose. "It's *what*?"

"My name is Bastian."

She looked at me without any expression for a good three seconds and said, "I'm just gonna call you Michael."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "I already have a brother named Michele."

Michele means Michael in Italian, so she was giving me the same name as my brother. Again, she looked at me dead in the face, shrugged her shoulders, and walked away. That was her way of ending the discussion.

I asked her for her name, and she glared at me again.

"Um, just call me Bunny."

(Clearly, her name was *not* Bunny.)

She walked away from me slowly, looking around, taking in everything in my room, still holding onto the cookies with two death grips. She did not seem fearful in the least of being in the new, unfamiliar place. After she scanned the room, she looked back at me.

With a giant lump in my throat, I asked her the question I did and did not want to know the answer to.

I whispered, "Aren't you afraid of me?"

Her expression turned to one of disgust.

"No," she replied in a sassy tone. "Are you afraid of *me*?"

I chortled from the sheer surprise of her response and startled myself. I couldn't remember when I last laughed, and it caught me by surprise.

I asked her if she was hungry, and she had no expression. I then told her that we had a pizza oven in our kitchen and that I could make her any pizza she wanted. Her eyes widened, and she nodded vigorously.

She walked towards me, and I held out my hand to her. I was a bit surprised that she put her entire fist in my palm. Her hand had a vice-like hold on those three cookies and wasn't about to let them go.

I led her down the hallway to the spiral staircase at the end, which led straight up to the kitchen. She followed me without question, which was slightly

concerning.

Why was this child trusting me?

I looked back to ensure she was navigating the staircase successfully, as I knew she wouldn't be holding onto the handrail. She looked up at me and gave me a giant smile, where I could see almost all the teeth in her mouth. She still had some vomit down the front of her dress, but it was clear that she didn't care.

What a wonderfully odd little child.

I had no idea about it then, but I had just met the most important person in my life.

2 CHAPTER TWO: 1972, BUNNY AT 4 (JUST CAN'T GET ENOUGH)

I made Bunny her pizza.

And she had no trouble in directing me, telling me everything she required on said pizza. Most would have noted how bossy she was. I loved it. It was my first real conversation with someone outside my own family or our housekeeper.

Although she told me she and her grandfather (the man outside speaking to my father) were from New York, she wouldn't give me much information about her life back home, so I didn't press it. I asked her about silly things—favourite TV shows, favourite foods, the names of her pets—and she gobbled up each question.

It was clear to me that she loved the attention and, like me, probably hadn't received much of it in her short life. Later, I would find out that she was the third of three girls, with her having two sisters, one nine years older and the other eight years older than her. She finally confided to me that her mother often called her "the mistake," so she was happier when she was with her grandfather and away from her family.

As Bunny and I continued chatting while she ate, Papà and my brother Giovanni walked in. They stopped in their tracks halfway through the doorway when they saw me with this little child. Bunny didn't even look up but continued to talk and eat. I interrupted her by speaking directly to my father.

"I would very much like it if she could stay for the afternoon. Please ask her grandfather if that would be okay."

There was a clear urgency in my voice.

My father slowly looked up from Bunny, over to me, and back to her again without moving his head.

He said very matter-of-factly, "I will see what I can do."

He then left, closing the door behind him. Through the curtains, I could see my father talking to Bunny's grandfather, and when the grandfather left before Papà even started walking back to the house, I could have danced a jig.

Yes, granted, I was 13, but this young child was the closest thing I had ever

had to a real friend, and I was overjoyed.

I wasn't sure at that moment, of course, but it seemed then that Bunny might have been able to stay for more than just a few hours. Her grandfather almost seemed relieved to leave her with us. It couldn't have been easy for a 70-year-old man to keep a four-year-old in check.

I asked Marta if she could help Bunny switch out of her vomit-stained dress and into one of my father's shirts. I would have offered one of mine, but my clothing was probably just as stained as her dress.

Soon after lunch, Bunny started to wander the house, interested to see what we were all about. Her favourite room quickly became the library, and she immediately picked out a book and asked me to read to her. It was a university-level economics book that my brother Michele had left after graduating from college, written in Italian. She didn't seem to mind and curled up next to me on the couch, looking at the various bar graphs and charts. It didn't take her long to drift off to sleep.

I picked her up and walked over to my father's rocking chair. For the first time in my life, I got to hold someone. I wanted to cry, it felt so good.

About an hour into her nap, Gio came in from the other room with his camera. Until then, I had refused to have a camera anywhere near me, but I was okay with him taking pictures of her.

One of my favourite photos, to this day, is from that afternoon, of Bunny sleeping on my shoulder, her big cheek resting against me, drool cascading from the corner of her mouth and down my shirt sleeve. In the background, you can just make out my silhouette. And if you look hard enough, you will see I was smiling.

I was smiling.

One of my all-time favourite memories of Bunny was that first night, sitting down for dinner with my family after her nap. My brother Gio called Michele in Milano and told him I had a new "friend." Without hesitation, Michele hopped on the first train down and was back home in time for dinner—a three-hour train ride and a 20-minute taxi trip to witness the minor miracle of me having a friend, regardless of their age.

It was the first time in years that my father had all four of his children home for dinner. Bunny was quite the draw.

She sat catty-corner from me at the table, seated between my father (at the head of the table) and Gio. Papà and Michele didn't know much English, but Gio and Luca were quite versed, so they did most of the talking.

How could a four-year-old be able to feel comfortable in a room full of strangers? She was such an enigma to me.

We were all having a lovely conversation and finishing dinner when Luca asked, "So, you're not afraid of him? You don't think he looks like *a monster*?"

Luca spoke in a spooky tone and gestured toward me with his fork.

In all honesty, I could have killed him in that moment. What was he doing?

It was as if he were actively trying to frighten away the only friend I had ever had.

Bunny spoke without looking up. "Nah. I get that all the time, too."

We all sat there quietly, looking at each other, trying to decipher what she had just said, thinking our lack of understanding was due to the language barrier. Recognizing that it was too quiet in the room, Bunny looked up from her plate and saw us all staring at her.

"You know—*got your nose! Got your nose!*"

My brothers slowly looked at each other, wide-eyed. She thought it was a game. She believed someone had taken my nose and wasn't giving it back, which was why she wasn't terrified of me.

I looked over at Luca and Gio, who had huge smiles and were doing their best to stifle their laughter. Michele and my father were still having trouble following the conversation, but they seemed intrigued, nonetheless.

She continued, "Yeah, but usually, my grandfather gives mine back right away. He doesn't keep it for, like, hours."

She looked up at me. "Who's got your nose?" she said, gesturing at me with her chin. She seemed almost perturbed that someone had it.

I stated solemnly, "My mother has my nose."

She asked, "Where is she? I'll get it back for you. I'm pretty good at that."

I gave her a small smile. This child wanted to go to bat for me. I shook my head slightly in amazement and could feel my eyes start to well up.

I simply stated, "My mother is dead."

Bunny's eyes grew large, and a scowl came across her face.

She looked at me with a fierce look and said very slowly, "You mean to tell me that your mother died without giving you back *your nose*?!"

She looked down at her plate and started to huff. She mumbled under her breath, "Motherfucking bitch!"

The table erupted in a roar of laughter.

Michele looked at each of us quizzically, as Luca and Gio laughed so hard that they were gasping for air.

However, my father was not pleased. He didn't know much English, but he had enough sense to understand what "motherfucking bitch" was. It didn't matter. After a few seconds, even I could see the smile begin to form in the corners of his mouth. Papà looked at me and gently shook his head, and I could see his eyes soften.

After dinner, my father sat in his library to enjoy his aperitivo, and Bunny followed him in. Without asking permission, she started rummaging through the lower cabinets below the books and behind the family's baby grand piano, almost fitting her entire body inside them.

Surprisingly, Papà let her, seemingly unconcerned about her invading his most private and cherished spot in the house. I followed her, watching her as if she were the most entertaining show on television. She had no fear. I was afraid

of everything, and I was starting to feel like I could learn a lot from her.

She pulled out some old colouring books that had belonged to my brothers. There were no crayons to speak of, but she found a pencil and lay on her belly under the baby grand, happy to shade in different areas of pages that had been only partially coloured long ago. She was carelessly scribbling outside the lines when she looked up, saw me watching her, and motioned for me to crawl under the piano next to her. I obliged.

She passed me one of the colouring books and a fountain pen, and I sat under the piano and coloured like a small child. Looking at the pen, I thought about how I never really had a childhood.

My brothers had the gift of having a mother, even if just for a few years. She killed herself when I was two, and I didn't remember her at all. My father did the best he could with me, but he was a very serious, educated professional and treated me as a young man right from the start. He loved me but rarely hugged me and wasn't one for big shows of affection.

And here I was, sitting under furniture (something I couldn't remember ever having done before), shading pictures in a colouring book with a little person who could not have been more opposite of my father.

Maybe this was an answer to a prayer. Bunny wasn't what I was expecting, but the good Lord rarely delivers what we expect, does She?

Had you seen me that summer, you would have thought me mad. I played with dolls, I pretended to be a dog (to her version of a cat), I swung for hours on the swing set that Papà installed for Bunny, I played in our pool (the pool that had been in our yard since before I was born but that I had rarely been in, as my father was worried about sun exposure and how the chlorinated water could aggravate my nasal cavity and surrounding tissue), and I continued to colour and make crafts.

Papà invested a small fortune in what seemed like thousands of crayons, markers, watercolours, colouring books, glue, glitter, and construction paper for Bunny. He allowed us plenty of time to be kids, but he also ensured we spent time on our studies every day.

The worst torture Bunny had ever been through in her entire life, according to her, was sitting down each day with my father while he taught her basic Italian.

It was an exercise in futility.

Bunny would rather have taught the entire city of Firenze to speak English than have learned Italian herself. But, each day, for a very long hour, they sat at the wooden table in the kitchen as Papà subjected himself to hearing a small child completely butcher our language.

He would be upset if he knew this, but he and the four-year-old were quite similar when it came to stubbornness. I enjoyed sitting in the next room, listening to them argue, each in their own language.

The part I enjoyed most was when Bunny deliberately mispronounced the

words that Papà was trying to teach her. He never caught on to what she was doing and would make her repeat the same phrase over and over, while Bunny gave a slightly different response each time. Sometimes I would peek around the corner to see her doing her best to stifle a smile, absolutely loving that she was infuriating my father as much as she was.

I was nothing but impressed. My father was the most influential and well-respected person I knew, but in that moment, she had all the power.

Music lessons he left up to me. Papà started teaching me to play the piano when I was just a young child, but I quickly surpassed him in skill at a fairly young age. I could read music without effort, and there wasn't any piece I couldn't master within a day or two.

My father wanted the two of us to do piano exercises for an hour, but I told Bunny we could practice for 15 minutes several times a day, which worked well for both of us. Why Papà never caught on to that idea when working with her on her language studies, I will never know.

Bunny stayed with us for that entire summer, and her grandfather came back for her in late August. He didn't abandon her. He knew she was well cared for, and he was incredibly appreciative of my father, his boss, for that.

Her grandfather, Gino, was a menial labourer, and he was quite good with his hands, so Papà hired him to work on our country home, which just happened to be in Gino's hometown, Reggio di Calabria. My father was familiar with some of Gino's relatives who still lived in the seaside city and recommended his services when Papà said he needed extensive work done on our vacation home.

The day Gino returned to pick her up, Bunny looked like a different girl. She had arrived at our home with no clothes or bags, but she was leaving with two brand-new suitcases full of clothing. My brother Luca, a shopaholic, absolutely adored taking her on weekly excursions to the shops near Palazzo Vecchio to buy cute little outfits and shoes for her.

And my father would ask our housekeeper, Marta, to take Bunny to get her hair cut each month, and by the time she left, it no longer looked like she had cut it herself. It was styled to make her look like a young lady. Even Michele's fiancée, Greta, got her a little, white, soft purse shaped like—you guessed it—a bunny.

It took me days to make Bunny understand that she couldn't stay with us any longer. She didn't want to go back to New York, back to being entirely ignored by her family. Bunny was invisible there. With us, she was a star, the centre of attention almost all the time.

What she didn't understand was that it would be the same for me. I was going to go back to being alone, ignored. I was more myself when she was around, even though I was acting like a young child for most of that time. I really loved being around her.

When Gino arrived, I was finishing up the pizza Bunny had requested as

her final meal before leaving. As she ate, I told her I was going outside for a moment. I put on a surgical mask and walked out the door with the intention of talking to her grandfather.

My father, who was already chatting with Gino, quickly turned when he saw me, recoiling with a look of surprise. For the first time in my life, I spoke directly with a man who was not a family member.

I asked Gino if he could bring Bunny with him next summer when he returned.

The very polite man that he was, shifted his hat in his hands and said, "I'm very sorry, young man, but I do not know who this 'Bunny' is."

I had called her that all summer and completely forgot that it wasn't her name. And I instantly became mortified when I realized I had no idea what her real name was. Several times over the summer, I had asked her for her given name, but she never revealed it.

Gino smiled and asked, "Do you mean Dolores? Yes, I can ask her parents if that would be alright. Her mother is my daughter, and I don't mind telling you that she all but ignores the girl. She had her first two daughters at 15 and 16 years old, and her two older girls are almost like her girlfriends. But Dolores? She doesn't pay that poor girl much attention at all."

Her name was Dolores. Dolores. What a truly horrible name. Do you know what Dolores means in Italian? It means sorrow. I don't know why—I didn't know Bunny's mother—but I felt like she did that on purpose. I already disliked her. I felt as if I could hate her mother as much as I hated my own.

So, no matter what, I would do everything I could to ensure that Bunny was with us that following summer.

3 CHAPTER THREE: 1973, BUNNY AT 5
(WAITING FOR THE NIGHT)

It was late April, eight months since Bunny had left, and I hadn't heard a word from her during that time.

I knew that would probably be impossible. She was just a little kid, and I assumed her parents wouldn't help her send any letters to me. But I wrote to her every week. I wasn't sure if she could read the cards and letters I sent, and I figured her family wouldn't help her either, but I hoped she had a nice teacher or aide at her school who could read them to her.

In the end, I discovered that it was a neighbour, Mrs Styler, who assisted her with my correspondence. And it was at the Styler home where Bunny was getting dinner each night.

According to Bunny, her mother seemed overly concerned with her own appearance and kept only diet foods in the house—low-carbohydrate items such as hard-boiled eggs and cottage cheese. Of course, Bunny was not permitted to touch these foods, but her mother didn't stock any other groceries in the house for fear that they would tempt her to break her diet. Her older sisters could eat at their friends' houses or walk down to the avenue to get a pizza slice, but Bunny didn't have that luxury.

Mrs Styler was a lovely woman and would shout out "Dolores!" from her front door when dinner was ready. Bunny was usually playing outside all afternoon (her mother was adamant that she couldn't come back into the house until the streetlights came on), so she almost always heard the call for dinner. According to Bunny, Mrs Styler was a great cook and allowed her to eat as much as she wanted. It was comforting to know that people were looking out for her when my family and I couldn't.

By the beginning of May, I was becoming impatient. I bothered Papà daily to contact Gino, but it wasn't always easy to reach him, as he didn't have a telephone of his own. This meant that my father could only call and speak to Gino when he was at his place of business, and only before his shift started. He was the janitor at a primary school in the city, and once his shift began, it would not be easy to locate him within the building.

After several weeks, my father finally spoke with Gino, but he didn't have good news. He said that he hadn't talked to Bunny since they had returned from Italy the previous summer. He did, however, offer to give us her phone number.

As soon as he hung up with Gino, Papà dialled the number to Bunny's home, but no one answered. In the best English he could muster, he left a message asking for "Dolores' mother or father to please return my call." Of course, they never returned the call, so my father tried again. Then he tried reaching them at least once every day. Then it was twice a day. Then, it was three times per day.

Finally, by late May, just a few days before Gino was about to leave the U.S. for Italy, Papà reached Bunny's mother. She was a rather cold woman, and my father knew right from the start that it would be a difficult conversation for him, not only due to the language barrier.

I sat next to Papà, watching him as he listened to her mother speak, as she did most of the talking. Then I could hear the voice halt on the other end of the line, and my father stopped to think.

After a long pause, he took a deep breath.

"Okay, I agree—one thousand dollars. I will speak with the bank. Thank you very much."

Papà had his back to me when he hung up the phone, his head hung low. He kept his hand on the receiver in the phone's cradle for several seconds and remained very still. Finally, he took a deep breath, picked up his head, and turned towards me.

His eyes looked sad, but with a smile, he said, "You have your wish. Bunny will be travelling here in four days with her grandfather."

I knew that my father had always paid for Gino's plane ticket to Italy, as he was his employee for the summer, but I asked, "Who will get Bunny's plane ticket? Is that what the one thousand dollars is for?"

Papà looked at the ground. "No, figlio mio. Plane tickets are not nearly that expensive. Bunny's mother would not allow her to come here unless I paid her one thousand dollars."

He looked away.

"Her mother will only let her daughter come here if it benefits her—if it lines her own pocket. I've never heard of such a thing. That poor child. So, yes, I agreed to pay the mother the money."

He started to walk away, but I could hear him mumble, "It's a small price."

I should have been saddened by what Bunny's uncaring mother had done, but I wasn't. I was just so incredibly excited for her arrival.

I cleaned my room downstairs, organized the books we would read together, and found new piano pieces I could teach her. But two days before her arrival, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach as I realized something terrible.

I went into my father's study, where he was working on medical documents, and sat down on the opposite side of his beautiful, large desk, where visitors

normally sat.

Without looking up at him, my voice quivering, I softly said, "Papà, what if Bunny doesn't remember me? What if she's changed? She was a small child when she was here. Little kids change so fast. What if she doesn't remember her time here? What if she doesn't like me anymore? Will she be afraid of me? Would she want to return home as soon as she gets here?"

Papà sat quietly and listened as I expressed my worries and fears. When I finished, I looked up at him, and he spoke.

In his infinite wisdom, he replied, "Let's just do our best to make Bunny feel welcome when she arrives. And, yes, she might not remember you or the rest of us, but let's try not to overwhelm her. And let's not worry about something that may never happen. She may just be thrilled to see you."

Two days later, I stood in the courtyard, waiting to see Giovanni's car, as he had offered to pick up Bunny and Gino from the airport. Gio called and said they had arrived safely and would be at the house within an hour. I stood outside the entire time with my umbrella, trying to avoid the sun, as any sunburn would be incredibly painful on my already damaged skin.

An hour passed—no car. I was so nervous that I was almost hyperventilating. My father came outside and waited with me, as did Luca and his current boyfriend, Piero.

We lived on a busy street in the hills of Firenze, so we could not have a traditional driveway, as we could never safely reverse out of it. Instead, we had a small semi-circular driveway that could snugly fit three Italian cars (but probably only two American vehicles). It had a gate on either side of the semi-circle, one for vehicles entering and one for exiting, as well as a small ramp off to the side leading to a garage where Papà kept his prized Jaguar XJ6.

Six steps led up from the driveway to the courtyard, and I was waiting on the top step, hoping that being higher up would give me a good vantage point to see when Gio's vehicle was coming up the hill.

And then I saw it.

The car pulled up to the gate, which had started to open slowly. Just then, the back door popped open, and out tumbled Bunny, a bag, a blanket, a stuffed animal I gave her the previous summer, a book, and some other items, all onto the driveway. She landed right on top of the pile. Gio slammed on the brakes, stopping the car with a screech, trying not to run over the child.

Bunny quickly jumped to her feet and feverishly looked from person to person, trying to spot me. I was standing far to the left, the last person she made eye contact with. A big smile came over her face, and she ran up the stairs and jumped into my arms, but not before knocking the umbrella out of my hand. She burrowed her face into the crook of my neck and started sobbing.

She cried, "I missed you so, so, so much!"

I held her tight and looked over at my father.

He said with a smile, "I think she remembers you."

I nodded my head, tears welling in my eyes. Never in my life had anyone been so happy to see me. Never.

Bunny was not the same little kid who left us nine months prior. There was a toughness to her that concerned me and, well, frightened me a bit.

After a few days, she began to open up, and I gently drew out from her how her mother enjoyed pitting her two sisters against her and often encouraged them to torture her. Her mother instigated her older daughters to sit on Bunny, to tickle her until she couldn't breathe, and worse—to lock her in the mother's hope chest, telling her she was dead and that it was her coffin.

The list went on. I couldn't bear to hear them, but she told the stories like they were badges of courage.

I contemplated asking Papà to find someone who could help her deal with the abusive situation. But I changed my mind quickly when I realized one of two things would happen: 1) her mother would be angry that Bunny talked about the abuse and would never allow her to come to our home again, or 2) even worse, it could allow Bunny to heal, only to be sent back to that home, to have it start all over again.

After some thought, I decided the best course of action would be to help train her to defend herself. This, of course, was something I would have to keep from my father. If he knew what I had planned, he would not be pleased.

Bunny also showed up with a few bad habits, such as thievery. I understood—at home in New York, she was often denied food, so she probably needed to steal. And certainly, no one there was going to give her candy or a treat, so she became very good at lifting items without being detected. She was also much younger than the average thief, so I don't think most people suspected a five-year-old of robbing them blind.

The first summer Bunny stayed with us, we rarely left the house and property. Occasionally, she went off shopping or on little excursions with one of my brothers, but that was it. But that summer, she wanted to get out of the house all the time. It was as if she stayed in one place too long, something terrible would happen. Maybe that was true for her home life back in the States.

Our house was up the hill from Piazzale Michelangelo, across the Arno River from the touristy area of Firenze. If you have ever seen postcards of panoramic views of the silhouette of the Florence city centre, the photo was most likely taken from Piazzale Michelangelo.

Getting to the Piazzale from our house was easy, as it was a straight shot downhill. Getting back home again, however, was something else. Our home was well up into the hills, past any tourist spot. It would take a good two hours to walk back, while the walk down would only be about 30 minutes.

Almost every night, Bunny would wake me up around 3:00 in the morning, and we would walk down and sit in the park for an hour. We never went during the day, as she knew people would stare at me. So, in the dead of night, we would enjoy the view that thousands of tourists appreciated every year. She

would bring snacks, usually a small bag filled with cheese, crackers, and grapes, as well as a thermos of ice water or juice. We sat on the stone railing, eating our small feast, and it was the closest thing I had ever had to a picnic.

I felt normal, even though we were sitting there in the middle of the night. The police would drive by regularly, checking the park for ne'er-do-wells. The first time this happened, they stopped, shone a light on us, and drove over to where we were sitting. Bunny, afraid of nothing, went over to the police car and started chatting with them in English. I don't believe either of the police officers in the vehicle could speak the language, but somehow, she found a way to communicate with them.

As she walked away from the vehicle, the officers looked over at me and gave me a wave. I gave a very small wave back, a bit shell-shocked that this small child could talk her way out of trouble for being in a park that was closed to the public after midnight.

She climbed back onto the railing and continued eating, not even looking at me or acknowledging the stunned look on my face. I stared at her in disbelief.

Finally, she glanced up and saw me looking at her. "What?"

I asked what she had told the police officers.

She said in one big breath, "I just told them that you had a really bad accident and that your face was all messed up and that the only time we could come to the park was at night because you didn't want people to stare at you or make fun of you."

"They understood you?" I asked.

"I guess," she said with a shrug.

And that was the end of the discussion.

We had our nightly picnics at Piazzale Michelangelo almost every evening that summer. The only times we didn't go were when there was bad weather or if Bunny didn't wake up in time. I have to admit that it was fun. It felt like we broke the rules every time we left the house.

And she liked breaking the rules, and it wasn't only limited to the nightly picnics.

Luca was still taking her on weekly shopping excursions, but she often ran off instead of staying with him. He certainly didn't enjoy spending hours looking all over downtown Firenze for her, weaving in and out of shops, searching for the small child in his charge who didn't speak the language. But he always found her, usually sitting on a bench, eating a treat that he had no idea where she had gotten it from.

Bunny would always tell me the stories when she returned. She remembered every establishment and its location, exactly where she lifted her spoils from. I listened quietly as she proudly told me all the details.

She stole a lot of snacks and small toys from all over Firenze that summer. Yet every time she did, I would make her copy a letter to the store owner that I had written for her, explaining that she had "accidentally" taken an item from

their business. Her letters were full of misspellings and barely legible, but oddly enough, she would never fight me in writing them. In fact, after the first two or three, she would tell me what she wanted me to write, and all her letters offered what I believed to be sincere apologies.

When she finished copying the letter, I would write her message in Italian below what she had written and include what I believed to be more than enough money to cover whatever she had taken. There was nothing I could do to deter Bunny's stealing, as I was never there when she did it, but I would make sure that she admitted to it and that those establishments were reimbursed for her theft.

I did not condone Bunny's behaviour, but I never scolded her for it, either. It was her small way of taking control of her life. She realized at a young age that she would have to fend for herself, and it was clear that she didn't want to depend on anyone.

I think she was waiting to get into trouble for what she had done or, at the very least, for me to be angry with her, but that never happened. I could see that after a few weeks, she started to soften, and the angry little girl that arrived was a bit more contrite.

Bunny hardly ever talked about her home life with me and would always deflect any questions I asked, but one morning, I found her sitting at the bottom of my bed, waiting for me to wake up so she could talk to me. She almost looked frightened. She didn't look up.

In a soft voice, she said, "I never get any presents. Only here. Only from you and your brothers."

I was barely awake, so I was sure I hadn't heard her properly. Plus, although my English skills were good, they weren't perfect, by any stretch, and I often had trouble understanding the messages she was trying to convey.

"You never get any presents? Ever? Not even for your birthday?"

"No. I'm a Jehobah Witness."

I had no idea what she was talking about, so I asked her to follow me upstairs and into the house. We found my father at the kitchen table, reading his newspaper and enjoying a cup of caffè before he had to head to the hospital.

I said to him in Italian, "Do you know about…"

I turned to Bunny and asked, "What is it called again? What are you?"

She looked down, almost ashamed.

"Jehobah Witness," she mumbled under her breath.

Papà took a deep breath, blinked his eyes several times, and stared off thoughtfully.

He looked up at me and translated, "Testimoni di Geova."

Papà had very rudimentary English skills, but as a doctor, he was familiar with Jehovah's Witnesses. Some patients would come into the hospital after accidents, desperately needing to be given blood. He knew of several who had refused transfusions and died. Jehovah's Witnesses are almost universally

opposed to it.

I was curious. I was 14 years old and had no idea what it meant to be a part of Testimoni di Geova, so I did some research. I asked my father and brothers to find any books or literature about the religion. And I called up the local Sala del Regno dei Testimoni di Geova, what English speakers call the Kingdom Hall, their place of worship, similar to what Catholics call a church, and I spoke at length with one of the congregation's elders, who provided many answers.

Over the next few weeks, I learned that Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate holidays that do not honour Jesus. So, it was unsurprising to hear that they didn't celebrate birthdays or other pagan holidays. However, the most astonishing information I gleaned from my conversation with the elder was that, technically, there was to be no celebration of events such as Mother's Day or Father's Day. Yet I knew that wasn't true in the Riddle household.

One week prior, Bunny told me the story of her mother getting upset with her three daughters for not buying her nicer presents for Mother's Day. Later, I would find out that her mother also had the family celebrate her own birthday, as well as her and Mr Riddle's wedding anniversary.

So, Bunny had been deliberately given incorrect information about the religion's rules and codes. Mrs Riddle falsely blamed the religion for her reluctance to buy clothes or presents for her children. Instead, Bunny's mother enjoyed choosing which dates she wanted to celebrate. The outward selfishness of it all was quite unbelievable. She truly had no shame. The holidays that benefitted and honoured Mrs Riddle were the only ones acknowledged.

Learning that information was so important to me. On some level, her stealing started to make sense. It was cumulative. Bunny's mother, who had plenty of money, wouldn't feed her or buy her anything she needed, so she truly had to fend for herself. No Christmas or birthday presents meant Bunny would never be able to get anything she wanted.

In our family, if my brothers or I saw an expensive toy we wanted, we would usually be told by Papà, "Maybe you'll get it for your birthday," or something like "We'll see." Then we would find it under the tree at Christmas.

That was not the case for Bunny. And I knew this to be true. That year, when she returned to us, the only clothing I found in her suitcase was the items we had purchased for her the summer prior, all faded and stained and too small for her. She didn't have anything in her luggage that I hadn't seen previously.

I spoke to my father about it, and after that, he did something uncharacteristic—he asked us boys to plan a party. It was to be known as "Bunny Day." It was not a birthday party, as we didn't want to go against her religion, so it was celebrated on July 31st each year. We were sure that Bunny told her family little to nothing about what she did in Italy, so we felt comfortable holding this annual celebration without worrying about her getting into trouble.

Bunny Day was excessive. We boys were all a bit too old to still have

birthday parties, and we didn't have a sister, so we took this celebration to another level. And I loved those parties, not just because I was happy that Bunny got a day all to herself, but also because it was probably the first project my brothers and I did together.

We all sat down in early July and planned out the event. My brothers suggested buying a whole assortment of Venetian masks for guests to pick up at the front gate and wear at the party. Doing this allowed me to be a part of the festivities without anyone staring at me. I'm sure I would still get some looks, as some of the scars on my face would still be visible, but none of the guests would be recoiling back in horror seeing the space where a nose should be.

For a few years after that, until I got my nose, Bunny's parties would include some fun masks or face coverings for the guests to don. One year, we had a construction theme, and everyone wore fake welding helmets. Another year, we had a medical theme with everyone wearing surgical masks. They were all fun and creative, and I appreciated the time and effort my brothers put into those parties to ensure I could be an active participant. I don't think they will ever know how much I loved them for that.

By the end of the meeting for that first Bunny Day party, all four of us had decided on our theme and were each given a list of errands and chores. My brothers would invite some friends and their significant others (or their spouse, in Michele's case), and it was usually the only time each year we were all together for an entire weekend. Not even Christmas had that kind of draw at the Aceti house.

The event was well attended, and there was a large pile of brightly coloured presents for her to open. She loved every minute of it, as any child would. And the best part was that after that very first Bunny Day, she never had the desire to steal again. Her theft spree lasted just over a month and was gone by the end of July, never to return.

It was at this first party, too, that I came out of my shell a bit. Luca's boyfriend, Piero, sat by me for most of the party and actively helped with whatever needed attending. Anyone who put that much effort into talking to his boyfriend's weird, deformed kid brother was a good man.

Piero was incredibly handsome, and he had the distinction of being the first boyfriend that Luca introduced to the family. Luca was also quite handsome. My three brothers were all on the thin side and looked similar in terms of facial structure. They had a slight aquiline nose and dark, wavy hair. But Luca was the only brother who devoted a great deal of time to his physique. He worked part-time at a clothing store and dedicated the rest of his hours to sculpting his body. He wholeheartedly admitted to enjoying the looks he received because of it and would always say that he wanted to have the body of David (Michelangelo's famous sculpture). Truthfully, he was quite close to achieving it.

Luca once told me that Piero was a former soldier in the Forze Armate

Italiane and served in the Carabinieri, the Italian military police force. Yet he was probably as soft-spoken as I was. I liked him instantly.

Piero sat next to me while everyone played sedie musicali, which Americans call "musical chairs." It was odd to me that my brothers' friends, some of whom were well into their 20s, enjoyed the game as much as Bunny did. I guess the nine bottles of wine consumed within the first hour had something to do with it.

Piero looked at me directly, smiled, and looked away.

"You know, I didn't bring a present for Bunny today. I didn't have time to stop and get her something on the way. So, I had Luca ask her what she wanted for her birthday, and I told him to tell her I would do my best. Of course, I couldn't understand a word of what they were saying, but I noticed Luca gasp and laugh once or twice during their conversation. I asked him what she said, and he whispered that he would tell me later. Before today, I couldn't care less what a five-year-old would want for her birthday. Now, I'm quite eager to know."

I smiled. I had no idea what she wanted and told him so.

Piero remained sitting next to me, and we both watched in silence as the adults continued to play games meant for small children. Finally, when the time set aside for games was over, and the cake was served, Piero called Luca over. Piero didn't even have to ask Luca what Bunny said, as the words were spilling out of Luca's mouth as he was walking up to us.

"Do you know what that child wants for her birthday from you? She said, and I quote, 'I want to learn how to kick someone's ass.'"

The thought of being tormented by her sisters never quite left her, even at a party, even while being completely safe and protected in a home in a country across an ocean.

Piero laughed. "Okay. I'll make her a deal. I will come here once a week and will teach her some basic self-defence strategies. We'll market it to her as a course on how to beat the crap out of someone."

I laughed. She was going to love it.

Piero kept his promise and came to our house every Wednesday morning that summer to teach her a few basic techniques. I would sit and watch, taking copious notes. Bunny stuck to the regimen and would willingly practice the methods throughout the week. She would show off her perfected moves to him each week, and he would then add more routines to her list. I would set up weekly goals for her and chart her progress.

Bunny was a beast. She was fierce and put all her effort into it.

Between Piero's workouts and the walks each night back up from the Piazzale Michelangelo, Bunny was a tough, fit little kid by the time she left at the end of the summer.

I later learned that Bunny never needed that training to protect herself from her sisters. That summer, they had both found boyfriends and were more

interested in spending time with them than tormenting their little sister. But I believe those workouts helped her in more ways than one. She had gained more confidence that summer and did not seem to carry as much anger with her as when she arrived.

I have always been so grateful to Piero for helping us that summer. Even during those sessions with Bunny, while I was sitting in the shade on those hot summer days, taking notes, my surgical mask dripping with sweat and fluids seeping from my nose cavity, he never made me feel uncomfortable.

Two weeks after Bunny returned to the States that year, I was devastated to learn that Piero was shot and killed in a call that he had responded to while on duty. The emergency was called in under the guise of a stated cardiac distress at a home. He and his partner rushed to the scene and were the first to arrive.

As they entered the house, they probably knew almost immediately that it was an ambush. They were both shot and killed instantly, and their bodies were dragged into the home's bathroom. Thankfully, the other Carabinieri officers were able to diffuse the situation without any further bloodshed.

Piero was later hailed as a hero.

I didn't inform Bunny of any of this until many years later.

The following summer, I told her that Piero didn't come around anymore because he and Luca had broken up. I didn't know what else to say. She had enough sadness to deal with in New York.

All I wanted was her life in Italy with me to be her safe haven.

4 CHAPTER FOUR: 1974, BUNNY AT 6 (IT'S CALLED A HEART)

We still had not heard from Bunny's family the following May, and it was getting close to her usual arrival date.

We knew her parents would never call us, as they wouldn't waste the money on an international call, especially when it only benefitted Bunny and not themselves. So, my father went through the same rigamarole again, calling and calling until he could get through to her mother.

Her parents never realized that Papà was a well-known and well-respected plastic surgeon in Italy, and his practice primarily focused on helping young people with facial deformities. (Yes, of course, I realized how lucky I was. I knew in a few years, I would get my nose, and it would look good.)

So, here was this talented surgeon, wasting hours and hours of his precious time, calling Bunny's parents repeatedly to try to talk to them. I will give him credit—he made those calls, and he never complained about it. He knew how much it meant to me to have her visit.

My father had a very similar conversation with her mother as the year prior, but that time, the price for Bunny's presence went up. Her mother wanted $2,000. Papà agreed without hesitation, which probably wasn't a good idea, as her mother learned that every year after that, she could continue to increase her price, and he would most likely pay.

Bunny showed up with her grandfather the following week, but it wasn't her usual, jovial self that was getting out of Gio's car. Her grandfather, Gino, wasn't looking well. He appeared very tired and frail, and I could tell she was worried about him. She told me that she thought he was going to die on the plane ride over.

We planned for Gino to stay with us that summer to help him regain his health while my father was treating him. But he quickly started to feel better and only stayed with us for a few weeks, as he wanted to get down to Reggio di Calabria to see his family. So, Papà, the generous man he is, allowed Gino to

stay in our vacation home that summer, the same home Gino had renovated the year prior. Bunny's grandfather was able to enjoy the fruits of his labour.

Through my father, I learned that Gino had a difficult life. His wife, Ginevra, died when Bunny's mother was two years old, the same age I was when my mother died. Gino was born and raised in Italy, but he, Ginevra, and his parents went to the United States, looking for a better life when he was in his early 20s. They moved to the Little Italy area of New York City, and although they had lived there for years, none could speak much English. They functioned perfectly well, speaking only Italian in their little neighbourhood.

Gino and Ginevra had three children: a girl, a boy, and Bunny's mother, who was the youngest. When Bunny's mother was two, Gino and Ginevra brought her and her siblings to Coney Island for the day. Ginevra put Bunny's mother down for a nap and took her two other children into the water. The tide was strong, and the three of them got caught in a riptide and pulled away from the shore. Gino saved the two children, but Ginevra was never found.

From that day forward, Gino's parents raised his children. Broken-hearted, Gino worked in the coal mines in West Virginia six days a week to support his children. He came home each Sunday but was so exhausted that he slept most of the day away.

Gino's parents were not the kindest people and had no desire to raise three small children. Bunny's mother, resourceful as she was, got pregnant at 14 years old by a local, attractive Puerto Rican boy, but claimed that the father of the child was a different lad, a successful young man from a good Irish-Catholic family. She had the child, a girl, and within four months, got pregnant again to ensure keeping the meal ticket that was Bunny's father.

Bunny's two sisters looked nothing alike, and her father should have known that the first child was not his, if not for the fact that he worked 12-hour days at his job. His long hours paid off, and he was able to move up the ladder quickly. By the time Bunny came along, her father was earning a very nice salary.

Her mother was rewarded for all her conniving and deceit with a beautiful house, a nice car, and the ability to lounge around the house all day, hanging out and going shopping with her teenage daughters when they arrived home from school.

Years later, Bunny's mother found herself a boy toy, and her parents divorced. There were over six million dollars that the couple could split between them, so they both were able to enjoy their golden years in comfort and wealth.

Bunny's mother was incredibly embarrassed by Gino, and he was not permitted to visit his grandchildren in her home. She did not want the neighbours to see that her father was a poor, blue-collar immigrant with nothing to his name. Because of this, Bunny only saw her grandfather when they flew back and forth to and from Italy together. So, those few weeks, when Gino was resting at our home, gave the two of them some quality time together.

Bunny was becoming more mature and independent, and her wanderlust

grew. She was pushing me more and more to venture outside of the house, including to go bowling, of all things.

Bunny's only friend in New York was a girl named Theresa. Theresa lived two doors down, and the only reason she was allowed over was that her mother and Bunny's mother would study the Bible together.

Theresa's parents enjoyed bowling, and they would take the two girls with them, so the kids spent almost every night at the lanes. Theresa's mother signed their daughter up for bowling lessons and paid for Bunny to go, too, knowing that her parents would never pay for something as frivolous as that for her.

Theresa and Bunny would bowl for two hours every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday afternoon. And according to Bunny, both girls improved quite a bit after seven months. So, what do you think Bunny wanted to do for fun in the evenings once she arrived in Italy?

The closest bowling alley was over 10 kilometres away. My father wasn't going to permit us to go bowling, which was great as far as I was concerned, as I didn't want to go anyway. I certainly didn't want to be in a public place during the day, and I certainly wasn't going to be allowed to bring a six-year-old with me to a bowling alley in the middle of nowhere at night. But Bunny was adamant. Instead of heading out for our nightly picnics at Piazzale Michelangelo, she decided we should try riding Papà's bike to an alley located on the road to Prato.

She nagged until I relented. She always won.

I estimated we had to leave around midnight to reach the alley by 1:15, as the terrain was quite hilly. My father's bike was quite old and still had a child seat on the back. However, riding a bike with that extra weight would be tough for me, as I still wasn't in the best shape, having done virtually no strength-training exercises. And, although I knew how to ride a bike, I hadn't ever ridden one outside our courtyard. This was going to be tough.

The first night, Bunny woke me up at midnight, and we snuck out of the house, careful not to bang the bike against any of the metal railings or the front gate. I first put her in the child's seat in the back, covered her with a small blanket, and strapped her in. I then got on the bike and started pedalling, realizing almost immediately that a) I was so out of shape, we were probably not going to make it to the bowling alley by 1:30, and b) that the bike was so old, there was a good chance we were not going to make it to the bowling alley at all. But I had spent a bit of time carefully choosing the route with the smoothest terrain, and I shocked myself by making it there around 1:20.

We walked into the alley, and almost no one was there. Bunny went up to the counter and spoke to the attendant. He mentioned that he was studying English in college, so he was happy to chat with her. He gave her shoes, and Bunny went and got herself a ball. I didn't bowl that first night and was content just to sit and watch her.

She was truly a terrible bowler. For all the hype, she had no idea what she

was doing and often found her ball in the gutter. But she was thrilled. Any pins she toppled elicited a squeal of happiness. She played two games and, when she was done, gave the lire to the attendant to pay for her session.

As she turned and walked away, she waved to him and said, "Okay! See you tomorrow!"

My eyes grew big. Surely, she wasn't expecting me to bring her down there every night.

We left the bowling alley that night at 1:55 a.m. I still had a 1.5-hour ride home, which meant we wouldn't get back until close to 3:30. I was already exhausted from the ride over, and now I had to get back on the bike and do it again—except the ride back was miserable.

Bunny kept falling asleep. She would list from one side to the other, almost falling out of her seat. There was only a thin lap belt, and the chair was made for a much smaller child, not a chubby six-year-old. I had to stop every so often and prop Bunny back up, which was exhausting.

At one point, she leaned the entire front of her body against my back while she slept. This was fine, as I knew she was still somewhat in her seat, but when I felt her start to slide off, I had to immediately stop the bike and reposition her. This happened repeatedly during the entire 10-kilometer ride. We finally made it home around 5:45, with Bunny still asleep on the back of that bike. It seemed that the child could sleep through almost anything.

Papà usually woke up at 5:30 on the nose every morning, even on weekends. He was sitting at the outdoor table under the trellis just outside our kitchen, enjoying his morning caffè, when we entered through the courtyard gate. He looked at us quizzically—not mad or upset, just confused.

I was so exhausted that all I could say was, "Don't ask. Please don't. I'll tell you everything later."

He looked quite amused as I struggled to get the bike up the six steps from the driveway to the courtyard. I appreciated that he didn't press me any further. I took Bunny off the bike and handed the still-sleeping child to my father, saying nothing.

I dragged myself downstairs to my room and slept until I was awoken at dinnertime that evening by Bunny. She was jumping on my bed, as happy as a clam, screaming, "Can we go again tonight? Can we? Can we?"

It was the only time in my life I considered smacking her. But, as always, I sighed and gave in. And I'll admit that I needed those small escapes as much as she did.

I didn't have enough money for us to take a taxi each way and pay for her bowling, so we kept riding the bike there and back. However, I did rig up the seat so she would be a bit more stationary. I put a small pillow, a small blanket, and two of my belts in a sack and brought them with us each evening. Just as we left the bowling alley each night, she would hold the pillow against her belly, and I would wrap the blanket around her. Then I would link the two belts

together, wrap them around both the seat back and her, and secure Bunny, the blanket, and the pillow in the seat. When she fell asleep, she leaned against the pillow, not the belt, so she seemed quite comfortable. Within a few trips, she knew what to do, so all I had to do was lift her up, put her in the seat, and get the belt around her and the chair. It was like clockwork.

After a few nights of watching Bunny bowl, I decided to join her. I was astonished to learn how much I enjoyed it. Surprisingly, even after she left at the end of the summer, I still went bowling at night on my own from time to time, taking a taxi to and from the alley on the nights that were too cold and icy for the bike.

By the end of that summer, I had discovered two things: 1) I was getting stronger and had built up enough endurance to get us both home in under an hour, even with her sleeping on the back of that bike, and 2) that the 2,000 lire (about 1 American U.S. dollar) we paid each night to bowl two games and rent two pairs of shoes was not nearly enough to cover the costs.

I probably should have realized that early on, but with never having been shopping or spending money on anything in my life, I was completely unaware of the cost of things.

On that first morning when Bunny and I arrived home at 5:45 after that horrific ride back from the bowling alley, it was fairly easy for my father to deduce that we were sneaking out at night, so he asked my brother Giovanni to follow us in his car the next evening.

Gio sat in his vehicle down the street from our driveway, waiting for us to emerge. He couldn't believe it, following behind us for over 10 kilometres to a bowling alley in a neighbouring town. He waited in his car down the street from the alley, hiding as best he could so we wouldn't see him, which we didn't.

After Gio saw us leave the alley and ride off on the bike, he drove up to the main door of the building and knocked on the glass, alerting the attendant. The gentleman motioned to my brother that they were closed, but Gio held up a cinquecentomila lire banknote (about 300 U.S. dollars) to the window, and the man opened the door.

Gio told the gentleman that he was my brother and asked him to use that money to pay for any games Bunny and I played. And he said he would continue to bring in the same amount each month as long as he didn't tell the two of us what he was doing.

The attendant happily agreed. And aside from our games, we would also receive free food and drinks each night we went there to bowl, with him saying it was left over from the day and that he would have to throw it out if we didn't take it. Bunny and I were both naïve and never caught on to what Gio was doing.

And that is how Bunny and I could afford to go bowling every night for an entire summer for a mere dollar.

5 CHAPTER FIVE: 1975, BUNNY AT 7 (SEE YOU)

We assumed that the following summer, it would be a bit easier to get Bunny to our home, as my father clearly understood what Bunny's mother wanted.

He called the Riddle home and, as her parents never answered their phone, left a message in English that said, "I will be wiring 3,000 American dollars to the same account as last year. If there has been any change to your banking situation, please call me within the next 48 hours to let me know. If not, you will be receiving the money by Friday."

This time was different.

Within five minutes, the telephone rang, and Bunny's mother was on the other end of the line. Papà put me on the phone to talk to her. She stated, in a very matter-of-fact tone, that Gino had died five months earlier and that "Dolores would no longer be able to travel to Italy."

She hung up the phone before I could respond and without saying goodbye.

I stood in Papà's office holding the receiver up to my ear, well after Bunny's mother had hung up on me. I was paralyzed. I had not anticipated that Bunny would not be coming, and my heart broke. During the nine months that she was gone, I spent a good deal of time planning everything that we were going to do during the three months she was there. It was the only thing that was keeping me going.

I slowly hung up and turned around to tell my father the news. He seemed almost as disappointed as I was. He sat down sullenly at his desk and put his head in his hands. Several seconds later, he looked up quickly and forcefully slammed his palms on his desk, which startled me a bit.

He looked at me, shaking a pointed finger in my direction.

"I have an idea. A good one."

He picked up his address book, looked up a number, and dialled it. Trying to decipher his end of the conversation, it sounded like he called Michele's secretary. My father told her to have Michele call him immediately, as it was a family emergency.

Several minutes later, the phone rang, and Papà sprang towards it to answer it. Serendipitously, Michele was already in New York City for business. He was traveling with his father-in-law, who owned the financial company where he worked, and was shadowing him, trying to conduct face-to-face meetings with many of their American clients.

My father is not one to overreact, so when he left that urgent message for Michele, my brother assumed that someone had died. He called back immediately.

Papà explained the situation to Michele, and then asked him to locate Bunny's family home and bring the $3,000 directly to them. I believe he assumed that once her mother saw the money, she would gladly hand over her child to him, even to a man that she had never laid eyes on before. He believed she would happily surrender the child's passport to this stranger without a word and close the door.

Papà was not wrong. Michele said the interaction with her mother took all of 30 seconds, as Bunny ran out the door the instant her mother had the cash in her hand. She didn't even bother getting a bag for her things.

When we heard from Michele that Bunny would not be traveling with any clothing or supplies, we decided to always keep a small cabinet in my room dedicated to her items. It didn't matter if she did or did not have a suitcase with her. Our home was her home, and she would have a permanent spot to keep her things.

Bunny stayed with Michele and his father-in-law in New York for several days before heading to Firenze with them. She was okay with staying in the hotel room alone while they attended their business meetings, and she spent the day watching television and drawing pictures on the hotel stationery.

Bunny introduced the men to a store called Kmart, and they watched her shop for a few items to wear until she got to Italy. As defiant and rambunctious a girl as I knew that she was, I was shocked to learn that Michele's father-in-law said that she couldn't have been a nicer or more polite child.

Four days later, a taxi pulled up to our home with Michele and Bunny in tow. She was wearing a completely mismatched outfit, and it was clear that she did, indeed, do her own clothes shopping without assistance. She ran towards me in her purple shirt and purple shorts (not even close to the same colour) and her purple sneakers (again, not even close to the same shade), and I started to laugh. She looked like a bruised plum.

She stopped in her tracks, looking confused. "What?"

I shook my head and said, still laughing, "You look good."

She walked over to me, punched me lightly in the stomach, and hugged me, knowing that she was getting too big to jump into my arms like she used to. I would venture to say that even though I was a good 25 centimetres taller than her (about 8 inches), we were probably close to the same weight. She was a bit overweight, and I was severely underweight. I gained a couple of kilograms and

put on a bit of muscle mass every summer, but I would lose most of it during the nine months she was gone.

The yard beyond our immediate courtyard was not level. Instead, it was tiered. The house, garage, and pool were on the top level, then back a bit further on the property was a grassy lower level, with several lounge chairs and the swing set my father had installed during Bunny's first year with us. The bottom tier contained remnants of an old garden that had become overgrown and unmanageable.

The previous fall, Papà hired workers to clear everything out, as no one had taken care of the plants in that area for years. It had become unusable to us. So, everything was ripped out, leaving a large, open dirt patch.

Papà asked me what I wanted in that area. I believe he secretly hoped I would do something unique with the space or maybe even start a new hobby. But, in reality, he should have guessed what my answer would be.

I said, "Let's wait to see what Bunny wants to do with it."

He gave a small smile, shook his head, and said, "Yes, of course."

So, when Bunny arrived and saw the open area, she looked at me wide-eyed and said, "Are we getting a trampoline?"

No English translation was necessary. Even my father understood, as the word for trampoline in Italian is *trampolino*.

He gave an emphatic "No!"

We both must have given him the same look—one that combined pleading and desperation.

He turned away from us and mumbled, "Buon Dio, devo essere pazzo."

Bunny asked, "What did he say?"

"He said we're getting a trampoline."

That's not what he said. The literal translation was, "Good Lord, I must be crazy."

Same thing.

Within a week, we had a giant trampoline. Actually, I take that back. I don't know if it was giant or not, but it seemed huge to me, as the only other trampoline I had ever been on prior to that one was the tiny one that was my mother's. My brothers told me she had used it years ago for her exercises.

This one looked nothing like that. It was immense. It was perfect. It was about 3.5 meters across, with a large net around it and bright red padding covering the springs.

As the worker put it together, I thought, "We are going to be out here jumping until all hours."

That was until I got on it.

I jumped for about 60 seconds and was exhausted. On the other hand, Bunny lived up to her name and could bounce on it for up to an hour without stopping. There was an additional bonus for the trampoline, as she could see over the concrete retaining wall into the neighbour's yard when she put effort

into it.

One day, Bunny and I were in the yard—she on the trampoline and me up above on one of the swings, reading a book in the shade.

She stopped jumping and shouted, "Hey, I hear English!"

She resumed her jumping and shouted, "Hey (jump), who's speaking English?! (jump)"

I stood up to see a middle-aged African gentleman approaching the wall from the yard behind ours. Up until the previous fall, we couldn't see their house at all, thanks to all the foliage, but now that most of it was gone, only a few small trees blocked the view to their yard. The man ducked under a tree branch in his yard and looked at the bobbing head that was trying to talk to him.

Bunny panted, "Hey! (jump) You! (jump) What's your name? (jump)"

He smiled a sweet smile and said, "My name is Bernard. And who might you be, young lady?"

She replied, "I'm Bunny! (jump) I live here (jump) with my friends. (jump)"

"Well, it's lovely to meet you, Miss Bunny. Is that your real name?" Bernard asked.

"Yup! (jump)" she lied right to his face. "Where are you from? (jump) You talk (jump) kinda cool! (jump)"

"I'm originally from South Africa. Do you know where that is?" Bernard asked.

"Yeah, (jump) of course! (jump) It's in (jump) South Africa! (jump)" Bunny said.

I could hear Bernard laughing from the other side of the wall.

"Well, I cannot argue with that logic!"

I stood up slowly and peeked over the retaining wall. A beautiful blond-haired woman walked up next to Bernard. She smiled, waved at Bunny, and said in a thick German accent, "Hello! I'm Brigitte! I'm Bernard's wife."

Bunny, speaking bluntly, asked, "Are you (jump) an actress (jump) or something? (jump) You're like (jump) crazy pretty. (jump) My sisters (jump) would hate you (jump) if they met you. (jump)"

Both Bernard and Brigitte laughed.

"No, I'm not an actress, but I think you've now become my new best friend!"

She wasn't wrong. For the fraction of a second that I saw her, Brigitte was, indeed, quite beautiful. Bunny clearly was enjoying talking to them, and I didn't want to interrupt. But then the child said something shocking.

"Hey, (jump), do you guys (jump) want to come over (jump) for dinner tonight? (jump)"

Bernard and Brigitte looked at each other.

Brigitte said, "Really?"

"Sure!" Bunny exclaimed happily, offering to host perfect strangers in our

home.

Bernard said, "Actually, we'd love to. We're still moving in and haven't unpacked most of our kitchen items. What is your house number?"

Bunny looked at me. I stared at her with wide eyes. She stopped jumping, giving me the same look back. She stuck her arms out in a "What?" kind of gesture.

I cowered and said, "Buonvicini, settantasei."

"Bom maccini (jump), sabana say (jump)," Bunny shouted over the wall.

I stood so that they could see me and said, "Hello! We are at settantasei. Buonvicini, 76."

Both of them, as good-looking as could be, smiled.

Brigitte said, "Wonderful. Settantasei. Shall we say 8:00 p.m.? Can we bring some wine?"

"That would be wonderful," I replied, not knowing what the hell I was talking about.

"See you soon!" Bunny cried out to them.

I walked down to the trampoline, grabbed Bunny's arm, and forcefully pulled her off.

"What the hell was that?! Why did you invite them over?" I yelled quietly at her.

"They were nice! And we don't have any other friends. Don't you want to have friends?"

Bunny looked like she was going to cry. I don't think she had any idea of what she had done. She was just being kind. And those lovely people behind us were happy to accept this child's offer. They were either the nicest people on the planet or just downright crazy.

I pulled Bunny inside the house with me and called Papà, who was still making his rounds at the hospital. They paged him, and when he answered the phone, I said, "Papà, I'm really sorry. Bunny did something really stupid."

"Oh, no. What happened?"

I could hear a slight chuckle in his voice, as he knew fully well the kinds of trouble she got into regularly.

"She invited our English-speaking neighbours in the back for dinner… tonight. 20:00. Tonight. And they speak English. Only English. Maybe some German."

I had not anticipated his reaction. I thought he would be livid.

"She did, did she? Well, I guess there's no getting out of it now, is there? Let's see… It's 15:30 now. Marta has left for the day, so I suppose we will need to order in. What about Trattoria 13 Gobbi? I'll order the rigatoni and maybe the Coniglio al Forno for us. I'll ask them to have it ready for pick-up at 19:30. Call Gio to see if he can join us. Might be good to have another English speaker at the table."

I pulled the receiver away from my head and stared at it. Was this my father

that I was speaking to? Was there another Dottore Aceti at the hospital?

I returned the receiver to my ear and said, "What? Seriously? I thought you'd be mad."

"My boy, before you were born, your mother and I had many lovely dinner parties at our home. That all stopped when we had you. Your mother was worried about protecting you, so we chose not to ask anyone over. But, as your little ingénue did you the favour of inviting the neighbours over, I would love to have them as guests this evening. In fact, I would say that I'm quite looking forward to it. Please ensure the house is picked up, and please set the table in the formal dining room. I will be home by 19:00."

And with that, Papà hung up on me.

I was worried for nothing.

Bernard and Brigitte Kuhmalo could not have been more lovely people, and they treated all of us at the table, especially me, with kindness and respect. I didn't have to explain the surgical mask on my face, as Bunny essentially told them my whole life story the moment they arrived at our home. Maybe it was best to just get it out of the way early on.

Bernard and Brigitte told us they met in South Africa while Bernard was working on his Ph.D. in Political Science and Brigitte was pursuing her master's in Africana Studies. They married shortly after graduation and spent the previous eight years traveling and teaching at colleges and universities around the world.

Bernard secured a full-time teaching position at Gonzaga University's Mozilo Center in town, and Brigitte was able to get a part-time teaching position at Villa I Tatti, Harvard University's extension campus. Brigitte loved it, and often, she would take the number 10 and 17 busses up above the campus to the small town of Fiesole to take in the beautiful views of the city before heading home each evening.

My father joined in the conversation, too, and spoke better English than I knew he could. Either he had been practicing on his own, or Bunny was rubbing off on him more than he realized. I assumed the former. His English was too good for him to be emulating the child.

The Kuhmalos stayed until almost 2:00 in the morning. Bunny fell asleep curled up under the grand piano (oddly, one of her favourite places to nap) while the rest of us chatted in Papà's library, and I believe we all had a lovely time. Gio dropped off dinner for us but couldn't stay long. However, my father and I held our own quite nicely. Both Brigitte and Bernard appreciated the extra effort we made to speak English, as their Italian skills were still a bit basic.

As they were leaving to walk home, Brigitte walked over to me, gave me a little hug, and said, "Thank you for a truly wonderful evening. I am glad you and Bunny are my first friends in Italy."

I swallowed hard and tried not to cry. I just nodded my head in agreement.

Once the Kuhmalos walked out of our wicket gate, down the hill, and out

of ear- and eyeshot, I let go and started to sob. Papà asked me why I was crying.

I whispered, "She called me her friend."

He smiled, and tears welled up in his eyes.

He hugged me, something he normally did not do, and said, "Yes. You did an excellent job tonight. And you will make more friends as you allow more people to get to know you."

He then let me go, stood before me, and grabbed my shoulders.

"Now, my boy," he gently said, "you get to go and clean off the dining room table. Marta can do the dishes in the morning."

He kissed my forehead and went into the house. I stood there for a moment, thinking about what had just transpired and smiled.

I went into the house, entered the library, and pulled Bunny out from under the piano. It wasn't easy, but I carried her down the stairs and put her to bed. I then, very happily, cleaned up the dining room and library and washed all the dishes, so Marta wouldn't have to.

6 CHAPTER SIX: 1976, BUNNY AT 8 (NOTHING)

Bunny's arrival at our home that summer was interesting, to say the least.

My father tried to get Michele to retrieve Bunny from the U.S., but he was busy with work and family life. He and Greta had a cute little girl named Aida and a newborn named Luciano. (Yes, my brother and his wife are fans of the opera.) Luca and Giovanni were unavailable, too. And I couldn't get Bunny by myself. Even if I had a nose, I wasn't permitted to fly alone internationally until I was 18. I was still several months away from that, being that my birthday is on October 31st.

Bunny thought that was the "coolest birthday ever," but when I told her that we don't celebrate Halloween the same way in Italy, she was quite disappointed. Instead, Italians focus much more on the days immediately following Halloween: All Saints' Day (Ognissanti) on November 1st and All Souls' Day (Il Giorno dei Morti) on November 2nd. So, to me, it was like having my birthday on the 3rd of July—not a big deal.

Unfortunately, it was up to my father to fly to the U.S. to get Bunny. He was the only option, and he wasn't happy about it. Papà didn't like to leave Firenze, let alone travel across the ocean to another country. In fact, he had never even had a passport.

So, in early May, when it looked like he would have to go to New York, he applied for an expedited passport that he thought he would use only once. He paid an incredible amount of money for it and for the plane ticket that would allow him to fly first-class both ways.

According to Papà, the flight to the U.S. was quite pleasing. He enjoyed his meal and slept most of the flight. And he planned everything perfectly to ensure he would have no reason whatsoever to leave the airport terminal.

He arranged for a colleague of Michele's, Jonathan, to go to Bunny's home and retrieve the child. Jonathan was also entrusted with the task of giving her mother her $4,000 in payment, ensuring that Bunny's passport was in his possession before the money left his hands. He was to be paid very handsomely for his time.

Everything went perfectly. Or so it seemed...

Jonathan arrived at the airport with Bunny and met my father at the predetermined spot, just outside the first-class lounge. As usual, Bunny had no luggage to speak of—just the clothes on her back—so Jonathan was able to get her to the airport well before their scheduled meeting time. Papà was there early, as well, and was almost as thrilled to see Bunny as she was to see him.

Then, Papà asked for Bunny's passport, and Jonathan stopped in his tracks. He looked up at my father and said, "I forgot… I forgot to get the passport."

Papà understood that sentence perfectly. Although normally a very calm man, when my father loses his temper, it is bad. It doesn't happen often, thank the Lord, but when it does, watch out.

Papà glared at Jonathan and growled, "Go. Get. The. Passport. NOW."

Jonathan ran out of the airport. My father had no way of communicating with him once he left. They hadn't decided on another time or place to meet, so Papà and Bunny had to sit in the same spot on the cold, concrete floor for over an hour, waiting for Jonathan to return.

An hour and 27 minutes later, my father could see Jonathan running down the hall towards them, completely dishevelled and dripping with sweat. Papà grabbed Bunny's passport without thanking him and ran down the hall towards the security checkpoint.

Security checkpoints were relatively new during that period, and neither the guards nor the passengers quite knew what they were supposed to do. It took them 22 minutes to get through security and 12 minutes to run to the gate. By the time they arrived, the gate door was closed, and the waiting area was empty.

Bunny went up to the desk and talked to the assistant at the gate, translating as best she could for my father. Yes, they missed their flight. No, no other flights were going out that day. Yes, they would need to find a place to sleep for the night. Yes, there was a hotel within the airport. No, there weren't any rooms left. No, she didn't know where else they could go.

Papà looked down at Bunny. They had no clothes, no toothbrushes, no place to stay, nowhere to go. They were both hungry and tired. The only difference was that she was enjoying every minute of it.

They left their gate in search of a ticketing agent. My father could only get a partial refund for the plane tickets for the flight they missed, and buying new plane tickets with no advance notice was ridiculously expensive.

The good news: They had seats on the first flight out the next morning. The bad news: The seats were in coach.

It was almost 20:00, and their flight was leaving at 5:50 in the morning, which meant they would have to return to the airport by 4:00 to make it in time.

Papà, exhausted as he was, looked down at the little girl beaming at him. It had been almost a full 24 hours from the time he left his house for this trip. He hadn't had a decent meal in that time and was starting to suffer from indigestion. He didn't want to leave the airport to search for a hotel room to

sleep in for only a few hours.

He looked down at Bunny and asked, "Is okay we stay in airport tonight? No hotel, okay?"

She replied, "Certo!"

She was doing her best to make my father happy in any way she knew how. They had a decent meal at one of the nicer restaurants in the terminal, then walked to their gate to wait for their flight the following morning.

Papà was awoken a few hours later by Bunny tapping on his face.

She gently yelled, "Hey, Papà, this lady said we need to get on the plane now!"

It was the gate agent, and she was trying to let my father know that the door to the plane was about to close. They were the last passengers to board the aircraft, as the flight crew shut and locked the door behind them.

They were on an American Airlines flight in economy class with a 3-4-3 seat configuration, and of course, their two seats were right in the middle of the group of four at the very back of the plane.

They both had to climb over a large, overweight man to reach their seats, but he was nice enough and was very happy to see that he would be sitting next to a child during that very long flight. This man told Bunny jokingly that he was used to having people who sat next to him complain to the flight attendants about his girth spilling over into their seats, but he had a feeling she wouldn't do that to him.

When my father was finally buckled into his seat, and the plane started to taxi down the runway, he asked Bunny, "I sleep in airport? I sleep?"

She nodded her head yes.

He asked, "You sleep?"

She shook her head no.

"What you do in airport when I sleep?" he asked.

"I dunno. Talk to people. Watch TV. Walk around."

My father realized that if she was walking around while he slept, there was a good chance someone had stolen his money. He feverishly searched his body for their passports and his wallet. He had them all and breathed a sigh of relief.

The flight home seemed far longer for my father than the enjoyable first-class trip to the U.S. had been. He stayed awake and let Bunny sleep, leaning against him. He could tell that he was starting to smell, as he hadn't washed or changed his clothes in two days.

As a physician, Papà always told his older patients who wouldn't bathe often enough, "If you can smell your own body odour a little, that means everyone else can smell you a lot." He knew that they both had just about reached that point. The pièce de résistance, however, was when the large gentleman next to Bunny took out his baloney-and-egg-salad sandwich and started eating it. Had Papà eaten anything that morning, he said he surely would have gotten ill from the stench.

Hours later, when Papà and Bunny finally reached the Amerigo Vespucci Airport in Firenze, no one was waiting for them. At that moment, my father realized he had forgotten to call us and let us know of the delay. He grabbed Bunny's hand and ran to the pay phone. He called our home, but the line was busy. Yes, the line had been busy, as Luca, Gio, and I were calling everywhere, trying desperately to find out what had happened.

We calculated that their 20:00 flight from New York should have gotten to Firenze by 12:30 that afternoon. By 18:00, there was still no sign or word from them. It wasn't until 23:30 that a taxi pulled up in front of our gate, and Papà and Bunny climbed out. My brothers and I rushed outside.

Luca, Gio, and I were emotionally exhausted from worry. My father was physically exhausted from the situation. And Bunny was thrilled, jumping from person to person, hugging everyone.

Then, she ran over and jumped in the pool, clothes and all. We all looked at each other. Then, we boys all followed suit and jumped in, as well. The day had been long and stressful, but everyone was alright, and we were all together. I honestly couldn't have asked for more.

It took Papà several days to get back to normal. He got violently ill the day after they returned, but I honestly think it was more about the stress of the situation than catching any type of virus.

He kept mentioning the smell of that sandwich on the plane and dry-heaved a little each time he talked about it. Sitting at the table that morning, he couldn't even muster the energy to drink his morning caffè.

But he did have enough strength to look at me and state, with a deathly scowl, "I will never, ever do that again. From this day forward, you and only you are responsible for Dolores' arrival here."

I was very thankful that Bunny was not in the room when my father said that. She would not have been happy to hear her given name spoken aloud.

Things were not as lively that year as they usually were in years past when Bunny arrived. This is not to say that things were bad. It just seemed that she was maturing a bit.

She was eight years old and still a child, but she was more comfortable and surer of herself. I think she finally realized that she didn't have to be the clown and entertain us constantly for us to want her to stay. I was glad she felt that way. It meant we were truly becoming more family and less friends.

We still went bowling, but not every night. Several times a week, we would take a taxi ride there and back—no more bike rides for us. We had the same taxi driver pick us up and take us home each time, and after a few weeks, our driver, Omar, came in and bowled with us instead of just sitting out in his car waiting.

Bunny also started to enjoy reading at this point. She would go through my father's library, picking up books that caught her eye, and my brothers would ask their friends if they had any paperbacks in English they weren't currently

reading. Within a week, she had over 30 books for her to choose from, many of them classics.

However, much to Papà's delight, Bunny was most interested in reading about Galileo, both his inventions and his life. This probably stemmed from his taking her to the Church of Santa Croce to see his sarcophagus. He told her the secret of his daughter being buried in the floor right below him. Not many people knew that fun piece of information, as no nameplate showed that she was buried there. Bunny loved obscure little facts such as that.

It was about this time that we realized that we just enjoyed sitting quietly to read or work on little projects. We didn't need to talk all the time, and, for me, there was security in that. In addition, I needed to work on my studies. I had completed my secondary school work and was preparing for my entrance exams for pre-medical studies. My father was adamant that I follow in his footsteps and become a plastic surgeon. He thought that, because of my own experience, I would be very devoted to my patients and give them the best possible care.

I know this sounds ridiculous, but I assumed medical school would be incredibly easy for me. It was not. Both Papà and my brother Gio were doctors, and I had been surrounded by stories of their experiences my whole life. There wasn't anything else I was interested in possibly studying, apart from music. However, the amount of reading I had to do for medical school was insane, and I had to complete quite a bit of it that summer, so I was glad Bunny was willing to just sit and be with me.

Family dinners were almost unheard of, and Bunny and I ate almost all our meals on our own. But once a month, Papà would still ask all his sons to come home and eat dinner together. Most of the time, not all of us could make it, but we did try.

At one particular meal in June, Gio and Luca made it home for dinner. Gio and Papà spent much of the meal discussing my nose, as the plan was to have it surgically attached before Christmas. They were researching different techniques and having serious discussions to determine what method would be best.

Gio asked me what I wanted my nose to look like, and Bunny asked, "Why won't his nose look just like yours?"

By this point, she couldn't really speak Italian, but she understood quite a bit of what was being discussed around her.

Gio replied in English, "It is because Bastian is only our half-brother. We do not share the same father."

She looked at Gio. "Well, then, who's your father?"

Gio looked a bit sad and glanced down at his plate. He quietly said, "He's my father," while gesturing slowly to the man we all called Papà.

Bunny turned and looked at me. "Then, who's *your* father?"

I was incredibly mad and ashamed at the same time. I could feel my face

turning red.

I replied angrily, "My mother had a boyfriend. He is my biological father. I don't know anything about him."

Bunny asked, "What does that mean?"

I was getting quite upset by this point. For the very first time, I yelled at her.

"It means that I'm not really part of this family, Bunny!"

I forcefully pointed toward my father.

"This man was nice enough to raise me as his son, even after my mother died. That was why she killed herself, and that is why I look this way. She didn't want to have me."

The room went silent.

Bunny, remaining calm, paused for a moment and looked around the table.

She studied each of our faces, taking the time to look at each one of us individually, and then said, "Nah, I don't buy it. You look just like the rest of them."

"Well, you're wrong. I'm not."

She rebutted, "Says who?"

"Says my mother, that's who. She *told* my father I was not his child."

"Well, your stupid mother wasn't a doctor. How the hell did she know?!"

It was at that point that everyone turned and looked at me.

Luca said quietly, "Papà, was there ever a paternity test done?"

Papà replied, "No, no, but your mother specifically told me…"

My father was not able to finish his sentence. Luca and Gio forcefully got up from the table, Luca knocking over his own chair. They both ran toward my father's exam room in the garage. Papà rarely had his patients visit him at home, but when he did, he needed a private space to examine them, so one section of the garage was made into an exam room/office.

Papà and I sat quietly at the table, and Bunny continued to enjoy her gnocchi, blissfully unaware of the giant tempest she had just created. She was actually humming as she ate.

Luca re-entered the room with gloves on, carrying a sterilised tray with three needles and six 10 ml Vacutainers, as the goal was to fill two of the phlebotomy tubes for each of us: Luca, my father, and me. Gio then followed behind him, holding a brand-new, unopened box of surgical gloves.

Looking directly at me, Gio said, "I made sure that everything is sterile so that there is zero chance of cross-contamination."

He walked to the sink to wash his hands and then opened the new box of gloves. He grabbed a pair from the box and put them on, careful not to brush up against anything around him. He then grabbed a sterilised needle off the tray.

Gio wrapped a tourniquet around my arm, felt for a good vein, and applied an antiseptic agent to the area. He took two blood samples from me. This was

overkill, one Vacutainer of my blood would have been enough, but he wanted to ensure he got a reliable sample. Gio wrote my name on both blood collection tubes and placed them into a biohazard transport bag. He did the same for my father and Luca.

As soon as he had samples from the three of us, Gio said, "I'll get my blood drawn at the hospital by an intern and will have him run the HLA test on all the specimens. I will return when I have an answer."

That was at 19:45.

Giovanni was completing his final year of medical school and finishing his residency at the same hospital where Papà practiced, so he had the same access to the labs as all the doctors there. I knew that if Gio didn't run the tests himself, he would vigilantly watch whoever did. He wasn't going to allow for any mistakes.

Papà, Luca, and I sat in our chairs silently for hours. No one got up from the table, no one looked at each other, and no one spoke, except for Bunny. When she was done with dinner, she put her plate in the sink and went downstairs to my room to watch some TV. After about an hour, she came back up into the kitchen, crawled under the table, squeezed herself between my legs, and stood up so that she could get her face close to mine.

She whispered, "Did I do something bad? Everybody looks sad. I'm sorry for what I said about your mom."

"You did nothing wrong. We're just trying to figure some things out. Why don't you go back downstairs and wait for me? I'll be down in a bit."

Bunny walked toward the spiral staircase on the other side of the kitchen. She had a sad look on her face, but I wasn't sure if that was because she was upset about the situation or just mirroring my own expression.

Giovanni returned shortly after 1:00. He quietly entered the house and walked up to my father, handing him an unsealed envelope with a folded sheet inside it.

Papà looked at the envelope and asked, "Do you know the results, Gio?"

He softly nodded his head.

My father then asked, "Did you verify them? Are these authenticated?"

Quietly, in almost a whisper, Gio said, "I performed the entire panel of genetic markers, including the HLA test, three times and had a fellow resident run them twice. The results are accurate."

Gio continued to hold the paperwork near my father's shoulder. I could clearly see my brother trembling, the envelope shaking. Papà, who was seated, glanced towards me and then up at Gio, who was standing above him.

He said softly, "Let Bastian see the results first."

I didn't want to see them. Either result would be bad, as far as I was concerned.

If I weren't my father's son, that would make me feel even less like I was a part of this family. It would be official.

If I were his son, I would have spent my entire life feeling like an outsider for no reason, believing my father was doing me an enormous favour by raising me, thinking I was the bastard child of his cheating wife.

I was positively sick to my stomach.

I could feel Papà staring at me, although I did not turn to look at him.

"Open it, my boy."

I looked up, and he smiled slightly.

"It doesn't matter what the results are. You are my son."

I scoffed and shook my head no.

Papà continued, "You are the only one of my sons that I blessed with my name—a German Christian name. Your mother didn't name you—I did. Your middle name is my first name, and my middle name is your first name—you already know this. But why did I do that, Bastian? I did that so that you would always be tied to me."

I was looking down at the floor. Papà gently grabbed my chin so that I would look right at him.

"So, you see, it doesn't matter what that paper says." He looked at me lovingly. "Go on, open it."

I took the envelope from Gio and opened it slowly, pulling out the single sheet of paper. I carefully unfolded it and began to read, not really registering the words. However, I did see a number and knew what it meant. I looked at Papà and read the result out loud to him.

"Indice di Paternità/Probabilità di Paternità: 99.7 per cento."

The man whom I had called Papà all these years was my actual father.

Luca gasped and covered his mouth. Gio was sobbing quietly. And my father just sat there, smiling, nodding his head in approval, tears running down his cheeks.

My mother was wrong. She didn't have to try to abort me. I didn't need to be disfigured. She didn't need to kill herself. Her family was intact. All four of her children belonged to her husband, a man who continued to devote himself to her long after she made a mockery of their marriage.

I suppose that is what all-consuming guilt will do to a person.

I didn't know how to feel about any of it. I thought I should have hugged my brothers, or at least Papà, but I felt cold and numb, just wanting to be alone. I stood up from the table and walked out the side door, not saying a word.

I arrived at the basement room using the external outdoor steps. I walked in and saw Bunny lying on my bed, fast asleep in the foetal position. I crawled into bed next to her, resting my head against her back. Within what seemed like mere seconds, I started to drift off to sleep.

I dreamed of my mother that night. Clearly, I didn't remember what she looked like, but my mind constructed an image of her based on the photographs around our house. In my dream, I remember running towards her—she had her arms stretched out to give me a hug. And in this dream, I was whole, with

a nose and no scarring on my face or upper torso. In fact, I think I looked very much like a younger version of my father. As I got closer to her, I realized that she wasn't a person but just a big pile of wet mud. The damp mud began to take on a rancid smell, and I was shocked to learn it was just a big pile of shit.

I woke up the following morning feeling angry at the world. I lay in bed for quite a while, trying to process it all.

From a distance, I could hear two faint voices talking, one certainly belonging to Bunny. Curious, I got up to get a little closer to listen. Walking down the hall, I could hear that it was coming from the kitchen, up above. The other voice belonged to Papà. I leaned against the railing of the spiral staircase, not wanting them to know I was there. I heard what sounded like Bunny teaching my father some phrases in English. I smiled a little bit.

Papà never disliked Bunny, but I believe he would have rather not have had her stay with us that first summer, or any summer thereafter. It wasn't easy for him to be responsible for someone else's child for months at a time. But I think their shared travel experience forced Papà to get to know her a bit better, and I think he was starting to enjoy her company. Of course, none of us boys were allowed to know that information, and he would have denied it vehemently if we ever confronted him about it, so I never let on that I knew about their little language lessons.

For the next few days, I pretty much stayed away from everyone, including Bunny. I got myself into a kind of funk and found myself content to just wallow in my own misery. What should have been happy news for me made me angrier at the world, maybe more than I had ever been.

Everything bad and wrong that had ever happened to me was because of one erroneous piece of information. At that moment, I hated life and everything about it.

Bunny did her best to try to coax me out of my room. Nothing worked, so she spent a lot of time on the trampoline, bothering the Kuhmalos. Bernard and Brigitte didn't seem to mind, though. In fact, they called my father one day and asked if they could take her on a little trip. They were flying to Denmark to go to Bakken, the world's oldest amusement park, built in 1583. Brigitte loved going on roller coasters, and they thought that Bunny might like the chance to go, too.

Lying on my bed, where I had been for days, Papà came down to my room, knocked on my closed door, and asked me if it would be okay if the Kuhmalos took her on a trip for a few days.

Without getting up, I said in a soft voice, "I don't care," and heard him walking away.

And, honestly, I didn't.

I had no feelings about Bunny at that moment. I had no feelings about anything. I started to wonder why I was even hanging out with a child. I was almost 18. All of a sudden, it seemed a bit creepy that I had an eight-year-old

as a friend.

Yes, Kuhmalos, please take her. Get her away from me.

I didn't miss Bunny those few days she was gone. I didn't even think about her, but I didn't really think about much of anything. But, several days later, I could hear the taxi with her and the Kuhmalos pull into our driveway, and for the first time in days, I felt happy about her return.

I heard my father go outside to speak with them, and then Bunny thanking them quickly. Then, I could hear her little footsteps running straight towards the outside stairs that led to the hallway to my room. She was running straight towards me.

I was still lying down (I had been lying down for days), and I didn't even have time to sit up before I felt a good 45 kilograms of weight land right on top of me.

After studying the English language for over 12 years, as well as speaking primarily English for five consecutive summers, you would think I would have been able to understand most of what an English speaker was saying. However, for the next five minutes, I understood virtually nothing.

I could comprehend a word or phrase here and there ("fast," "gigantic," "so much"), but that was about it. Actually, I don't even think a native speaker could've grasped much of what Bunny was saying, as I had honestly never heard anyone speak faster. It was a mile a minute.

I sat looking at her, pretending to understand, and felt a smile come across my face. She had knocked me out of my funk, damn it. It was too bad—I was kind of enjoying it, in a sort of perverse, sadistic way.

At the end of her story, she suddenly gasped loudly and shouted gleefully, "I'll be right back!"

She ran to the door to my room and up the stairs to the courtyard. Several seconds later, she re-emerged with a large, white plastic bag with Bakken in big letters across the side. It was completely full of stuff, absolutely packed. She could barely lift it and carry it to the bed. I sat up, and she dumped the contents out onto my lap.

I looked as she gathered and organized her stash. She had two of everything—two sweatshirts, two giant lollipops, two pinwheels, two ridiculously large pencils with the name Bakken on each side of the hexagons, and two snow globes with a tiny roller coaster in each one.

Everything was identical with the exception of two small rolls of paper—one was pink and the other blue. She made two piles, keeping one pile in my lap and pulling the other closer to her. She looked up at me, closed her eyes, and smiled a big, toothy smile. I swear I could see every tooth in her head.

"They're for you! They're your souvenirs. Bernard gave me money, and I got us some cool stuff. Check it out."

I held up each item to look at it. She got us each a sweatshirt, both in the exact same size. Hers would have been a bit large on her, but I believed mine

would fit well. The last item I inspected was the pink scroll of paper.

The scroll was long and thin. I unravelled it, and there was a cartoon of a rollercoaster with a letter inside each car. There were seven cars, and the letters spelled out M—I—C—H—A—E—L.

I laughed. Of course, this was not my name, but it's what she called me, and in all honesty, she probably didn't even remember what my given name was.

I looked up at her and said, "This is great. Can I see yours?"

She unrolled her blue scroll and held it up for me to read. Again, there was a cartoon roller coaster, but this one only had five cars. B—U—N—N—Y.

I sat and watched her as she played with her stash. She went on a trip to a country 1,500 kilometres away, but, in a way, she brought me with her. Over three days, she purchased these items, and each time she did, she thought of me. It was worthless stuff—utter crap, really—but I loved each and every item.

Bunny started to get up off the bed, grabbing my scroll with her as she did. She went over to my desk and retrieved eight pushpins from the top-centre drawer. She then grabbed a chair, stepped up on it, and proceeded to pull everything that was on my bulletin board off it, carelessly throwing it to the floor, and pinning up my scroll and then hers below it.

She looked at me, still standing on the chair. "Don't ever take these down, okay?"

I nodded my head yes.

"Make me a pizza?" she asked.

"Sure," I said and got off the bed that I spent the better part of a week on.

As we walked up the spiral staircase to the kitchen, my father was just coming in from the courtyard. It was the first time I had seen him since that night.

He stopped and stared at me with a kind look. He opened his arms, and I half-ran to him, collapsing in his embrace. I cried and cried.

After about a minute, I felt Bunny pull at my shirt. I let go of Papà, snot and tears covering my face as I neglected to put on a surgical mask that morning. I looked down at her, and she had a clear look of indignation.

"Umm, my pizza?"

I looked at my dad and shook my head. We both smiled.

That narcissistic, self-centred little imp could irritate me to no end, yet she was the thing I loved most on the planet.

7 CHAPTER SEVEN: 1977, BUNNY AT 9 (JUDAS)

It was early April, and we were making plans for Bunny's arrival late the following month.

I had my new nose, and I loved it. I couldn't wait for her to meet the new me.

The prior summer, I had a dream that I had a nose and resembled a younger version of my father.

My dream was accurate. After the surgery, even before I healed completely, I admit that I very much looked like a younger version of him. Papà and I have always had similar physiques, as well. I was the shortest of the four brothers, and my father was only slightly shorter than I was. We were both thin and weighed about the same, as well.

I always wondered: If we had waited to see what I was going to look like with my nose, would we have needed that paternity test at all?

Papà chose a very qualified head surgeon for my procedure (legally, my father wasn't allowed to operate on a family member), with my brother Giovanni and him assisting. They did an excellent job. It wasn't an unusual procedure for my father, actually. Many people from all over the world had come to him for the same issue. Some lost their noses to accidents, and others lost them for health reasons, such as autoimmune disorders.

My father was a plastic surgeon for many years, but he chose to focus on nasal transplants and reconstructions after my birth. He had 18 years to develop his skills, and although Papà is not one to readily show emotion, it was clear that he was almost excited to be a part of the team that worked on me.

The procedure went well, but as with many other operations, there were a few complications. The surrounding tissue had trouble fully adhering properly, and I had to be incredibly cautious not to hit or damage that area. By early April, it was decided that I would not be able to fly to get Bunny.

Although I was excited for her to see my new face, I couldn't risk it. Exposing myself to that many people in a short amount of time through various airports and flights would give me a much higher risk of contracting a virus or

infection, such as staph.

No, unfortunately, I just couldn't risk it.

When Luca heard this, he volunteered to go get Bunny. This was huge, as Luca was still a bit shy regarding his language skills. Yes, in high school, he had lived in Boston for a year as an exchange student and knew a bit of English. And he was perfectly capable of speaking English when Bunny was around, but it's easier to make mistakes when talking with a child. What he was most worried about was that his skills weren't good enough for him to travel to her home on his own to retrieve her.

Papà contacted Michele and asked him if he thought Jonathan would be willing to help us again. Michele wasn't too sure about that. Even though Jonathan was paid well for his help the previous summer, he was still terrified of my father, and Papà knew this.

Michele promised Jonathan that he wouldn't have to see or deal with my father at all, and that Luca would be patient and kind and wouldn't get angry with him. Jonathan was still unsure, so Michele agreed to pay him double what he received the last time. After much coaxing, Jonathan finally agreed, which was great news as it meant that Luca, like my father the year prior, would not have to leave the airport.

In early June, Luca flew to JFK Airport in New York City. When he arrived at the predetermined meeting spot, Jonathan and Bunny were already there waiting for him. But she didn't look up when Luca approached them.

Bunny looked terrible. She was dressed in very unbecoming, hand-me-down clothing, none of which fit her correctly. Her hair was almost completely chopped off. She had grown a few centimetres since Luca had last seen her and was starting to develop physically. And, according to Luca, she had an unbecoming smell, as if she desperately needed a shower and deodorant but had access to neither.

She was silently sobbing when Luca leaned in to give her a hug. Luca looked up at Jonathan, who gave him a confused look. I later learned that Bunny looked so different to him that he wasn't sure he had brought the correct child to the airport.

Luca thanked him, retrieved the passport from him, and gave him his payment.

As Jonathan walked away, Luca asked Bunny, "Are you okay?"

She softly shook her head no.

Luca continued, "Let's go get something to eat, okay? We have three hours before we fly. Okay?"

Bunny, without looking up, gently nodded her head yes.

At lunch, Luca gingerly pressed Bunny about why she was crying, but she did not reply. In addition, she didn't eat at all, which was incredibly concerning to Luca. Many times, he had watched her inhale an entire pizza with ease. This was not the same child.

After lunch, the two of them walked over to their gate, and Luca asked her to wait there so he could use "the toilet." She nodded her head slightly to signal that she had understood but said nothing. Luca passed the men's room entrance and walked over to a bank of pay phones. He pulled out the international calling card Papà had given him before he left, dialled the number, entered the passcode, and heard the line ring on the other end.

It was I who answered the phone. I could feel my face smile as I said "Pronto!" thinking it was Bunny calling me.

Luca, without saying hello, stated in a sombre tone, "There is something wrong with Dolores. I want you to know this before we get there, so you can prepare yourself. I don't know what it is, but she has changed. It's not good, Bash. It's not good. I need to get back to her. I just wanted you to know so you wouldn't be shocked by her appearance."

Luca hung up on his end without saying goodbye.

Her appearance? Did someone beat her? Did she have bruises or broken bones? I had no idea what he meant by that, and for a moment, I thought about calling the airport to have Luca paged. At that point, I didn't want her to come to Italy.

It sounds awful and completely selfish, but Bunny's visits were for me. To make me happy. To entertain me. To give me companionship. I didn't want to have to deal with a depressed nine-year-old.

This was the best time of my entire life. I had a new nose, a new face. I could go out in public, and no one stared, and no children were frightened of me. And, most importantly, I was thrilled to learn that Papà really was my father, and my brothers were not my half-siblings. That changed everything for me.

No. No. This was my time, and Dolores was not going to spoil it for me. I ran into Papà's study to look for the airline's phone number. I had to call Luca back to let him know.

Papà entered the room and saw me frantically searching his desk for Luca and Bunny's flight information. He came over next to me and gently touched my arm.

"Calma, Bastian. What are you doing?"

I started rambling, not making much sense, still shuffling the papers on his desk.

Papà spoke over me, "Calma! Calma!"

I stopped with a huff. He sat me down and said, "Okay. From the start, tell me everything."

I took a deep breath. My voice was quivering. I told him about Luca's phone call. I told him that I didn't want Bunny to spoil everything. I told him about the feelings that I didn't even know I had.

My father sat quietly, listening to me, his hands clasped together in front of his face. His two index fingers were pointed and touching his lips.

I stopped talking and looked at him. He looked back at me for a long

moment with no expression.

I closed my eyes for a few moments and said quietly, "I'm a horrible human being."

He gave a small smile. "I think you are worried to see your friend hurting."

I looked at the floor, and with a closed mouth, I ran my tongue against the front of my upper teeth over and over again, pondering what he had just said.

I looked up. "Yes, you're right. I am terrified to see her broken."

"Ah, now we are getting somewhere. So, do you really want to send Dolores back to the place that was causing her to be so sad, or do you think we should try to help her here?"

"Of course. She should come here."

I felt like an ogre.

"How about this? I will talk to your brother and the Kuhmalos. Each one of us can be responsible for Bunny on a different day. This way, all her sadness and negativity won't only be upon you."

He got up and started walking towards the door. He turned back to me and said, "I understand you want to protect your new life. But I am glad that you understand that Dolores needs to come here."

He turned back around and walked out. Never in my life would I have imagined that my father would be the one advocating for Bunny to come to our home. I felt like I didn't understand anything anymore.

Bunny and Luca arrived the next day around noon. I was excited for her to see my new nose and couldn't wait to show it off. It wasn't that I thought I looked good—it was that I thought I looked normal. I wouldn't stand out in a crowd. You could still see my scars, but they weren't very prominent. I looked like everyone else. How boring, right? How positively lovely and boring.

Luca stepped out of the taxi first, followed by Bunny. The smile on my face disappeared, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Had I seen this child on the street, I would have assumed I was passing a very ugly teenage boy. She stood in one spot, her head so far down that it rested against her chest. I could see her shoulders shaking slightly, signalling that she was crying.

She looked up, trying to find me, but looked past me twice when she didn't recognize me. We didn't recognize each other. It was crazy.

She was still standing in the driveway, so close to the taxi that the driver was afraid to leave. I walked down the six steps from the courtyard to the semicircle, grabbed her hand, and gently pulled her up the stairs, through the courtyard, and over to the outside steps leading to my room.

I turned and looked at my father. He blinked hard and nodded his head in an affirming way. I led her down the stairs, and she immediately walked into my room, but not in the fun, jumping, bounding way she usually did. She was like a zombie.

She went straight to my bed, lay down in a tight foetal position, and began to half-scream, half-cry. She did that for about 10 minutes and then drifted off

to sleep. For about 20 minutes, she was gasping and shuddering while she slumbered, her body still trying to calm itself. When I was convinced that she was completely out, I walked over to the bed and sat down next to her.

From a distance, it looked like Bunny had started to develop alopecia and then decided to cut her own hair. On closer inspection, that was not the case. Her hair was a series of uneven cuts, with patches where the hair had been ripped out altogether. Some areas of her scalp had scabs that appeared to be in the process of healing. She had only a few small scratches on her face and chest area, but when I pulled up the sleeve on her left arm, I could see deeper scratches and bruising.

I got up and sat on a chair on the opposite side of the room, watching her sleep, and thought to myself, "Christ, I am an absolute monster."

I knew what kind of home life she had, and it had clearly gotten so bad that my brother had to call and warn me about what I was about to see. But what did I want to do? Selfishly, I wanted to send her home, back to that.

Was this really who I was? Was I really that evil?

Bunny slept for two days, only waking to use the restroom and get a drink of water. She didn't even eat. In those two days, however, Luca contacted several of his drag-queen friends and explained the situation. They arrived at our house the next afternoon and went into my room to wake the still-sleeping child.

Bunny was completely confused, having six large "women" standing around her, pulling her off the bed and examining her hair, her face—pretty much everything. They brought her into my bathroom and kicked me out of my own room, asking me to go upstairs and wait. For an hour, there was no word about the activity going on downstairs. Finally, a very beautiful lady, whom I knew was a man but looked very much like a woman, came up the spiral staircase.

She looked at my father and me and said, "Which of you is Michael?"

I raised my hand.

She continued, "Bunny requests a pizza and a glass of chocolate milk. She said you would know what she wanted."

She immediately headed back down the stairs after delivering the message.

I looked at my father. "Do you want to help me make pizzas for a group the size of a soccer team?" knowing fully well that everyone downstairs would want a pizza after I made the first one.

As I assembled them, Papà tended to the oven. After sliding the third one in, he asked, "Do you know why we have this pizza oven?"

I replied, "Of course, I do. I asked for it for Christmas one year."

Papà chuckled. "Yes, you did. You said you didn't want anything but a pizza oven. But at five years old, you didn't realize how expensive this oven would be. However, I do have to say, at this point, thanks to Bunny, it has probably paid for itself."

Just then, a herd of people started heading up the spiral staircase and into the kitchen. They all greeted me and completely gushed over my father, pinching his cheeks and kissing him on the forehead. I honestly don't know for sure if Papà knew that they were men. I watched him, but I couldn't say one way or the other. The group then sat down on the benches around our wooden kitchen table and began whooping and drumming on the tabletop.

From below, Luca's voice came: "Ladies and gentlemen, introducing for the first time at the Aceti home, please welcome Signorita Bunny!"

Bunny came up the stairs in a slow, semi-seductive way that the queens had taught her. She wore a sequin dress (which looked lovely from the front but was held together with clothespins in the back), a pink feather boa, and the most enormous blond wig I had ever seen. In all honesty, the wig was larger than my torso.

But Bunny looked good, and she was smiling. She looked like a beautiful young lady. She did a few small twirls on her way to the table but stopped once she saw her pizza waiting for her.

The drag queens and Bunny sat around the table eating their pizzas and drinking their chocolate milk (Bunny) and wine (the queens). They were teaching her dirty words and phrases in Italian, and they laughed and laughed each time they heard this child mispronounce (or correctly pronounce) words that my father normally did not allow in his home. But, for this, he allowed it.

The queens stayed and chatted with Bunny for over two hours. By the time they left, she was a changed girl. I could see that she had a sparkle in her eye, and I knew she was going to be okay. Of course, as they were leaving, all the queens fawned over Papà once more. Luca thanked them profusely, and they each promised to return to help with Bunny's hair growth over the summer.

Once everyone was gone, I sat across from her at the table, and she looked at me for the first time since she arrived.

She smiled a big smile. "Hey, you got your nose! It looks so good."

She stared at me for a bit longer. In a quiet voice, she looked me in the eye and said, "You really are so handsome."

"No, I'm not," I mumbled, cringing and feeling quite uncomfortable by the compliment that I perceived as disingenuous.

She continued to stare at me but, this time, with a different expression. She looked a bit perturbed.

"Michael, have I ever lied to you? About anything? Ever?"

I thought about her question. I could not think of a single time she had not told me the truth. Even during her thievery streak when she was five, she still told me everything that she stole and where she got it from.

No, she was right. I looked up at her and shook my head no.

"See? I have never lied to you. Never. So, when I tell you that you are so handsome, it is because you are so handsome."

She flashed a wicked smile, gave me a soft kick under the table, and said,

"Idiot."

And there it was. That was us.

Bunny did not keep that giant wig for long. Papà didn't want a nine-year-old to look like, and I quote, "...una donna della notte." So, he gave me some money to take her to a wig shop downtown to get her something more appropriate to cover her head. She desperately wanted to wear the wig out of the house, but my father refused. Instead, he gave her one of my mother's old headscarves.

I helped Bunny put it on and said, "You kind of look like my grandmother."

She gave me a look of disgust. "Screw you."

I wasn't completely sure what that meant, but I clearly understood the sentiment.

This was the first time I had ever gone shopping with Bunny. Actually, it was the first time I had ever gone anywhere with her during daylight hours. It was fun.

We, of course, went to the wig shop first. The ladies, when they saw her head after Bunny removed the scarf, tsked together in unison. I heard one say, "Poveretta" under her breath, which basically translates into "poor thing."

Bunny couldn't try on many wigs, as the scabs on her head still hadn't healed completely, but the ladies did a great job finding a wig that looked nice and was much more appropriate for a girl of her age. It gave her long, brown curls, much like what her hair would look like if it hadn't been butchered.

After they fit it to her head, they brought her to the back and sat her in the hairdresser's chair. One of the women brought out a pair of scissors. Bunny looked at me, frightened.

"She's not going to cut my hair, is she?"

"Excuse me," I said to the room. "Dolores would like to keep the wig at that length. Would that be okay?"

The woman with the scissors said, "Oh, yes, of course. I just wanted to trim a little in the front to frame her face. Is that okay?"

"Yes, thank you."

I told Bunny what she was going to do, and although she didn't look pleased, she complied.

Bunny walked out of the shop with a hairstyle that she would keep for the rest of her life—long curly brown hair with perfect ringlets. It completely suited her.

I asked her if she wanted to get some dessert, and her face beamed. I told her that I honestly didn't know where to go, as I had been to the downtown area only a handful of times since my nose healed.

She said, "I know exactly where we should go!"

We walked through the Piazza della Repubblica and towards the Duomo. She stopped and pointed.

"Here. This is where Gio takes me to get cioccolata. It's my favourite thing

on the planet."

I had both cioccolata and pastries from Caffè Gilli before, but I had never been inside. The place was bubbling with tourists and energy.

Bunny asked, "Can we sit and eat outside? Gio never lets me do that. He says it's too expensive, so we always have to stand at the tables inside."

Indeed, it was expensive. The cost to sit outside in a sectioned-off, chained area in the Piazza della Repubblica was exorbitant, but I obliged.

The waitress came to our table. She was an older woman, probably close to my father's age, but she spoke both English and Italian, as did most of the staff there. Bunny knew this and took full advantage.

"We'll have two pieces of Grandmother's cake, two pieces of Sacher cake, two cioccolatas, and two bottles of Pellegrino, please."

And with that, she handed the menu back to the waitress. Bunny knew that if I had ordered, I would have gotten half that amount of cake and no cioccolatas. But I let her have her fun. It would be interesting the following month when my father received his credit card statement and saw that we spent over 70,000 lire on dessert at Gilli.

It took us a long while to get our order, but I did not mind. Bunny and I sat quietly and watched both the Italians and the tourists walk by. It was easy to tell who was and wasn't Italian. If a person wore dress shoes and sunglasses or carried a designer bag, they were Italian. If a person walked by wearing a backpack and donning hiking boots, they were clearly a tourist. I have heard so many tourists complaining about how dangerous Italy is and how easy it is to be pickpocketed, but when you dress in a manner where you stand out like a sore thumb, it's really your own fault.

Our order arrived, and Bunny flipped back her brand-new hair, careful not to get it in the cioccolata. I picked up my fork and grabbed a bit of the Sacher cake. I put it close to my mouth and felt a sharp jab to my elbow, which caused me to miss my mouth entirely. I ended up with most of what was on my fork in my nose, and I was not happy.

I glared over at Bunny, who was smirking. "The wig shop? That was for saying my name is Dolores."

She resumed eating her cake, looking like the cat who ate the canary.

The rest of the summer was quite enjoyable, as Bunny was becoming more and more independent and didn't need as much attention from me. I still needed to study for my medical school courses, so she found ways to entertain herself during those times.

One day, as I was reading in the study, I heard harsh guitar strumming coming from the adjacent room. I walked in to find Bunny hunched over my father's prized instrument. He never let me play it, and I was quite adept at most stringed instruments.

"You better not let Papà catch you with his guitar. He won't be pleased," I said to Bunny.

The defiant child looked up at me, still holding the guitar, and strummed forcefully against the six strings. As if on cue, Papà walked in.

I folded my arms and leaned against the door jam, waiting for him to give her the business. Instead, to my utter shock and surprise, Papà sat down next to her and showed her how to hold the instrument properly. I could feel my mouth drop open. Had he caught me at nine years old playing his guitar, I guarantee the reaction would not have been the same.

Bunny spent hours that summer practicing both the guitar and piano, and by the end of the summer, she sounded quite good. She couldn't read music, but if you gave her a bit of time, she could play by ear reasonably well and mimic basic melodies from Italian songs she heard on the radio.

My evenings were mine, so I left Bunny at home a lot while I went out with my brothers. They would take me to different bars, and I loved that they finally began to include me in their social plans. I came home, almost nightly, completely wasted on a combination of alcohol and marijuana. My father wasn't pleased, but he didn't reprimand me, either. I was 18, the legal drinking age in Italy, so there wasn't much he could say.

Bunny and I weren't growing apart, per se, but we had an understanding that what I needed to do came first and that I would do my best to make time for her. I often came home from school to find her lying on the trampoline, alone. Yet I don't think she was lonely. I truly believed she relished the time she had to herself, on her own, relaxing, as she rarely got it at her home in the States.

It had been almost two months since her arrival that summer, and she was scheduled to go back in three weeks. I hadn't pressed Bunny about what had happened to her when she arrived, and she never brought it up, but I thought it needed to be addressed.

She was sitting at the piano upstairs, just fiddling around, when I asked her to follow me downstairs. I turned to walk out the door of the library and towards the spiral staircase in the kitchen.

She looked up at me and said to the back of my head, "No, I don't think so."

I turned around and gave her a quizzical look.

"I don't know what you want to talk about, but I want none of it."

I really wasn't 100% sure what that meant, but I knew she wasn't planning on getting up from that piano stool.

"I think we need to talk about your home life back in New York."

She slowly shook her head no, her lips perched, and her eyes glaring at me.

"Bunny, please. This is important."

"Really? It's important? It's so important for you to hear how much my mother hates me? She hates me. She thinks I'm totally disgusting.

"You wanna know why my hair looked the way it did when I got here? It was because I got my period. She said that now that I was 'fertile,' whatever that means, she didn't want the boys to come 'sniffing around me.' So, she made

me look hideous. She made me look like a boy."

She made air quotes each time she spoke her mother's words, and then took a deep breath, trying not to cry.

"She cut my hair, and when I tried to stop her and take the scissors away, she got even angrier and ripped it out instead."

Bunny couldn't hold in the tears any longer and began to sob.

"I thought my sisters were evil, but no. No."

I sat next to her on the piano stool, and although she was getting far too big for it, I picked her up and sat her on my lap, rocking her back and forth.

"What am I going to do, Michael? I have no friends because my mother scares them away, telling me that I can't associate with anyone who isn't a Jehovah's Witness. Kids at school try to be nice to me, but I can't even go to their homes or their parties. I am a total weirdo because I'm all alone, all the time. I can't even celebrate Christmas or Halloween."

She put her head on my shoulder.

"Every year, she comes into my classroom on the first day of school, stands in front of the class, and loudly tells my teacher that I can't salute the flag because I'm a Jehovah's Witness. From the first day of school, the kids look at me like I'm a freak.

"And get this… Whenever any of them brings in cupcakes for their birthdays, guess where I have to go? To the library. I have to go to the library and write a book report while all the other kids have fun."

She lifted her head off my shoulder and looked right into my eyes. "And the worst part is that you forgot Bunny Day this year."

My Lord, I had.

I had forgotten. Bunny Day was always on July 31st each year. I looked at the calendar. July 30th. Had we remembered, we would have been doing last-minute preparations.

I must have had a terrible look on my face because she mumbled, "Don't worry. It's okay."

But it wasn't okay. We both knew that.

"Is there anything else you want for Bunny Day, other than a party?" I asked sheepishly.

She asked, "Can everyone come here for dinner? I haven't spent one night with everyone since I got here."

I said, "I will do my best to make that happen."

And I meant it.

The next night, by some small miracle, Luca, Giovanni, and Michele were all able to rearrange their schedules to be at the house for dinner. Greta and the kids couldn't make it down, but Bunny was happy just to see Michele, as he rarely stopped by the house anymore. Living almost three hours away makes it tough to just drop in for dinner.

Marta, my father's housekeeper, made steak, potatoes, and salad for the

meal, and she picked up a cake for Bunny, as well. It was nice to see Marta, as during that period, I scarcely saw her. Now that I was an adult, she was strictly "verboten" (my father's word, not mine) from going downstairs near my room, as I kept some "adult-like" items I didn't want her to find while cleaning.

The meal was lovely, but Gio was not in a celebratory mood. He was agitated that he and Papà were unable to find decent medical space for their practice. Papà still did rounds at the hospital, but he and Gio were hoping to start their own clinic with an in-house surgical theatre and recovery rooms. It had been over a year of looking at space after space, but nothing was even close to what they wanted, and Gio was getting frustrated.

"What about the church next door?" Bunny asked, not looking up from her plate.

"No, tesora. We're looking for medical space," Gio replied to her. "In addition, it's being used as a church."

"No, it's not," she said. "No one's been in it all summer. I sneak in there all the time."

Papà was about to reprimand Bunny, but Gio stopped him by placing his hand on my father's shoulder.

"You go there? How do you get in? The main gate is locked."

Bunny said, "There's a small gate. Behind the kitchen."

"But that gate's always locked."

"No, it's not."

Gio stood up. "Show me, Bunny. Show me now."

It was almost sunset, and it was getting dark, but there was enough light for her to show Gio the broken latch on the gate behind our house. Nobody ever went back there, as the space was a tangled mess, filled with spider webs and overgrown foliage, so no one in our family even knew that the gate was unlocked. Bunny pushed it open, and the three of us were at the back of the old, abandoned church.

We walked around the building. Gio was smiling.

"The archdiocese would never allow us to use this building, would they?" he asked me.

"I don't know. It's possible. I think if you devoted a certain percentage of your work towards a Christian mission, they would consider it. You and Papà could offer procedures pro bono to help disadvantaged children around the world. They just might approve it."

I never went to church, but both Papà and Giovanni regularly attended mass and tithed appropriately.

Gio whispered excitedly, "I'm calling first thing tomorrow."

He then looked down at Bunny. "Thank you, tesora."

He gave her a big kiss on the cheek and whispered, "You're a good girl."

By October, Gio and Papà were able to get a 25-year lease on the property for 1,000 lire (about 50 American cents). The agreement was that my father and

brother would ensure the maintenance and upkeep of the building and land. And they would also designate 10% of their surgeries as free, non-profit procedures. In addition, the Catholic Church of Firenze would decide which children would receive the pro bono treatments.

It was a win-win. My father could practice right next door, and after some extensive renovations to the building, they were able to house two surgery theatres and three recovery rooms in-house.

And Gio lovingly named the children's recovery ward La Gabbia del Coniglietti (The Bunny Hutch).

8 CHAPTER EIGHT: 1978, BUNNY AT 10 (BLASPHEMOUS RUMOURS)

The beautiful wig that we got Bunny the previous summer was still hanging on a nail in my bedroom as we planned for her arrival that year.

However, we did send her home the summer before with another wig. That one was awful, consisting of short, dark brown hair with tight, unattractive curls. It was a style I could easily see an 80-year-old woman wanting.

We did this so that Bunny could wear it around her mother and keep her hair safely tucked underneath, allowing it to grow and her scalp to heal. We assumed that if she looked unbecoming, her mother would be happy and, hopefully, leave her alone.

According to Bunny, each day, she would leave the house in the morning, sporting the ugly outfit her mother gave her, and arrive at school with a bag in her backpack containing the clothes that she would wear to her classes. She would also remove the ugly wig and shake out her own hair, which was starting to grow out.

Before heading home, the process was reversed, and Bunny would re-don the ugly wig and the outfit she wore to school. Her mother would never buy her clothes, but her friend Theresa would often give her any clothing she was getting rid of. Theresa was much thinner than Bunny, but invariably, she always found at least a few pieces she could fit into and wear to school.

That summer, Bunny was 10 years old and could fly unaccompanied, provided that my father paid the extra unaccompanied minor fee. This meant that after Jonathan got her to the airport and to her gate, an airline employee would be hired to help her get to her seat, lavish extra attention on her during the flight, and hand her off to the designated person upon arrival. The fee was quite expensive, and I appreciated Papà for taking care of everything for me.

Papà loved all his sons, but I doubt he would have paid this amount to fly in any of my brothers' friends on a regular basis.

I was listed on the airline's form as the adult designated to retrieve the unaccompanied minor upon her arrival, but I asked my father to go with me to the airport, in case of any issues. We arrived early and sat in the waiting area for

almost an hour before we saw the attendant prop the arrival gate door open.

Papà nudged my arm and said, "Get up there so she can see you."

Bunny was the first person off the flight. She walked down the ramp, holding the stewardess's hand, but broke away and ran towards me once we made eye contact. She was a big girl, about 150 centimetres tall and 60 kilograms. I think she wanted me to pick her up, but there really wasn't any chance of that happening. I had to let go of her when the stewardess asked to see my identification, so she turned to my father to hug him. I heard her whisper, "Hi, Papà," in his ear.

Bunny had grown that year to be very tall for a 10-year-old, but, oddly enough, this was the tallest she would ever be. She grew quickly, but then just stopped. I never told her, but back then, I thought that if she were 150 centimetres at 10 years old, she was going to be 180 centimetres by the time she was my age.

The odd thing about her arrival that time was that Bunny had luggage with her (two large suitcases), and we needed to retrieve them from baggage claim before we left the airport. It had been years since she arrived with any bags, knowing that we would always take her shopping shortly after her arrival to buy her any clothing she needed.

"Luggage?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "My mother decided she wants to take in three exchange students this school year. She can make, like, a thousand dollars a month for room and board. My bedroom will be given to Takashi, or something like that, so she enrolled me in an exchange program in England for the school year. I'm taking the train up there this August."

Her mother was pawning Bunny off to live with a family overseas while she hosted international students for money. I felt terrible for Bunny, and I felt terrible for them. If her own mother didn't care about making sure her child got fed, I highly doubted that those students would be catered to.

And she was sending her daughter away to England, no less. It was a half-decent choice, as Bunny would be able to communicate and wouldn't have to learn a new language, but she was only 10. It just didn't seem right.

But Bunny didn't seem to have an opinion on the matter either way. She was not joyous talking about her upcoming adventure, nor did she express fear about the uncertainty of it all. It didn't seem to matter to her, which bothered me a bit.

As she was talking while we waited for her luggage to come around on the baggage carousel, I stared at her. She was no longer a child. She clearly looked older than her years and could probably pass for a 16-year-old schoolgirl in Italy. Her hair looked lovely, too. That hideous wig we sent her home with served her well, and her hair was growing back nicely. It was still several inches shorter than she wanted, but it looked quite pretty, and the soft ringlets framed her face nicely.

In addition, I was enjoying chatting with her, and I felt as if I could relate to her a bit more. This wasn't really surprising. We were both growing up.

That summer we spent together was the busiest one for both of us, but probably the best one we had up until that point. Papà and Giovanni decided to group all their pro bono cases during the month of July to avoid overloading their practice the rest of the year, and we were all expected to help in any way we could.

Every other day (except for Sundays), they would perform surgery on a child. All these procedures involved some kind of facial reconstruction, but most of them were cleft palate repairs. By performing only three operations per week, the rotation schedule for the three recovery rooms would allow a patient to stay with us for a full week, receiving optimal post-surgery care.

I would help in the operating theatres, acting as a technician and providing emergency backup if they needed a third set of hands. Bunny took over doing just about everything else.

During our regular operating months, there would be a staff of three that would disinfect the surgical tools, clean the operating theatres and recovery rooms, launder the sheets and towels, as well as any clothing from the patients, take out the garbage, bring meals to the patients, and complete all of the paperwork. However, for that month, Bunny and I split those tasks, with her taking the lion's share.

In addition, most of the practice's regular patients lived locally, so they usually did not stay in recovery for a lengthy amount of time. Many opted to go home after one day to recover, which made sense, since many were having only cosmetic procedures. In addition, most of our usual clients did not bring family members with them to stay overnight, either. They usually chose to be on their own after surgery. The only time we saw any loved ones was when they were picking up the patient to take them home.

However, in July, we had children from all over the world coming to the clinic with at least one family member in tow. So, it wasn't just the three beds in the recovery rooms we had to concern ourselves with, but also the additional cots for the parents.

I am not exaggerating when I say that for those four weeks, Bunny and I only saw each other at the clinic. My father had given her my brother Luca's old room upstairs in the main house, so she no longer slept on the couch in my room as she was getting too old for that. Luca was living downtown above the bar he worked at, and he hadn't slept at home in months, so it was now Bunny's space. Papà even had one of his workers paint the room a pretty shade of light mint for her arrival from the bluish-grey that Luca initially chose. So, with us working 16-hour days next door, her beautiful new room was only used for sleeping that month.

Bunny had a way with the families. She wore a pair of bunny ears every day, saying it was her name tag, and she handled most of the communication with

the families, as most of them could speak better English than Italian.

Our neighbour, Brigitte, also came over and helped, especially with the families from Africa, as her master's degree was in Africana Studies. Of course, when we didn't have patients from Africa, she still came over to help, usually during dinner time.

Bunny's cooking skills weren't stellar, but with Brigitte's help, she made some kind of dinner for the children and their guests every night. The families loved it, as many of them had come from impoverished countries to get their children the surgeries they needed, so to have three meals a day was a luxury some of them did not have back in their home countries. The Catholic Church paid for the airfare for the child and their parents, but the families had no money and nowhere to go once they arrived at our clinic. So, Bunny made them feel as welcome as she possibly could.

On their last day with us, the patients were allowed to ask for whatever meal they wanted, and Bunny often secretly encouraged them to ask for pizza, as that was the one meal I said I would help her with. I was exhausted after being in surgical theatres all day, but I would still bake the pizzas next door at our home and bring them over to the church. Honestly, I probably made pizza for dinner at least two nights per week that month.

When the children would get sick or vomit, Bunny helped clean them up and never complained. She changed the bedsheets, scrubbed the bathrooms, and mopped all the floors every day. This was not a small feat, as it was a large building with two floors.

The bottom floor had the reception area, a waiting room, Gio and Papà's offices, a kitchen area, a break room, and the two surgical theatres. A large elevator was located down the hall, big enough to accommodate a hospital-sized gurney. The upstairs floor had all three recovery rooms, the large closet for medical supplies, the utility room for cleaning products, a seating area for families to relax and watch TV, and a small kitchenette that had to be restocked regularly.

Bunny was responsible for it all, including unloading and putting away everything from the weekly deliveries. Food and cleaning products were delivered directly to the practice, but it was my responsibility to go into town each week to get the medical supplies. Luckily, we did not need to worry about any anaesthetic, as we hired an anaesthesiologist to come in three times per week for the surgeries. It was his summer break, too, so he was paid quite handsomely for his time.

We laboured from dawn to dusk, but it was good, meaningful work, and we were all happy to do it. My father rewarded himself for that arduous month by spending eight weeks at our home in Reggio di Calabria, the same house that Bunny's grandfather had renovated years before. Since Papà wasn't going to return until late September, he said goodbye to Bunny, got in his car, and left. He didn't even say goodbye to me. He was exhausted, and I had a feeling that

within a few years, Gio was going to be doing most of the surgeries with me assisting.

Going from working 16-hour days to having nothing to do almost seemed shocking. My medical studies weren't starting again until September, and it was still three weeks before Bunny had to leave for Burton-Upon-Trent, a small city in the middle of England, halfway between London and Liverpool.

Normally, I would question why a mother would want to send her 10-year-old child to a foreign country to live with a family she had never met, but then I remembered that she willingly sent her daughter, every summer, to stay with us, people she had never laid eyes on. I smiled when I thought that the closest thing her mother had seen to who she stayed with every summer was Michele, my brother, who lived hours away from us. It's ridiculous when you think about it.

Bunny and I did nothing and everything during those three weeks. We had the house to ourselves, as Gio also left for a few months. He never said where he was going, but quite often, he didn't even know where he was going before he left on his excursions. Gio was quite a playboy and always seemed to have a gorgeous woman on his arm, never the same one twice. He loved going to Monaco to drink and gamble, and he would make the trip at least once a year. He always promised me that he would take me with him, but for all his promises, that trip never quite materialized.

Bunny and I spent most of our nights that summer with Bernard and Brigitte. Many of their friends left Firenze for the summer, but they enjoyed staying in town. Bernard did not know how to swim, so going to the beach for them was out of the question. In addition, Brigitte was incredibly fair-skinned and didn't enjoy the sun very much, so things like sunbathing or hiking weren't considered. They enjoyed going to the opera or concerts, eating out, reading books, and meeting new people from all over the world—all things educated and worldly people like to do.

The four of us took turns, and each night, one of us would decide what we would do together. Bunny asked if she could choose where to go that first night, and we all obliged. She told us that we would not be eating dinner out, so we all needed to prepare for that.

The Kuhmalos arrived at our house at 19:00 and were very nicely dressed, as they always were. We took a taxi to the Duomo, and for a moment, I thought she wanted to bring us to Caffè Gilli for dessert. But Bunny surprised me by leading us to Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci, a truly beautiful Baroque-style church rebuilt in the late 1700s and known for its classical music performances featuring its pipe organ. The church often had free concerts, and Bunny just happened to know of one that evening.

We walked into the church and up the centre aisle to the middle row. When we all sat down, she leaned over me to tell the Kuhmalos that Luca had brought her there a few times for concerts after their shopping trips downtown. He

always ensured they sat in the centre row, as he believed it was the best spot.

She was telling the Kuhmalos this information, assuming I already knew it. But I hadn't. I had no idea Luca took her to concerts, educating her in a way that her parents never did.

It was my first time in Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci, and I was doing my best not to let on how excited I was to be there.

Thirty minutes later, the concert started, and I could suddenly feel the reverberation from that giant pipe organ go through me. It was a spiritual experience, and without even realizing it, I had tears running down my cheeks. I looked over at Bunny, who was watching me, smiling, and she took the back of her pointer finger and wiped away one of my tears. I grabbed her hand after that and held it for the rest of the concert. It was such an amazing moment for me, and I was so glad I could experience it with her. And the Kuhmalos. But mostly her.

The concert ended an hour later, and as most people got up to leave, the four of us stayed seated, just enjoying sitting in such a beautiful little church.

I looked over at her, and she smiled and whispered, "I'm going to get married here."

It wasn't a question or even a wish. It was a statement. I didn't reply. I just gave her a small smile and nodded my head softly.

I was just so very impressed by Bunny. She was still a child, but acted like such a young lady, choosing an activity for the evening for us that was so special that I knew I would never forget it. She was far more mature than her 10 years gave her credit for.

Bunny then turned to us with a big smile and clapped her hands, saying, "And now, cioccolata and cake!"

And the 10-year-old returned.

Later that month, Bunny was arranging some of her items in her backpack, preparing to leave for England the following morning. I thought about how I was going to truly be all alone at the house, and I wasn't sure if I was supposed to feel excited, empowered, or just plain scared.

"Can I come with you?" I blurted out without really thinking.

"What? Really?" she said with a smile.

"Yeah. I want to travel to England with you. I want to make sure you'll be with a nice family."

That was partially the truth. I realised that I did not want to be on my own. Travelling with her to a foreign country for the first time sounded far less terrifying than being alone.

"Sure. I would love that, actually."

Bunny pulled out a small notebook from her backpack, walked over to the landline, and called the Jamesson home, where she would be staying, and spoke with Mrs Jamesson, her host mother. I listened to her side of the conversation.

"Hello, Mrs Jamesson! —Yes, I am looking forward to seeing you on

Saturday, too! — Yes, thank you. Mrs Jamesson, I have a question to ask you. One of my family members here in Italy would like to travel to England with me to ensure I get to your house safely. Would that be alright? — No, I don't want to put you out. — Oh, that is incredibly kind of you. — Yes, thank you. Thank you so much! — Alright! See you Saturday afternoon! Goodbye!"

And she hung up.

"Wait—you said Saturday afternoon. But your tickets say you are leaving on Thursday evening," I stated.

"Yes, Michael, it will take us almost two full days to get there. It's really far away, you know. You're still gonna come with me, though, right?"

I hesitated and said, "Yes. Yes, of course, I will. But I believe it would be best if I took a plane home."

Bunny turned back towards her bag and continued packing. I could hear her say "wimp" under her breath.

"What did you say?" I half-heartedly demanded.

She turned and looked at me with a big, toothy smile, her eyebrows raised. In a happy, sing-song tone, she said, "Sure! That's a great idea!"

We boarded the train together in Firenze at 17:30. It was my first time leaving the city, and for some reason, I had no fear. The trip would not be easy, as we had to switch trains in Torino, Lyon, London, and Derby to reach Burton-Upon-Trent.

In addition, the trip was not restful, even though we were just sitting the entire time. Our biggest concern was that we had to switch trains every few hours, and I was so worried that we would miss our stop that I never really fell asleep. For those two days, cat naps had to suffice.

Had I known how exhausting the trip was going to be, I probably wouldn't have gone. That's a lie—of course, I would have gone. However, the one intelligent thing I did was to mail her two big, blue suitcases ahead of time. Bunny was a strong kid, but having her try to lug those large cases on and off trains for two days did not sound pleasant. It wasn't cheap, but it was money very well spent, and she only had a large backpack and a rabbit-shaped purse to carry during the trip.

Bunny had told Mrs Jamesson what time our train was scheduled to arrive in Burton-Upon-Trent, so Mrs Jamesson told us to look for her son, David, who would be holding a sign with her name on it. Soon after we debarked the train at the Burton-Upon-Trent station, we saw a young man, close to my age, holding a sign, listing slightly to one side. It displayed the name Dolores Riddle in big, black letters.

"Hey, are you David? I'm Bunny."

He was rail-thin and smoking a cigarette. He had a mop of mousy brown hair and a t-shirt of The Clash with the sleeves cut off.

"Ey up. I'm Jack. David is dead. Bunny, eh? What 'appened to Dolores?" he said with no affect.

"What?! David died?! Oh, my God, I'm so sorry!" Bunny cried.

He looked over at me, snorted ever-so-slightly, and looked back down at Bunny.

"Nah, lil' one. Me name used to be David. I now wan' be called Jack."

"Ohhhhh. Got it. Okay. Well, I'm Bunny. Dolores is dead," she said with a smirk.

Jack looked slightly amused.

"Aye. So that's how it's gonna be, eh?"

He looked over at me again and said, "Cheers, mate, I'm Jack," and stuck his hand out for me to shake.

To this day, I don't know how to shake a person's hand. I know my handshake is very limp and squishy. I've just never perfected that art. So, when I went to take Jack's hand, it was one of the first times I had ever shaken another man's hand. It was bad. I could see it on his face.

Jack looked up at the sky, opened his umbrella, and said, "It's black over Bill's mother's. A'ight, gerron wi' it. Me mam is prolly cookin' up som'in truly naught and nasty for din."

Bunny looked completely befuddled and surprised. I would venture to guess that both of us felt like English was our second language at that point. Jack smiled at her confused look. For some inexplicable reason, he began to talk like he was impersonating Elvis. It quite possibly was the only American accent he knew.

"Look, Lil' Mama, you'll start barking like us cool Brits soon 'nuff."

Bunny looked back at me, thinking that I would help her translate. I frowned and shook my head.

I bent down and whispered to her, "This is your language, not mine."

Jack, who was walking ahead, looked back and smiled.

It was a short ride in Jack's van from the station to Bunny's new home. Jack explained that he was a musician and played gigs all over London, which is why he needed to drive such a large vehicle. The van was quite disgusting on the inside and smelled like a combination of old, sweaty gym socks, cigarette smoke, and stale beer.

There were only two seats, and they were in the front, so Bunny had to climb into the back and sit on the floor as we drove. Jack did his best to take every curve as sharply as he could and laughed when he heard her tumble all over the back of the van. For a moment, I was concerned, but Bunny was laughing hysterically, so my worry dissipated quickly.

I asked him what instruments he played.

"Piano, primarily, but I got a scholarship for percussion. I'm studying at The Royal Academy of Music."

I looked up quickly and stared at him.

He said, "I know, I know. The Royal Academy of Music, eh? I look a wazzerk, but I got a brain in me 'ead."

I was relieved when we pulled up to the house, as it seemed lovely. It was a rowhouse with a small garden out front. It looked to be in a poorer part of town, but everyone on their block seemed to do their best to take care of their homes. In addition, it was quite evident that Mrs Jamesson liked roses, as the garden was filled with only rose bushes.

"Me mam asked for a rose bush for her birthday one year from me da. Every birthday since, Da got her rose bush after rose bush. Her own fault, really. Looks a bit nutty, if you ask me," Jack said, shaking his head.

He parked the van in front of the house, and Mrs Jamesson was already standing outside, waiting for us. She looked like the quintessential British mother. She was a tall, plump woman and wore a polyester work dress with tiny blue rosebuds all over it. An apron covered her dress. It also had tiny rosebuds, albeit in a different shade of blue from her dress. Her grey hair was pulled back in a bun, and she had a delightful smile that made one feel right at home.

She introduced herself right away, hugging both Bunny and me, and pulled us into the house. It was still so foreign to have people be warm and kind to me, as I expected that most everyone would continue to react the way they had when I did not have a nose. I was still expecting people to recoil in horror.

The front door of the house led right into a hallway with rooms on either side. I found it fascinating, as it was very different from our house in Italy, which had a much more open layout. I hadn't had the opportunity to go to other people's homes very much, so this was incredibly interesting for me. I loved how every room, even the kitchen, was its own space with a door.

The first room on the left we encountered had the door slightly ajar. A man I assumed was Mr Jamesson was sitting in what was the living room, watching television.

Mrs Jamesson popped her head in and said, "The kids have arrived. This is…"

He cut his wife off. "Oy, I'm watching football, innit? We'll say our formal introductions later!"

Bunny, standing behind Mrs Jamesson, pushed her way into the room and shouted, "That's not football! That's…"

She didn't get to finish her sentence, either, as I covered her mouth with my hand. I spun her towards me and looked at her with big eyes.

"Don't be rude."

"But…"

"Don't!"

She glared back at me.

I knew she was going to be disrespectful by telling Mr Jamesson that it was called "soccer." Bunny was my family, but she was American through and through, and sometimes, she could be outright boorish and obnoxious. It could be very exhausting conversing with her at times.

"Come this way, my dears!"

Mrs Jamesson led us to the last room on the left, which was the kitchen. It was a small room, but there was a little metal table in the middle with four chairs around it.

"Sit! Sit!"

She put out a plate of what she called bacon cobs. Jack popped his head into the kitchen and called his mother over. He whispered something to her, and she shook her head.

"Just a small snack for now. Dinner will be ready in an hour. We're having bangers and mash."

Bunny opened her mouth to say something, and I gave her a stern look. She remained quiet as she didn't want to get yelled at again for saying the wrong thing.

I whispered to her in a serious tone, "Whatever it is, you will eat it, and you will like it. Do you understand me, Bunny?"

She nodded, a big pout across her face.

Mrs Jamesson said quietly to Bunny, "David told me that you don't like to be called Dolores. Is that correct? He told me that we should call you Bunny."

She replied, "Yes, please," and smiled.

Mrs Jamesson said, "Okay, Bunny. How 'bout you sit here and enjoy your snack for a bit? I am going to bring Michael upstairs to show him where he is going to sleep tonight."

She looked at me and motioned for me to follow her. "This way, Michael."

I didn't have the heart to tell her that wasn't my name. It seemed that most of the people in that house at that moment were not being called their given names, which I thought was quite funny.

I followed Mrs Jamesson up the stairs, and she led me into what I assumed to be Jack's room, as there were rock posters all over the walls, including one of The Clash. There were two twin beds in the room, one against each wall.

I heard Jack call up the stairs, "Don't worry, mate! I'm staying at a friend's house tonight. The space is all yours. Terrah then!"

I yelled, "Thank you!" down the stairs and then turned and thanked Mrs Jamesson. She looked back at me with an uncomfortable look.

"Sit for a moment, love."

I sat on what was to be my bed, and she sat on her son's bed across from me.

"I am so embarrassed to ask you about this, but… I need to speak with Dolores' parents. Do you know how I can get in touch with the Riddles?"

I thought, "Yeah, good luck with that, lady."

She continued, "Bunny's parents were supposed to pay for her room and board months ago, but we still haven't received any payment."

"How much were they to pay you?" I asked.

"It is to be 1,500 pounds for the school year, about 170 pounds per month. It was supposed to be paid in full by the first of August, but we haven't received

anything yet. I've tried calling the number I was given and left messages, but they haven't gotten back to me. The agent who set up the exchange told me that she can't get in contact with them, either."

I looked at her with a kind face and said gently, "I hate to say it, but I'm honestly not surprised. Don't try to contact them again. Let me see what I can do. Could I possibly borrow your phone? I have a calling card, so the cost of the call won't be on your phone bill."

"Yes, yes, of course."

She showed me the phone in the hallway, and I called my father at our vacation home in Reggio di Calabria. I was shocked when I got through to him on the first try. He sounded great, like he was truly rested.

"Hello, my boy! You caught me at the perfect time! Renata and I just came back from the beach to clean up before we head off to dinner with Signore and Signora Ferro. What can I do for you?"

I paused for a moment. "Renata?"

Papà laughed. "Oh, so much to tell you, but that is for another time."

"Clearly, you are preoccupied, Papà, so I will make this quick. Bunny's parents never paid for her…"

He cut me off. "How much do you need?"

"Fifteen hundred pounds. I think it's about 3 million lire."

"Go to the bank tomorrow. Use the credit card I gave you to take out a cash advance. We will talk about the rest when I get home at the end of the month."

"Thank you, Papà. I love you."

"Love you, too, my son. Call me if there are any issues."

And he hung up the phone.

I shook my head as I hung up the receiver. I was starting to realize there really wasn't much that my father wouldn't do for Bunny or for me.

By the next day, Mrs Jamesson had her payment in full, plus an additional 100 pounds for her trouble. It was worth every bit of it, as I knew I was leaving Bunny in a home where she would be looked after. In fact, I don't think I could have picked a better family if I tried. Oh, I knew she would irritate Mr Jamesson something fierce, but still, everything would be fine.

I left the following evening with Jack. Bunny looked sad as I went to walk out the front door.

She hugged me hard, putting her head against my chest, and said, "I love you more than anything in this whole world, you know."

She kissed my chin three times quickly and hugged me tight once more. And she held my hand as we walked outside and then watched as I got into Jack's van and drove off.

I glanced in the side-view mirror and saw her getting smaller and smaller. She stayed outside watching us drive off until we were completely out of sight.

Jack was driving back to London and was willing to take me to the airport

for my flight. I was a bit shocked when it only took me two hours to get from London to Firenze by plane. The two days on those trains were awful. Why did I not fly us up there? I learned I will never make that mistake again.

That was September 3rd.

On December 1st, there was a phone call at 3:30 in the morning.

It was Friday, and I had stayed up late, drinking and playing chess with Michele. He needed to be in Firenze for a meeting first thing that following Monday, so he arrived a few days early to spend some time with Papà and me.

When the phone rang, Michele and I looked at each other quizzically. Who on earth would be calling us at that hour?

Michele got up from the table, walked across the room, and answered the phone. Almost immediately, he shouted, "Un momento! One moment, per favore!" into the receiver.

He looked over at me and said, "You need to take this. I cannot understand the woman on the other end of the line, but it is clear that she is very upset."

I got up slowly and answered the phone by saying, "Hello?"

"Michael? Is this you? This is Mrs Jamesson, Dolores' host mother. Oh, Michael, something terrible has happened. I think you should come here right away."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Dolores is in hospital," she said.

"Is she hurt?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe very badly."

I paused for a moment to catch my breath.

"Is she dead?" I asked softly.

"Oh, honey, I'm not sure. I don't know. All I know is that it's bad."

For some reason, I remained calm, mostly because I thought there must have been some kind of mistake.

"Which hospital is she in?"

"Mayday. I believe it's in Beckenham, just outside of London."

I could hear someone talking to her on the other end.

"No, no, that's not correct. I'm being told it's in Croydon."

I said, "We will be there as soon as possible," and hung up the phone.

"What's going on?" Michele asked.

"I honestly don't know," I whispered. "But I need to go wake up Papà."

My father, who hates to travel, contacted the 24-hour answering service for the travel agency that the hospital used. They were able to get us flights to London that would leave first thing in the morning. I chose not to sleep at all that night. I went to my room, showered, put on a dress shirt, dress pants, and a sweater. The only luggage I was bringing with me was my leather overnight bag, with just one change of clothing.

I highly doubted that it would be more than an overnight trip. In fact, I was pretty sure that I would be back home, sleeping in my own bed, the following

night. It was 5:30, and the taxi would arrive in 30 minutes to retrieve my father and me. If everything went according to plan, we would be at the hospital in Croydon no later than noon.

I was a bit perturbed as I boarded the plane, still believing there was some mistake. I had just received a postcard from Bunny the previous morning. The card was written in tiny letters and discussed how she wanted a pickle from a fish-and-chips shop. The story was that she went up to the counter to ask for "a pickle," and the lady behind the counter said, "A pickled what?" According to her, Bunny was quite confused and replied, "I don't know. A pickled pickle, I guess."

She wrote that the woman's response was, "Oy, get your arse out o' me shop." The last line of the card read, "Never got my pickle. Miss you bunches! SWAK."

The SWAK on the postcard didn't make much sense to most, but I knew what it meant: Sealed With A Kiss. It was something that Gino used to put on the back of the envelope when he sent letters to Bunny.

For a moment, I was a bit agitated with her, as the choice to add the SWAK was ridiculous. There is nothing to seal on a postcard, so no "S" is needed. Dumb Bunny. And then I remembered that she was only 10. I should have just been happy that she sent me a card.

I remember thinking, "God, what is wrong with me?" as we boarded the plane.

The flight was uneventful, and my father and I barely spoke. We landed in London, exited the airport, and quickly found a taxi to Croydon. Again, we sat in silence during the ride to the hospital.

We entered Mayday Hospital and began looking for someone to direct us to Bunny's room. But Jack was sitting in the lobby area and immediately saw us. I introduced him to Papà, and he half-fell into Papà's arms, which I thought was odd, and kept saying, "I'm so sorry. It's all my fault."

He led us to the elevator and pressed the button for the 2nd floor. Jack wasn't talking much, nor was he looking at me. We walked down the brightly lit hall with the light blue walls. He stopped in front of room 219 and motioned for us to enter. I asked if he was going to join us.

He shook his head no and softly said, "Only two visitors are allowed in at a time."

My father pushed open the door to the room. I couldn't see Bunny at first, as a curtain was blocking my view, but Papà, who was in front of me, could. He softly placed his palm on my chest to stop me from walking any further into the room. He then put his hand up in front of my face, indicating for me to stop, and quietly said, "Let me look at her first."

I waited behind the curtain, unable to see into the room, but I heard the various machines buzzing and whirring. I knew that anyone who needed that much armamentarium would not be doing well. I just shook my head—there

had to be some mistake.

A minute later, my father came back around the curtain.

He whispered to me, "It is Bunny. You need to prepare yourself. She does not look well. She does not look like herself."

I blinked hard a few times, trying to comprehend what Papà was telling me. The warning he gave didn't help much.

I came around the curtain and looked at the person who was lying in that bed. They looked more like a bloody pulp than a human being. I wasn't entirely sure it was her. This person's face was so swollen that I had trouble locating her eyes. I couldn't really see any other facial features, either, due to the respirator mask.

Her hair was a mess—some parts were matted down with some kind of gel, others were shaved off completely. It was clear that her head was now a bit misshapen. Upon closer inspection, I could see several long lines of post-surgical stitches across her scalp.

There were marks, cuts, and bruises everywhere. But I still wasn't upset by the scene. My brain could not register that this was Bunny.

At full volume, I stated to my father, "Let's go. I don't want to be here anymore."

As we started to leave, the patient's blood pressure monitor began beeping rapidly, and a small alarm sounded. Two nurses ran into the room and were punching buttons on various machines. One nurse leaned over the bed and forcefully said, "Dolores! Dolores, you need to calm down!"

I wanted to tell her that if you wanted her to calm down, calling her Dolores wasn't a good way to start.

It was clear that the patient was quite agitated, and every time the machines were reset, the alarms would spring right back to life.

Without thinking, I walked quickly back to the side of her bed and yelled, "Bunny, stop! It's okay. I'm here. We're here. Papà is right here, too. We're not going anywhere, okay?"

The machines slowly began to quiet down. My father and I sat with her, and after a few minutes, I lightly stroked her forearm with my pointer finger.

Once she was calmed down and the nurses left, I said to her, "Bunny, I'm just going to go outside to talk to Jack, okay? I'll be right back."

I stood up and turned to leave the room when the machines started blinking and beeping again.

"Okay. It's okay. Papà will go outside and talk to Jack. I will stay here. Please just try to remain calm, or the nurses will make us leave."

I was a bit surprised they hadn't already asked us to leave.

Bunny never moved once during this interaction, but she successfully manipulated the situation to get her way. Yet, in all honesty, I still wasn't 100% sure it was her, but if my being there was calming down whoever was in that bed, then I wasn't going to go anywhere, at least for a while.

I motioned to Papà to talk to Jack. I wanted to have some facts, some information, right away.

My father said, "I can't talk to Jack. I do not speak English. I won't understand. You need to talk to him. I will send him in."

"No, Papà," I whispered. "That's probably not a good idea. It is clear that, on some level, she can understand what is happening in the room. I don't want Jack to come in and have her hear the details. I'm sorry, but it looks like it's going to be you talking to him."

My father sighed, looked towards the door, got up, and started to walk out. Just before he reached the curtain, he looked back at me and said, "I will try my best."

I nodded, and he pulled open the door and left.

I looked down at the hands of the person who was lying in that hospital bed. They did not look like Bunny's hands. I had looked at her hands almost as much as I looked at my own in the last few years, between teaching her the piano and the guitar. But it looked like nearly every finger was either broken or disjointed. The wrists were broken, of that, I was sure. Whoever this person was would need extensive surgery just to use them again.

The things that made Bunny distinctive were gone. Her face was mostly hidden under the respirator mask, and her eyes were swollen shut. I couldn't even hear her voice. Yes, her reaction to my being there made me think that it may have been her, but that person could have been happy just to hear any voice that didn't belong to a hospital worker. So, I sat there, next to a person I hoped was not a stranger.

My father walked back into the hospital room about 20 minutes later.

"Papà, what happened to her?"

"No, not now. Not today. Maybe I will tell you tomorrow. It was difficult enough for me to hear it. I will sit with her for a few minutes. Go and get a cup of coffee with Jack. He's not doing well."

I looked over at Bunny. The machines didn't start to whir and beep, so either she was finally asleep, or she was okay with me leaving for a few minutes as long as Papà was there.

I met Jack in the hallway, and we walked together in silence to the hospital cafeteria. I wasn't going to press him. If anything, I didn't want to hear what happened to her.

I believe most people would have been curious to know how she ended up like that. But after assisting with all those surgeries on those kids the summer prior, I could see how long their road to recovery was going to be. And most of those children were going home after only one or two surgeries.

Bunny would have to endure countless ones. Who knows how many she had already endured? Just putting her skull back together was a feat, I'm sure. And who knew how much brain damage she suffered.

No, I didn't want to hear it. If Jack and I just sat downstairs, drinking a cup

of coffee in silence, that would probably be best.

And that is what we did. For almost an hour, we sat without talking or looking at each other. Honestly, I believe it was what Jack needed. I'm sure he had to tell the story repeatedly—to his parents, to the doctors and hospital workers, to the police, to my father.

I can imagine that he would have thought I was going to walk up to him, grab him by the collar, and scream, "What did you do to her?!" Sitting alone with me, not communicating, was the first time since we arrived that I didn't see him covered in sweat. In fact, he jumped a little when I finally did speak.

"How old are you, Jack?"

"I'm 24." He paused. "How old are you?

"I'm 20. Are you the youngest, the oldest?"

"I'm the youngest of three brothers."

Yes, that's right, I knew that. Bunny told me that.

"You?"

"I'm the youngest of four brothers, although sometimes I feel like I was an only child with my brothers being a bit older than me."

Jack shook his head slowly, still looking down. After a few minutes, he finally spoke.

"I honestly don't know what to tell you, man. I do and don't know what happened to her. I swear."

"It's okay. It's okay. Are you able to tell me what you do know?"

He took a very deep breath, breathed out shakily, and began.

"It's all so crazy, man. Okay. Okay. A few weeks ago, me mam was going away for a weekend to visit her mam up in Liverpool. She didn't want to bring Bunny with her, as there would be nothing for her to do, and she didn't want to leave her with my father, as she was sure he would all but ignore her. So, my mother said that she would give me some money if I took her for two nights. That was back in November.

"I live with my girlfriend, Lauren, in London. We rent a bedroom from a friend of mine. He's got a nice place, a three-bedroom apartment, so when Bunny stayed over, she slept on the couch in the living room. Lauren was mad about having to have a kid stay with us for two days. She wasn't nice to her. She was pretty mean to her. And I didn't stop her. I probably should have, but I didn't.

"Anyway, that first morning, my girlfriend woke up and went into the living room. I guess she looked over at the couch and saw that Bunny had started her period during the night. I was still half-drunk from the night before when I heard Lauren shouting at someone. I heard the front door slam and went into the living room.

"I was a mess and couldn't understand what the hell was going on. She pushed past me, went over to the couch, and held up the sheets. She screamed, 'Do you see what that little cunt did to my sheets? I threw her ass out and told

her not to come back.'

"I said, 'You did what?!' I was stumbling around, trying to get my pants on. I grabbed my shoes and my shirt and ran out the door to look for Bunny. She was nowhere to be found. That was on a Saturday morning. I didn't see her again until Sunday night, when I found her waiting by my van, asking to be taken to my parents' house. She was still wearing the bloody pyjamas that she had on when Lauren kicked her out.

"Michael, she had nothing with her for two days—no shoes, no clothes, no backpack, no money. I tried to apologise and talk to her on the ride back, but she said nothing. I don't know where she was for those two days.

"I dropped her off and watched her walk in the front door. I didn't stay, as I didn't want to deal with me mam. I waited for days to get the dreaded call and have me mam scream at me for what 'appened. But the next time I spoke to my mother, she thanked me profusely for taking such good care of Bunny. I don't know what she told me mum, but it wasn't anything close to what the truth was."

Jack stopped for a moment to take a few calming breaths and then continued.

"I stopped by the house the following weekend to see if I could talk to Bunny. I brought her to the fish-and-chips place up the street from my parents' and got her dinner. I told her that no apology would ever make up for what had 'appened, so I wanted her to tell me how I could make it up to her.

"After a long time of just sitting there in silence, she finally asked me if I was still with Lauren. I said we had broken up and that she would never have to see her again. Bunny then said there was one way I could make it up to her, and that would be to take her with me when me band played at The Three Tuns Pub the following week.

"I told her that that would be impossible, that she was far too young to be allowed in. But I also knew that if I listed her as part of the band, they would have to let her in. She pleaded with me, promising to stay hidden backstage. All she wanted was to see us play.

"I finally relented, even though I knew me mam would kill me if she found out. I lied and told me mam that my friends and I were going to take Bunny out for dinner and a movie that night and that me mate Robby would be by to pick her up shortly after school.

"Two days ago, Robby got her from me mam's, and they took the train into London. We piled into me van, instruments and all, and drove to the pub. We got there early. Our set began at 21:00 and finished at midnight. Bunny loved it. She did. She was super-charged that night.

"As the boys in the band were finishing packing up the instruments into me van, Lauren showed up. I guess she had been there the whole night, watching the show.

"I'm a little unclear as to what 'appened to Bunny next, as I was inside

talking with the manager of the club and getting our payment for the night, but me mate Robby said that Lauren told Bunny that she needed to talk to me, so she asked her to wait around front of the pub, and we would pick her up there. I heard that Bunny tried to get my attention, but Lauren got in her face and told her that if she didn't wait out front, she was going to tell me mam about going to the pub and how she was going to get into huge trouble and be sent back to the U.S. Robby didn't see Bunny after that.

"When I finally walked out the stage door to get in the van, I saw Lauren there. I didn't want the rest of the band to wait around for me, so I gave Robby the keys and told him I would get a ride back with Lauren. I'll be honest—I drank during the entire set and was pretty wasted, and she looked really good that night.

"When I asked Lauren where Bunny was, she told me that she had gotten a ride back with a friend of hers. I called her name a few times to see if she was still hanging around, but when I didn't see her, I just assumed that Lauren was telling the truth.

"But she wasn't, and I left a 10-year-old kid on the street in the middle of the night with no money, no jacket, nothin'.

"I honestly don't know what 'appened after that. The police told me they thought Bunny had started walking home on her own, but where they found her was in the opposite direction from where she was supposed to head. A police officer doing his rounds found her near the train tracks, bloody and barely alive. The doctors here said the only thing that kept her alive was that it was cold that night. It was snowing a bit, and she was left on a concrete slab. So, according to the ER doctor, she survived because the cold slowed her heart rate, so she didn't bleed out as quickly. She was barely clinging to life when they brought her in."

Jack stopped talking long enough to look up at me and see my expression. He looked back down again and continued.

He asked, "Did you talk to the doctors yet?"

I stared at him and shook my head. "No."

He said, "It's bad, man. It's really bad. This 'appened on Wednesday night. Me mam thought Bunny was with me, and I thought she was home with me parents. We didn't call the police until late Thursday afternoon. By the time we got to the hospital last night, we were told that we should say our goodbyes, as they didn't think she would survive the night."

I closed my eyes, feeling like I needed to vomit. I ran my fingers partially through my hair, stopping midway to hold my own head in my hands. I didn't look up, but I could hear Jack starting to sob again.

"She's going to die, isn't she? No little kid can survive that. Me mam got so upset last night after we got home that we had to call an ambulance. They believe she had a stroke. The worst part is that she doesn't even want to see me. Mam is going to die, Bunny is going to die, and I will never be able to apologize

to either of them."

I let Jack cry for a bit, not concerned about the others in the cafeteria staring at him. I then stood up quickly, pushing my chair back, and said, "Let's go."

I picked up his arm and halfway dragged him out of the room. I then asked an orderly in the hallway where I could find the chapel, and he pointed us in the proper direction.

I pulled Jack into the chapel and was thankful no one else was there. I sat him down in a chair and went up to the altar. I kneeled down and prayed, out loud, in Italian, and I'm fairly certain Jack understood none of it.

I was mad at God, mad at the world, and the Good Lord was going to get a piece of my mind.

"Lord, if you exist, if you are up there, I am ready and willing to call in my chits. All of them. I have had a horrible life. You, out of anyone, know this. The only two things I have ever asked you for were a nose and for Bunny to stay with us that first summer. Nothing else. I have been a good steward, helping my father and brother heal those broken children.

"But now, now you need to help me. You need to come through for me now, and I promise the slate will be clear for us. I will never be mad at you again for making me be born a freak, or for letting my mother kill herself, or denying me from loving my father the way I should have, all because I thought he was just my guardian and not my parent. I won't be mad for all those times I wanted to kill myself, and for all those years I stayed in that underground prison, denied of any love or companionship.

"YOU. OWE. ME. Heal Bunny. Give her a long and healthy life, or at least as healthy as possible. And heal Mrs Jamesson.

"Do not punish Jack for something that his wretched girlfriend did. She caused this. And if Bunny survives, if you bring her back to us, I promise I will not take a scalpel to Lauren and dismantle her piece by piece."

I was panting heavily by the time I finished. My face was wet, a combination of sweat and tears, and I felt like I had ridden my bike to the bowling alley in the middle of the night with a chubby six-year-old on the back again. I was spent.

And I had just realised that I had left Papà upstairs in the room all alone with who we assumed to be Bunny. If it *were* Bunny, and if she were awake, she would not be pleased with me for not being there.

Jack and I left the chapel and headed towards the elevator. He stopped suddenly in the middle of the hallway, which made me stop as well.

"I still haven't called her parents to let them know what happened. I wasn't sure what to tell them. I…"

I cut him off mid-sentence.

"It's alright. I will take care of it."

I surprised myself by offering to do this. But I liked Jack and knew he wouldn't be the best person to speak to her parents. He was too emotional to

explain things properly, he didn't really understand what was going on with her medically, and with all the apologising he kept doing, I was afraid that her parents would take advantage of that and sue the Jamesson family. They were kind people, and that was the last thing I wanted to see happen.

We reached the elevator, and I said to him, "Just go home, Jack. The hospital will call you if anything changes. But for right now, the best thing you can do is get home and get some sleep."

I could tell that he had been awake for days. He looked sad but nodded his head vigorously in agreement.

With tears in his eyes, he looked up at me and said quietly, "Cheers, mate. I'm gonna stop by and try to see me mam first. I really hope she'll let me in."

I watched him walk down the hall and then got into the elevator by myself. I returned to Bunny's room, and it looked like both Papà and her were sleeping, so I went down the hall, pulled out my calling card, and found a private booth to call her parents. The phone rang, and no one answered, so I left a message.

I tried to contact them every hour, for seven hours. Finally, on that last phone call, Bunny's mother picked up.

"You need to stop calling us. We are not sending Dolores any more money."

"No, Mrs Riddle. I—"

"Yes, yes, I know. I heard all your messages. I understand Dolores was in the hospital. I was very clear with the agency that Dolores was not to receive any blood transfusions, as we are Jehovah's Witnesses. I have contacted a lawyer, and we will be suing both the homestay agency as well as the Jamesson family. You people think you can do whatever you want."

I took a deep breath in, trying to maintain calm before speaking again.

"Dolores is in hospital now. She is very hurt, and she needs someone to make medical decisions for her. Will you or your husband be flying here? I can meet you at the airport."

"We are not flying there, and we will not be paying any hospital bills."

"You won't need to pay any hospital bills, as England…"

I heard the phone hang up on the other end. I was very clear in my messages that there was a chance that Bunny wouldn't survive. It didn't matter. My father and I were on our own in terms of making medical and financial decisions for her.

I returned to the room and found Papà still asleep. I gently woke him and said, "I finally got through to Bunny's parents, and…"

He cut me off and replied angrily, "I don't want to know," while waving his hand in front of his face, as if shooing away a gnat that was bothering him.

The day after we arrived, the doctors decided to put Bunny in a medically induced coma. She had been sedated up until that point, but the pressure caused by her injuries led to brain swelling, and her doctors were getting concerned about the amount of oxygen that was getting, or not getting, to her brain. She

stayed in that medically induced coma for over two weeks.

Almost three weeks after her attack, although she still didn't look good, Bunny's vitals were much better, and the internal and external swelling had gone down considerably. Her doctors, including my father, felt that it was safe to start reversing the process. Slowly, the drugs keeping her in her coma were reduced, and her vitals and brain activity were very closely monitored by the team. Considering the condition that she was in when she first arrived at the hospital, everyone seemed cautiously optimistic about her prognosis.

My father stayed with me in England for those three weeks, having Gio take over for him with some of the patients at their clinic and completely rescheduling procedures for others. Papà was incredibly skilled, so his patients were willing to wait for his return rather than seek care elsewhere. Knowing that there were two doctors in our family, with a third on his way to becoming one, Bunny's medical team wanted to sit down with Papà and me to discuss her options.

Dr Barker, a very intelligent and competent surgeon, led the team and called us all into her office.

"I'm glad we could all meet. I understand that Dolores' parents have elected not to make any medical decisions, and the hospital has received the necessary paperwork to indicate that. Doctor Aceti here has agreed to take over as her medical proxy."

I snapped my head up quickly and looked over at my father. I was shocked that he willingly put himself in that position. I was Bunny's best friend, and I don't know if I would have done the same. That was a big commitment.

Dr Barker continued, "As Dolores begins to become conscious, I think it's best that we have a plan in place that we can all agree to. I will speak freely—I do not necessarily think that England is the best place to continue her recovery. She has a long road ahead of her, and I think she would do better being surrounded by people who love her and can help care for her. The Jamesson family, as lovely as they are, will not be able to do so. Mrs Jamesson has her own health issues to deal with now.

"I received two calls in the last few days, one from a Renata Cavazzuti and the other from a Bernard Kuhmalo, checking on Dolores' progress. Renata stated that she is retired but had worked as an occupational therapist for many years. She has offered to help Dolores, free of charge, at least three days per week."

I realised that Renata Cavazzuti must be the same Renata that my father spent time with in Reggio di Calabria. Was Papà keeping in touch with this woman while we were in England? I can only assume the answer was yes. And now, she was in Firenze? Was this my father's new girlfriend?

Dr Barker continued, "Dr Kuhmalo said that neither he nor his wife works in the medical field but that his wife would be willing to help Dolores every day with any therapy—speech or physical therapy—and that he would devote two

hours per day to helping Dolores complete any schoolwork as part of her homeschooling. Dolores may or may not pass her Year 6 studies, but she should at least continue trying to learn and gain some knowledge, in addition to skills.

"The road ahead will not be an easy one. Dolores' hands and wrists are so badly damaged that she, certainly initially and possibly long-term, will not be able to feed herself or use the restroom on her own. Daily bathing and grooming will also be issues. And this is aside from any brain damage she has incurred, the full extent of which we do not know.

"So, now that we all know the facts, where should Dolores go? Dr Aceti, is it even possible to bring her back to Italy to be with you and your family?"

Papà leaned over and told me to ask how Mrs Jamesson was doing. I repeated my father's question to the group, but in English.

"Thank you for asking, Dr Aceti. Mrs Jamesson is doing remarkably well. She is still bothered by the facial paralysis on the right side, but she is now able to walk, with assistance, and communicate her needs. Her middle child, Paul, is planning to move back into the family home and is helping her regularly. So, yes, that situation has been resolved."

Papà spoke up. Very carefully, in his slow, broken English, he said to the group, "Dolores is family. We would like to take her to Firenze. If we did this, what would the… the…"

He turned to me and said, "…la linea temporale?"

I addressed the group. "My father would like to know the timeline for this."

Dr Barker replied, "Dr Aceti, I believe that we need to get Dolores where she needs to be right away. Wherever she starts her therapy is where she will need to stay for a while. Consistency is key."

I translated all of this into Italian for Papà, but I truly believe he understood almost everything.

My father spoke again, "Va bene. So, paperwork? Travel? How do we get her to our home?"

"We are looking into options for you now, Dr Aceti. I will be honest—either way, it will be expensive to get Dolores back to Italy, whether it be by an ambulance service or by a private Medevac."

My father slowly nodded his head in agreement. He made a good salary every year, but between the cost of starting his new clinic with Gio and the renovations needed at the church, in addition to the loss of a month's worth of clinic time and surgeries while we were in England, money was starting to become an issue.

I shocked myself by having a good solution to this.

The meeting was adjourned, so Papà went back to Bunny's room. She was not yet completely conscious, but he didn't want her to be alone once she started to stir. I, however, stayed behind to talk to Dr Barker.

I explained to her about the charity work my family did during the month of July and was hoping that she might consider contacting the Archdiocese of

Florence. I believed they would be willing to transport a child from England to Firenze to get the necessary surgeries and therapies she needed, so I gave her the name of the contact person I knew and the phone number to the main office there. I wasn't sure if it would work, but I prayed on it, something I had started doing more of since our arrival.

We received good news and bad news. The good news was that the archdiocese had a donor willing to cover the Medevac costs. The bad news was that they would only allow persons with their passports in hand to board it.

I had been flying and travelling in and out of England using only my Italian state identification card. That is all I thought I needed. But the rules were becoming a bit stricter regarding travelling between countries, and to get on that Learjet, I was going to need my passport.

Even though we paid a considerable fee to expedite the application, the passport didn't arrive until several days after the scheduled Medevac flight. So, my father rode back to Italy alone with Bunny, while I was forced to take a commercial flight home.

By the time Papà and Bunny's Medevac flight landed, and she was transferred to a private ambulance and brought to our home, it was fairly late. I arrived mere minutes before the ambulance pulled into our driveway. Bunny was awake, with her eyes open slightly and a small smile across her face.

Bernard and Brigitte were at our home, and they had spent a good portion of the day helping Gio bring a hospital gurney over from the clinic next door and setting it up in the library. Papà had organised it all without me even knowing it. I had assumed that she and I would have stayed at the clinic to sleep and for her rehabilitation, but my father knew that Bunny would be far happier at home.

The medics from the ambulance wheeled Bunny into the house and then into the library, carefully transferring her from their gurney to ours. My father walked them out, and she and I were alone for the first time since that previous September.

She looked at me and said weakly, "Hi."

She had a small, sweet smile, and I had just noticed that several of her teeth were missing. It was the first time she had not been wearing the respirator mask, so I could better see the damage that had been done to the lower part of her face.

I stood next to the gurney and stroked her hair, careful not to touch the areas that were still healing.

"Hi," I said back.

She swallowed hard and winced a bit. "What happened to me? Papà wouldn't tell me."

I told her, lying to her face, "You got into a bar fight… and won."

Bunny closed her eyes and gave a little smile.

She whispered, "Really? So cool."

She kept her eyes closed, and the smile disappeared. She swallowed hard again and said, "I'm so, so tired. Will you stay with me while I sleep?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here when you wake up."

I could see that she was drifting off quickly. I stood next to her bed, staring at her, wondering how she could have possibly survived all that she had. She was such a fighter.

I had thought that she was already asleep when I whispered to her, "Thank you for not dying and leaving me all alone," but I saw a faint smile come across her face.

9 CHAPTER NINE: 1979, BUNNY AT 11 (PRECIOUS)

I won't bore you with stories about Bunny's recovery.

Let's just say that the four months after we returned from England were horrible.

Bunny had to undergo so many procedures, and she was either recovering from surgery or in therapy. Had she not been 10 years old and in good health when this happened, she probably would not have survived. Ten-year-olds are quite resilient.

Bunny's birthday is on May 31st, and this was the first time we celebrated the actual day with her. She was still hurting quite a bit, but she was looking forward to the day. She got a cake and presents, of course, but she also got what she specifically asked for: She wanted the entire family, including Michele and his wife and children, to come for dinner and watch movies together.

I know she loved me very much, but I could tell she was getting a bit tired of hanging out with just me. I wasn't insulted by this. I completely understood. It's no fun to spend all your free time with the same person who is forcing you to do all kinds of painful exercises and therapies every day.

I wish I could tell you more about that summer, but there really is nothing to tell. It was more of the same—sleeping, exercising, therapy, resting, eating—all in different rotations each day.

By the end of the summer, I was terrified to send her back home. She was still in so much pain, and I knew she wouldn't get the care and attention she needed.

However, one thing of interest did happen that summer. My father, who had always been vehemently opposed to having any animals in the house, got Bunny a dog. Let me rephrase that: Renata convinced Papà to get Bunny a dog, and he gladly obliged.

Renata had a tiny, little Miniature Pinscher named Princess. The dog hated everyone, including my father, but Renata loved it more than just about anything. Princess went everywhere with Renata—literally everywhere—and even had her own wardrobe. So, if Renata went to play tennis, Princess would

show up in her tennis whites. If she were going to a pool party, Princess would don her own bathing suit.

The only place Princess was not allowed was the beach, as Renata was concerned about her "baby" getting overheated. So, because Renata loved Princess so much, she was sure that a dog would help Bunny recover more quickly. How? I do not know.

Two weeks later, Renata walked into our house with the tiniest puppy I had ever seen. It was a teacup Miniature Pincher, meaning he was about half the size of a regular Mini Pincher. It also meant that he would have twice as many medical issues and twice as large medical bills. But I did have to give Renata credit. She was right. Bunny felt no pain when that dog was around.

She named him Snickers due to his dark brown coat and light brown underbelly.

If Bunny were in horrible pain, all we had to do was call, "Snickers!" The dog would bound into the room and onto her lap, and she would instantly forget about any discomfort she was experiencing. It was magic. Truly.

Two days before she was to leave to return to New York, we received a fax from her parents. It showed that she was to fly to Los Angeles instead of New York.

When I told her about the fax, she said, "Are they getting rid of me? Am I living with a new family in California?"

She tried calling her parents to find out what was going on, but, not surprisingly, no one answered the phone or returned her calls. Two days later, she was on a plane without understanding why she was travelling to the other side of the country.

As Bunny climbed into Gio's car to go to the airport, she was practically sobbing.

"Take care of Snickers! Tell him I love him every day!"

She looked up at me and stopped crying a bit.

"I love you, Michael! I'll miss you, too. A whole bunch."

"I'll take care of him for you. He'll be right here when you return next summer."

I didn't hear from Bunny that year—no cards, letters, or phone calls. I tried calling her home number just to see if she made it back safely, but when I did, a stranger answered. It turned out that the Riddle family had changed their phone number.

At that point, all I could do was hope and pray that Bunny was okay and that she would reach out to me if she were in trouble.

10 CHAPTER TEN: 1980, BUNNY AT 12 (GET THE BALANCE RIGHT)

The next year, I was surprised when I received a phone call from Bunny's mother in early May telling me that she was sending her to us.

She didn't ask for money in advance or for us to pay for a plane ticket. I was thoroughly confused. But when Bunny arrived that summer, I understood why.

Of course, I had pictured in my mind that she would do what she always did: Jump out of the taxi, run up the stairs to our courtyard, and hug us all. However, I was given quite a shock as her taxi pulled up, and she slowly exited the vehicle. It felt like a ton of bricks had hit me.

Bunny looked awful.

She was hunched over, in the shape of a question mark. My father ran down the stairs and grabbed her arm, helping her get up each step.

I couldn't move. I just stood there and watched. It was one of the saddest things I had ever seen. No wonder her mother didn't want her around.

Bunny made her way over to me and straightened up as best she could. She smiled and said, "I'm a stone-cold fox, right?"

I let out a kind of laugh/cry sound.

I started to help her walk into the house, and between her laboured breaths, she whispered, "Pizza. (gasp) I need pizza."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Just as soon as we get you settled inside."

Snickers came running out from my room downstairs. He jumped up on Bunny's legs, but she couldn't bend over enough to pet him.

"Snickers! Oh, you're so cute! I missed you so!"

My father had disappeared into the garage for a moment and returned half-running with an old wheelchair. I was about to tell Papà no, that she didn't need it, but she surprised me by saying, "Oh, thank you, Jesus," under her breath and plopped herself down in it. Snickers thought it was the best thing ever, as he could ride around in her lap all day long.

As I got Bunny situated in the wheelchair, my father said that he would make our lunch so we could sit outside for a bit. Bunny looked at me with an

enormous frown. She didn't really like the way Papà prepared her pizza, but she would never let him know that. It wasn't surprising—after seven summers of perfecting it to her exacting standards, I was the only one she wanted to prepare her pizza.

I rolled her and Snickers over to the seating area under the trellis. For nine months, I was incredibly curious to know where she had been and what awaited her in California upon her return. Not surprisingly, it was not a happy story.

It turned out that when Bunny was in England, her father got a promotion, and his job was transferred to a new branch on the West Coast. The family packed up and moved right after her sisters' school year ended. By the time Bunny visited the house in California for the first time, the other four members of her family were completely moved in. Her room, however, contained an unmade bed and 20 boxes needing to be unpacked. No one bothered to help her get set up.

The worst part, according to Bunny? She never got the chance to say goodbye to her one and only friend, Theresa. That clearly didn't matter to her mother, as she had never liked Theresa to begin with. Mrs Riddle had a good friendship with Theresa's mother but thought she was weak because she couldn't have children of her own.

Theresa and her sister Jamie were adopted from Afghanistan. Her parents fell in love with her immediately and were going to take only her home with them, but when they met Jamie and saw the two beautiful girls together, they couldn't possibly leave one of them behind. So, Bunny's mother tolerated Theresa and her sister, but it was clear that she never liked the idea of Afghan children running around her pristine-white neighbourhood.

Bunny's parents bought a beautiful, five-bedroom house outside of LA. Her father had an hour-long commute to work each way, but it was worth it to keep her mother in a home that she could be proud of. I, however, thought it was odd that they bought such a lovely home when it was perfectly clear to me that her mother had no friends and despised having people over. I knew this about her even though I had never even met the woman.

After Bunny told me about the new house and new school, she got quiet. She looked at me and said, "Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure, within reason," I replied, smiling.

"Wanna go jump on the trampoline for me?"

"You want to watch me while I jump on the trampoline?" I asked, for clarification.

"Yes. That would make me very happy," she said in a sad tone but with a small smile, which confused me a bit.

I walked down the steps to the bottom tier of our yard and climbed onto the trampoline. I never liked jumping on it, and I wasn't enjoying myself at that moment, either.

I heard Brigitte shout from behind me. "I see that Bunny has arrived!"

I turned around and said, "Indeed, she has. (jump) She is making me (jump) do this."

"Yes, I deduced that. Good for her!"

Just then, my father called us over for lunch. I wheeled her and Snickers back under the trellis, and even though she could barely hold each slice of that pizza, she consumed her meal in record time.

She stared at me for a moment with sad eyes and a small frown. "I can't play the piano anymore. Or the guitar. Or the drums."

She looked at her hands.

"They hurt all the time. They hurt from the moment I wake up. I can't bathe myself. I can hardly use the bathroom. And my mother is furious with me all the time because I'm not helping with the cleaning or the laundry. I try to stay out of the house as long as possible every day, and when I am home, I try not to talk to anyone. I've become quite good at being invisible."

"We'll work on that this summer. I'll help you get better. And, yes, you need to play the piano and guitar. You need to exercise those muscles in your hands, or they will start to atrophy."

I picked up her left hand. "Look, it's already started."

"My mother has always told me that all I ever do is create problems. I used to be mad when she said it, but I think she's right."

I looked at her with my eyebrows raised.

"Really? You're going for self-pity? And you expect me to bite?" I shook my head.

"Nope, not gonna happen. If you could see yourself, I think you would be disgusted. This is not the Bunny that I know. Maybe I should just start calling you Dolores."

"Oh, that's not cool, man." She still had tears in her eyes, but she smiled at me. "Okay. I get it. I'll try harder. I'll do better."

"Good girl. That's what I wanted to hear."

There is not much more I can say about that summer. Bunny slept about 12 hours a day, which was fantastic, as she needed the rest. The other 12 hours consisted of about six hours of therapy and six hours of fun. I realise that six hours of therapy and treatments a day sounds like a lot, but it clearly was masked as fun, or she would have never agreed to do it.

She relearned to play the piano, this time with fingers that seemed bulky and foreign to her. She couldn't hold drumsticks, so I configured a pair of gloves with small, long pieces of wood along the fingers so she could still hit the drumheads. (She beat on them like she was playing the bongos, but it worked.) She would play with Snickers and throw the ball for him to fetch. And yes, even bouncing on that trampoline was worked in.

I couldn't believe how hard she worked. She wanted to get better, and I was so proud of her for giving it her all. She returned to the U.S. that September a new girl.

As for me, that summer was difficult, as I was still trying to figure out who I was. On one hand, I so admired Bunny for being true to who she was and for being so tough and such a fighter, but on the other hand, I was embarrassed by her. And I didn't know why.

I was finally able to be part of society and desperately wanted to fit into the social norms, but I knew I never would. My life experiences had moulded me into someone who would always be, on some level, a freak. It didn't help that Bunny seemed to do everything in her power to avoid following social norms.

I was so torn. I loved that about her but also hated it.

I didn't understand her. I didn't understand myself. It took years before I finally started to figure out why.

11 CHAPTER ELEVEN: 1981, BUNNY AT 13 (MERCY IN YOU)

It was early May when my father received a phone call from Bunny's mother.

She was back to her old ways, demanding a price before she would send Bunny to Italy. But Papà had had enough. He had paid for all the expenses we incurred during our three weeks in England, in addition to paying the 1,500 pounds for her homestay with the Jamessons. So, that summer, Papà put his foot down and decided that he would no longer pay Mrs Riddle a fee just to have her daughter come and stay with us. He felt she should have just been happy that he paid for her round-trip ticket and clothed and fed her all summer.

Bunny's mother was not happy with my father's change of heart, and she called him repeatedly regarding her payment. He ignored all her calls. So, it was not a complete surprise when Mrs Riddle rang again and said she would not allow her to travel to Italy that summer. It was tantamount to extortion—pay up, or I will not send my daughter to you.

My father was incredibly apologetic but adamant. He was not going to pay that woman another cent, and I agreed with him. Of course, I wanted to see Bunny, but I understood why he couldn't go against his principles. So, she would not be with us that summer. I hoped and prayed that she would be okay.

It was late June when the phone rang late one night. I answered it, and on the other line was Bunny. She was a bit frantic.

"Michael, I need your help. Please, help me. Please."

"Are you okay? What do you need?"

"I need to come see you. Now. Please. I'm at a travel agency. I'm going to put an agent on the phone with you right now. She will need you to pay for two tickets to Italy. Please just do it. I promise I will explain everything when I get there. Please."

She whispered into the phone, "This is life or death."

I could then hear Bunny pass the phone over.

"Good afternoon. Is this a Mr. A-see-tee I'm speaking with?"

"It is Ah-CHEH-ti. Yes, how may I help you?" I asked quizzically.

"Yes, I apologize. Mr Aceti. Thank you. Well, I have a Ms. Riddle here that

wants to purchase two tickets to Italy for herself and Mr. Garza. I will be able to book these tickets once I receive a credit card number from you."

"Okay. Please hold a moment."

I walked into my father's office and opened the centre drawer where I knew he kept the credit cards he didn't use regularly. I grabbed one and walked back to the phone. I gave the agent the credit card number and waited.

"Excellent, Mr. Aceti. An amount of $1,621.00 has been charged to your account. Thank you for your help. Goodbye!"

"Wait! Wait!" I called into the receiver. "When will Miss Riddle and Mr…"

"Garza."

"Yes, Mr Garza. When will they arrive?"

"They leave tonight and will arrive in Florence, Italy by 7:00 p.m. tomorrow evening, your time."

"Okay. Thank you."

And with that, she hung up.

A Mr Garza? I had never heard of a Mr Garza before. And what was so life-or-death about this situation? I was perplexed but was looking forward to seeing my girl. I was not, however, excited about telling Papà about the credit card bill. Still, even with the cost of the extra ticket, it was still cheaper than what Papà usually gave to Mrs Riddle each summer.

The taxi from the airport pulled up to our house the following evening, and my father, Gio, and I walked out into the courtyard to greet Bunny and the stranger she brought with her. She climbed out of the car with her head down and walked quickly over to Papà and Gio to hug them. She never looked up.

"This is my camp counselor, Bobby."

Bobby looked terrified. He stood there, waiting at the bottom of the courtyard steps, without saying hello. Gio, wanting to break the silence and cut through the awkwardness of the situation, quickly walked down the steps to Bobby and said in English, "Hi, Bobby. I'm Gio. Nice to meet you."

Bobby introduced himself in perfect Italian. I was so confused. Before I could introduce myself to him, Bunny grabbed my hand and dragged me downstairs to my room. She said nothing until the outside door and the door to my room were both shut and locked. She looked up at me with giant eyes, breathing hard.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Bunny ran over, grabbed me around my waist, and started to sob. I slowly walked us backwards and gently guided her over to the couch. Snickers came running into the room to see his girl, but Bunny couldn't even stop crying to give him attention, so he just curled up next to her. We sat there for about ten minutes, her sobbing the whole time. Soon, she started to drift off to sleep.

I slowly got myself out from under her and grabbed her favourite pillow and soft blanket. I thought it was funny that that same blanket and pillow had been hers since that very first summer. They were old, and the blanket had one

corner that was shredded from getting caught in the washing machine, but they were the ones she always wanted to use on her return.

I left her there and went upstairs to introduce myself to Bobby, but I only found Papà at home.

"Gio took Bobby out for dinner. They seemed to hit it off right away. So, how does Bunny know this Bobby fellow?"

I shook my head and raised my shoulders, signalling I had no idea.

"What did she tell you when she arrived?"

"She locked the door and cried for 10 minutes until she passed out."

A look of deep concern came over Papà's face.

"Gio invited him to stay the night."

To try to allay my father's fears, I replied, "I don't know who Bobby is, but I can't believe she would have brought him here if he were a danger to us."

Papà looked relieved. But I later found out from Bunny that the terrible sense of unease I felt was justified.

She slept through the night and had a big smile on her face when she woke up the next morning and saw me. Then, she sat up with a snap.

"Is… Is Bobby here?" She looked terrified.

"Yes. He spent the night. Gio invited him. What's going on, Bunny?"

She put her head back, looked at the ceiling, and took a deep breath. She had a look of horror on her face.

She appeared to be in agony when she said, "I guess you could say that Bobby kind of kidnapped me."

I was unaware of the word "kidnapped," and my face clearly showed my expression.

"Abducted."

Still, I had no idea what she was saying. The Italian word for abducted is "abdotto," but for some reason, I still couldn't make the connection. I went over to my bookshelf and took out my Italian-English dictionary. I read the definition and looked up at her incredulously.

"You were *abducted*? And you brought your…" I looked at the dictionary again— "…abductor here to Italy with you? To our home? Are you insane?"

She took a deep breath and started to sob again.

"Oh, God. I'm so, so sorry. I just wanted to come here so badly this summer, but my mother… You know my mother. Ugh. So, of course, she didn't want me to stay home all summer and spoil any of her plans, so she sent me to this horrible Charles Taze Russell camp out in the middle of the desert for the summer. It was horrible. Hundreds of JW kids talking about the Bible and the 144,000.

"When I got there, the camp counselors realized that I had been placed in the wrong house. My mother put on the application that I was 10 years old. The bitch doesn't even know how old I am. Unbelievable."

I thought to myself that that was not a mistake. Without ever meeting this

woman, I just knew that Mrs Riddle had done that on purpose.

Bunny continued, "So, while they were trying to find a place to put me in the house with kids my own age, all my things were put in the storage closet. For three days, I was just roaming around, literally. I was just basically living out of my backpack. I had some books in it, and some snacks and a water bottle.

"A few days ago, I walked up to a small pavilion near the main road. When I got there, Bobby was already sitting there. I thought he was one of the camp counselors, so I said hello to him and sat three tables away from where he was. About 10 minutes later, Bobby got up, and I thought he was going to walk back down to the main building.

"He walked behind me, and that was the last thing I remembered until I woke up in the passenger seat of his truck. His dog was in the seat next to me, growling. We were in the middle of nowhere.

"He saw me wake up but said nothing to me. I was going to open the door and jump out of his truck, but there was no door handle or window crank. I was stuck."

She looked over at me to gauge my reaction. Clearly, it was calm enough for her to continue.

"He said nothing the whole time we were driving. We pulled off onto the side of the road so he could go to the bathroom, and he told me that I could try to get out of the truck and run, but there was nothing around for miles and that I would probably die in agony out in the hot sun. He was right—there was nothing around. I was terrified.

"We drove for hours, and I finally decided to try to talk to him, but he said nothing. He only glared at me. I asked him if he was going to kill me. He looked at me and said, 'Probably.'"

She paused for a moment and swallowed. "Can you get me something to drink?"

I brought her a bottle of her favourite, San Pellegrino Aranciata. She took a big swill, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and started again.

"When it got dark, he pulled over, pulled the keys out of the ignition, and got into the back of his truck and went to sleep. I was starving and still had my water bottle and some food in my backpack, so when he was finally asleep, I fed myself and the dog. The poor dog honestly didn't look like he had anything to eat in days. He stopped growling at me after that.

"I didn't know what to do, and there was nowhere to run to. I stayed up all night watching Bobby. I kept thinking that if I fell asleep, he was going to reach around from behind me and slash my throat. I had no idea what kinds of weapons he had on him.

"At the crack of dawn, he climbed out from around back. He got back in the truck, started it, and we were off driving again. We were about an hour away from where we had stopped for the night when his truck started sputtering. We were able to drive for a bit longer, but it finally died on the side of the road. He

looked enraged, and I didn't say a word, thinking, 'This is it. This is when he's going to kill me.'

"He got out of the car and kicked his front tire about a hundred times. He then got back in the driver's seat. A car was coming from the other direction. I still had no way of getting out of his truck, but I prayed hard that they would stop and ask us if we needed help. Bobby lifted his shirt to show me the gun that was tucked into his pants and said, 'One word, and you're dead.'

"It was a local police officer. I was thrilled. Bobby got out of the truck to talk to him, looking back at me the whole time. The police officer walked over to his car and called something in. I thought, "Oh, my Lord, I am saved!" Then, the police officer came back over to the truck, waved at me and the dog, and continued to talk to Bobby like nothing was wrong. I didn't know what to do. If I made a commotion, would this guy shoot both the cop and me? I was frozen. I just sat there.

"A tow truck showed up about 20 minutes later, and the driver hooked up Bobby's truck to his. Then, all three of us—Bobby, me, and the dog—loaded up into the cab of the tow truck and drove about 20 miles to a gas station in the middle of nowhere. It was this tiny oasis, with the station, a small store, and a diner. That was it."

Bunny finished her drink and asked for another one.

"Oh, and get me some of those cookies I like."

I shook my head in disbelief. I retrieved her snacks and returned with them so she could resume her story.

"So, at this point, I have no idea what to do. None. I'm thinking, 'Do I try to get a message to the tow truck driver now?' or 'Should I make a run for the diner?' 'Was he just going to assassinate everyone here if I said anything?' I literally had no idea what I should do. So, I just sat down. Stupid, right? I just sat in the chair inside the garage.

"Bobby was in the garage, too, pacing back and forth. After a few minutes, they got his truck off the tow truck and into the garage. The mechanic looked under the hood for a few minutes and then came back over to talk to Bobby. I heard him say, 'Well, your fuel pump's shot. And your truck is past inspection. And it won't pass unless you have those two front tires replaced.' The mechanic starts pressing on the keys of his calculator and says to Bobby, 'Looks like it'll run you about $300.00, I'm afraid.'

"At that point, Bobby's whole disposition changed. He walked over and sat down in the seat next to me. He looked totally dejected. His dog went over to him, and he gently patted his head and rubbed his ears. Then he looked at me with tears in his eyes and gave a small laugh.

"I told him I needed to use the bathroom and got up. I knew he wasn't going to stop me. The bathroom was around the back of the garage. I went in and washed my face, not knowing what to do next. And then, I did something totally crazy."

I spoke up. Of course, I knew what she did.

"You gave him the money. You wouldn't be sitting here if you didn't."

She looked at me with big eyes.

"Yes! Exactly! I gave him the money. I had almost $700.00 in my backpack, sewn into the lining. I ripped it open quickly, really quickly, so that I wouldn't change my mind, and took out $300.00. I walked back into the garage.

"Bobby was still sitting in the same spot, rubbing his dog's head. I sat down next to him, grabbed his hand, put the money in it, and closed his fist around it. He stared at his hand for a long time and then looked up at me. I then said to him, 'The dog and I will be over at the diner' and got up, grabbed the dog by his collar, and left.

"I crossed the highway to the little store first and got a leash for Kuni—you know, Kuni, the Buddhist god of love. That's what I started to call the dog, as he was such a sweetheart after I fed him. Anyway, I got him a leash and a bunch of snacks and dog food. I even bought a couple of cute doggy bowls for him and a gallon of water. Then, I walked the dog over to the diner.

"No one was in there, and there was only one waitress and one cook. I held up a $20.00 bill to the waitress and said, 'This is yours if I can bring my dog in.' She laughed and said, 'Fine by me, hun.'

"Kuni and I walked to the far end of the restaurant. I didn't even look at the menu. The waitress walked up, and I said, 'I'll have a burger and fries and onion rings and a salad and a Coke, and my friend here will have pancakes, 4 sausage links, and four pieces of bacon, please. Oh, and can you please fill up his water bowl?'"

"The waitress couldn't have been nicer and gave belly rubs to Kuni every time she came over to check on us. Halfway through my meal, Bobby showed up and slid into the seat across from me. He looked different. It was weird. He looked like a child, almost scared and embarrassed.

"He took out the change from the mechanic—I guess it cost less than $300—and slid it across the table to me. I slid it back towards him and said, 'Get yourself something to eat.' The waitress came over, and he didn't say anything to her. I said, 'He'll have the same as me.'

"By this point, Kuni was out cold on the floor. I'll tell you, at that point, if Bobby had laid a finger on me, I think that dog would have killed him.

"Anyway, I said to Bobby, 'I need to get to Italy. I need to see my family there. So, you are going to drop me off at the closest travel agency. Do you understand me?'

"He looked at me and said quietly, 'You have family in Italy? Where?' I told him you were in Firenze, and he said he hadn't been back to Italy in years.

"I then said something really stupid to him. I said to him, 'I'll make you a deal. You help me get to a travel agent, and I will do my best to get you a plane ticket to Italy.'

"Why did I say that? I don't know. I don't know. But it did the trick. We

got his truck, drove into a town called Pahrump, and got the plane tickets, thanks to you. Then, we drove four hours to Los Angeles, dropped off his truck and Kuni at his friend's house, and went straight to the airport. And now you are all caught up."

I stopped and stared at her.

"You not only bought a plane ticket for this criminal with my father's money, but you also thought it was wise to bring him to our house? Does he still have the gun? Will we all be killed tonight?"

Bunny shut her eyes and closed them tight. She was rubbing her wrists, and I could see that she was in a bit of pain.

"I know. I know. I really messed up. I'm so, so sorry. I honestly didn't know what else to do. I had no one else to call."

She opened her eyes and looked at me.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to be here. I knew I would be safe if I were here. It's the only place in the world I wanted to be. I made a mistake. A big one, I know. I'm sorry…"

She started to cry again.

I hugged her. "It's okay, Bunny."

But it wasn't okay. I was livid. I was angry with her for putting us all in that situation, and I was furious with this Bobby, who thought it would be okay to come to our home.

"You need to stay here. I need to go talk to Papà."

I found my father in his room, getting ready for work. It was Saturday, but Papà went into the hospital every fourth Saturday to do rounds. I sat down on the edge of his bed.

"I think we need to talk."

Papà looked in the mirror and began knotting his tie.

"No, I don't think we do. Bobby talked to me this morning while I was having my caffè. He told me."

Incredulously, I said, "What exactly did he tell you?"

My father turned and looked directly at me, his tie only half-finished.

"My boy, I know everything. He is overcome with guilt. He has had a lot of troubles in his life, and he did something stupid and impetuous. He could be sitting in a jail cell right now, but your Bunny showed him kindness when he really didn't deserve it."

He turned back towards the mirror and continued working on his tie.

"You know, if you think about it, he isn't much different from how Dolores was when she showed up on our doorstep. She might have ended up with the same fate as Mr Garza had she not had you trying to convince me to let her stay."

I let that sink in. I couldn't even imagine who Bunny would have grown up to be if she didn't have this place to call home each summer.

"So, you're letting him stay here?"

"Yes, for the time being. He's going to help at the clinic every day, doing janitorial work. He's happy to do it. And Gio is going to pay him a small salary in addition to the room and board that he is getting here."

He picked up his briefcase, and I stood up and followed him into the kitchen. He turned one last time to talk to me.

"For the time being, I'm going to let Bunny stay in your room with you. Bobby and Gio are working on turning Gio's office in the church into a bedroom where Bobby can stay, but until that is ready, I don't think it's a good idea to have Bobby and Dolores staying in the main house together. Just please behave. Don't disappoint me."

I clearly knew what he meant by that. He would not have to worry.

Even though Bobby was there, Bunny and I still went over and worked at the clinic each day. Bobby did his best to avoid her, and the only time they spoke was when one would need something from the other.

We were incredibly busy that summer, keeping to our three procedures per week schedule. But word was starting to spread, and parents who had stayed with us previously were telling other parents how well we treated them, so more family members were showing up with the patients.

Brigitte still came over three times a week to help Bunny with meals, and she enlisted Bernard to help, as well. The children loved Bernard and his low, booming voice. When he would come to their rooms with a bag full of books, asking them if they wanted to hear a story, you could hear the "Yaaaay!" in most of the building. He was quite entertaining, and I often found myself standing outside the patients' recovery rooms, listening to him read, smiling. What a truly lovely man.

By mid-July, my father asked to speak to both Bunny and Bobby separately for a half-hour each day. After a couple of weeks, he would have them both come in at the same time. It was a safe environment for them, and I believe Papà helped them understand each other. They didn't exactly grow to like each other that summer, and I would never have called their relationship a "friendship," but in an odd way, they realised that they needed each other. Bobby needed her to come to Italy and have a sense of normalcy for a short while, and Bunny needed Bobby to help her get to Italy and to get back to her parents' home in Los Angeles.

As far as her parents knew, Bunny was still at that camp. And the camp probably never knew she was missing, as her belongings were probably still in that storage closet. There was no empty bed each night, as she was never assigned a cot. So, to get her home without her parents being the wiser, Bobby was going to have to take her there, acting as a camp counsellor.

Bunny and Bobby arranged for him to drop her off at 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday, when the family was sure to be at the Kingdom Hall. It was good planning, as when she arrived home, no one was there. She was able to get the hidden key and sneak up into her room without anyone noticing.

And I was lucky, as I got a summer with her that I never thought I was going to have.

12 CHAPTER TWELVE: 1982, BUNNY AT 14 (NEVER LET ME DOWN AGAIN)

From the day Bunny left the summer before until the following spring, I was miserable, suffering from severe depression.

It didn't help that the previous summer was so difficult for me emotionally, as Bunny appeared to be a bit off having Bobby around. She always seemed to be perpetually on the defensive. In addition, I had turned 23 two months after she left to go home, and my brothers and father kept pushing me to become more of an adult, meaning they felt I needed to consider moving out of my father's house or, at the very least, find a woman to date and eventually marry.

My family thought it was cute that Bunny was kind of my "girlfriend" when she was little, but the fact that she was starting to look and act a bit more like a young lady made our relationship a bit creepy. In fact, everyone at that time thought it would be best if I discouraged her from visiting that year.

Luca and Michele were still upset that she brought Bobby to our home, and although Gio tried his best to defend them, it was still a sore topic amongst all of us. And Luca and Gio thought it would be a better idea if I spent the summer going out with them, having them take me on trips, and to pubs, concerts, and events. They even wanted to take me to the dance clubs where many of the American exchange students hung out. The fact that I spoke such good English led them to believe that finding an English-speaking girlfriend might be more interesting and exciting for me.

In reality, none of it sounded appealing, and I had no idea why.

I honestly didn't have much time for girls and dating, even if I were interested. I was exhausted from both my studies and from the surgeries we conducted during April and May. Gio and Papà decided to move all the pro bono work to the spring to accommodate Gio's wedding to his fiancée, Alessandra, and their subsequent honeymoon.

For as much of a playboy as he was, Gio found a lovely and beautiful woman who rebuffed his advances for months. That seemed to do the trick, and from the moment he picked her up for their first date, his wandering eye was focused only on her. They married on May 22nd, three days after we finished

the final surgery of the summer, at a beautiful resort in Montecatini Terme.

I still agreed to have Bunny come that summer. I didn't see any reason why I couldn't do both—hang out with her during the day and go out with Luca in the evening. She certainly was old enough to stay on her own. However, by the time she had arrived, my feelings had changed.

I felt so bad for her, as no one seemed truly happy to see her, including me. My father was pushing for us not to spend time together, especially alone. I guess he was worried about what would happen if a young 14-year-old under his charge were to get pregnant. But as much as I loved Bunny, I was not attracted to her, not in that way.

I wasn't attracted to anyone, and Bunny knew that. I felt safe with her, and she with me. No one understood our relationship. Hell, I really didn't understand it completely myself. How could I possibly explain it to them?

She had arrived three days prior, and I had barely said anything to her. She wandered around the courtyard on her own, still sometimes jumping on her trampoline, which was slowly starting to fall apart. And she ate meals on her own or with my father.

When she was particularly lonely, Bunny would call my name repeatedly from the top of the steps, either at the spiral staircase in the kitchen or the outdoor steps in the courtyard. I wouldn't answer her. She would sit and read books outside under the veranda, waiting for me to come out. I never did. She couldn't understand how I could be depressed with her being there, as we always had so much fun together. In all honesty, I couldn't understand it myself. I was so confused about so much.

By the fourth day, Bunny had had enough. She stood at the top of the stairs in the courtyard and yelled, "Michael, I'm coming down, ready or not."

I heard her start to run down the steps and remembered that my door was ajar. I couldn't get over to it in time to lock it, and she barged in. She would have bashed my teeth in had my face been anywhere near that door.

"What the fuck is the matter with you? What have I done for you to treat me this way? If you want me to go home, fine, I will go. But at least have the balls to tell me to my face."

I was pissed. How dare she come down to my room and yell at me. Even my own father would never do that. This was my space, and no one was allowed in it when I wanted to be alone.

I could feel my face getting hot, and I began marching towards her. I placed my hand on her chest near her neck and, gently but forcefully, began to push her out of my room. I thought she would go willingly, but I flipped a switch in Bunny that I had only seen once before—when she was four years old.

At that time, my brothers enjoyed making fun of me on purpose, just to see the child get riled up. She would become so angry that she would threaten their lives. One time was especially bad, and they gave her the moniker "La Diavola della Tasmania" (the Tasmanian Devil). It seemed that at that moment,

my attempting to push her out of my room re-awakened that beast. She came at me with everything she had.

Bunny grabbed my hand, the one on her chest, and started to pull me towards the door.

She growled, "You are coming out of this dungeon right now."

I was enraged.

I started to shove her out my door. My plan was to push her up the stairs, and then run back down, locking the door behind me. Unfortunately, only part of my plan worked.

I successfully pushed her up into the courtyard, but when I tried to run, she wouldn't let me go. She held onto my clothes, my hair, anything she could get her grubby little hands on, so that every time I tried to push her down, she would pull me down with her. I lost my balance, and we were rolling around on the ground in the courtyard.

My father ran out of the house, screaming at us to stop. I was trying to push her down, but her hand met my fist and pushed it back up. Even with it being years later, her hands still had not regained their full strength from the accident, so my fist got loose from her grip, as she couldn't hold me back for very long. Before I knew what was happening, my fist came down upon her face with such force that I knew I had done damage.

I stopped as I could see her writhing in pain. I was still sitting on top of her, straddling her hips, when I checked to see if she was okay. I had my face close to hers and was about to apologise when I felt a hard punch to my throat. Bunny couldn't see very well, as my punch had landed right in her eye, and although I don't believe she was aiming for my throat, she seemed pleased with the target she did hit.

I gasped and gasped. I couldn't find the air.

I felt like I was choking to death. Bunny was not in the least concerned. With one eye bleeding and starting to swell, she pushed me off her, jumped on top of me, and started to pummel me with all her might. Had Luca not been there at the house at that moment to pull her off me, I don't want to think about how that would have ended.

Luca was strong, and he was able to pull her straight up by her arms and literally toss her to one side. He was not concerned about Bunny at all, even though she was hurt. He was worried about me—more specifically, my nose. He knew how precious my nose was—the torture of not having one, the painstaking hours of prep and surgery for my father and Gio, and the months of healing I had to endure. As Luca was checking me over, I could see Bunny get up and run past Papà and over to the back of the house, behind the kitchen. She was going next door to the church.

I waited almost an hour before going over to check on her. My father saw that I was worried, so he went into the house and upstairs to her room. From there, he could look out the upstairs window into the churchyard. A small area

between the trees had the perfect view of the sunset over the hills surrounding Firenze, so my brother put a bench there. There were many nights he and I would sit out there with a couple of beers, chatting and drinking after a hard day of work (for him) and school (for me).

Papà could see Bunny sitting quietly on the bench, looking out. According to him, she sat very still for a long time, not moving a muscle.

I grabbed an ice pack, an old towel, and two bottles of Pellegrino, walked to the back of the house, and climbed through the ivy and the gate that led to the church yard. It was interesting to me that, even though Gio, my father, and I all worked next door, none of us used that gate to reach the church. We all walked out our front gate, up the sidewalk, and through the church's main entrance. That secret back entryway was all for Bunny, and we coined it The Rabbit Hole.

Bunny was still on the bench, and when I sat down next to her, she didn't move. We sat quietly together for several minutes. Then, she said softly, "If you're looking for an apology from me, you're not going to get one."

I paused for a moment and replied quietly, "Okay."

She took a deep breath and began again, right away, with a bit more strength in her voice.

"Why is it that every time I leave, it takes us days or even weeks to get back to the way we were? What changes when I'm away?"

I paused, and without looking at her, I said softly, "We do, Bunny."

"Sorry, but no. I'm not buying that."

"Bunny, I'm 23. I should be off doing things that 23-year-olds do, shouldn't I? I definitely should not be hanging out with a kid, a teenager. My family thinks it's weird and creepy, and you know what? So do I."

"Do you?" she snapped at me. "Do you think it's creepy? Or are you just saying that because that is what your family wants you to think? You know what? I'm going to tell you something that you won't like, but here goes… You're not 23, you big, fat idiot! You're 14, just like me. That first summer, you were not 13 when I was four. We were both four years old together. Don't you get it? We've grown up together."

She got up from the bench, and I could see how horribly bruised and swollen her face was. It reminded me of what she looked like in the hospital when she was 10, and I felt dreadful for doing that to her. I was sitting at the other end of the bench, and she came over to me, bent over, and put her face near mine.

She growled, "You're 14, motherfucker. You can try to fool everyone else, but you will never fool me."

She stood up and walked back to the house through her gate. I watched her go.

I looked back at the view, watching the sun go down, pondering what she had just said. I still had the ice pack and the bottles of Pellegrino, having

neglected to give them to her. I put the ice pack on my throat. I could breathe fine, and there wasn't much of a bruise there. But I had learned that day that there is no such thing as a "small" punch to the throat.

I opened a bottle of water and drank it slowly. I thought to myself, "My Lord, she's right. I was 14. At least emotionally. And probably mentally, in many ways. I was 23 physically, but I was so behind in my emotional growth. It all began to make sense to me. I was four when she was four. I *was* four when she was four."

I was starting to grasp why it wasn't weird that we were friends. I realised that it wasn't strange that there was nothing sexual going on between us. No one could have understood our relationship. How could they? I was just starting to comprehend it myself. And would it even be worth trying to make everyone understand? I would look mental. I was so exhausted. I just wanted to find myself. Most 23-year-olds had found themselves by then. But that wasn't me. I just needed a bit more time.

I sat on that bench and watched the sun go down. I then headed back over to the house, coming in through Bunny's side gate, and when I entered the courtyard, I saw her lying in the dark on one of the lounge chairs. I walked over and sat on the chair next to her, handing her the other bottle of Pellegrino, which was only partially cold at that point. She took it, opened it immediately, and guzzled down the entire bottle. She didn't look over at me. We both sat in the chairs in the dark, facing the Kuhmalos' backyard.

I said very quietly, "You're right, Bunny. I am only 14. We are the same age."

I studied her face to gauge what she was thinking. She didn't look back at me but nodded her head repeatedly, slowly in agreement. Then, she turned and gradually leaned towards me, as if to tell me something. She opened her mouth wide, and the largest, most disgusting burp emanated from her body. She sat back in her chair, nodded once, and gave me a sly smile.

A 23-year-old man probably would not have found that funny. I thought it was hilarious.

The next day, Bunny concocted a plan that I truly did not think would work. She went to my father and told him that she and I still hadn't made up and that she wanted to return home. According to her, Papà almost seemed relieved that she was leaving.

She avoided me altogether the rest of the day and made a big to-do, pretending to call the airlines to change her plane ticket for the following day. She arranged to have a taxicab pick her up at 6:30 the next morning, and, in a dramatic fashion, she got in it without saying goodbye to anyone. For all my father knew, Bunny and her bag were off to the airport.

The crazy thing is that she predicted exactly what would happen next.

She thought Papà did not want to be in Firenze for the summer but was remaining at home for me. He wasn't about to leave the two of us alone in the

house, so he stayed behind, even though he desperately wanted to be in Reggio di Calabria. So, by 9:00 that morning, just two and a half hours after she supposedly left, I learned that Bunny was correct in her assumption.

Renata had pulled up in our driveway in her little Volkswagen convertible, and my father ran out of the house carrying his bags. He put them into the trunk of her car and then noticed me standing off to the side while as he slammed the trunk shut. He dug into the pocket of his designer shorts and threw the keys to his car to me.

"Take good care of her," he said as he got into Renata's car. By "her," my father meant his vehicle, which he loved almost as much as any of his children.

At 13:00 that afternoon, the phone rang. Before I could even say hello, Bunny asked, "Is he gone yet?"

She didn't wait for me to answer.

"I'll be right there."

Within five minutes, a taxi was pulling up. I opened the gate for her, and as she pulled her bag out of the back seat of the taxi, she said, "Oh, please tell me that he left the Jag."

I smiled, pulled the keys out of my pocket, and held them up.

She shouted a bit too loudly, "Great! Get your things."

"What? Where are we going?" I asked.

Looking directly at me, she said, "Anywhere. Everywhere."

Over the next hour, we packed my clothes, her bag, some food, toiletries, a first-aid kit, Snickers' bowls, and dog food into the trunk and filled the back seat with blankets and pillows. We put Snickers in his crate and squished the carrier between the blankets. Had there been a horrible accident, chances are Snickers would have easily survived the crash, thanks to all the padding surrounding him.

Bunny and I got in and buckled our seatbelts. As she stroked the dashboard, she looked over at me, thinking I would have the same excited expression, but I didn't. I was anxious. I had driven a bit but not much and taking such a beautiful car on a long trip was concerning. I was also worried about Papà returning home at the end of the summer and seeing hundreds of extra kilometres on the odometer.

Bunny thought I was crazy and told me one of two things would happen. Either he a) would not notice that any additional mileage had been put on his car, or b) would notice that I had put that mileage on the car and assume that I took a trip on my own, possibly with a beautiful Italian woman in tow. According to her, there was no way I could lose.

I took a deep breath.

"Okay. Where would you like to go?" I asked.

Without hesitating, she said, "San Gimignano."

San Gimignano was not far, about an hour's drive southwest of Firenze, just off the same raccordo autostradale, or motorway, that leads to Siena. I think

she chose to go there as I had told her previously that it was somewhere I had always wanted to visit. It's called the "Manhattan of Italy" due to the number of "skyscrapers" it has, and since she was originally from New York, I wanted to see it for myself.

We got to the town, but there weren't many places to park, so we found a lovely hotel on the outskirts, one that permitted dogs. I was somewhat shocked when the woman at the registration desk told me there was a vacancy, given that it was the height of tourist season. She said that most visitors did not stay overnight in town, as there were plenty of day trips to San Gimignano from Firenze.

When we pulled up to the hotel, I initially told Bunny we could only stay for one night, but when the woman behind the counter asked for the checkout date, I said, "We'd like to stay for three nights, please."

I must admit that I surprised myself by doing that.

We brought Snickers and our smaller bags to our room, which was lovely. Small, but quaint. We had our own toilet and sink in our room, but we had to share the showers that were down the hall.

As soon as Bunny sat down on the bed, I said, "Don't be mad, but I just paid for us to stay here for three nights."

Her eyes got big.

"Three nights? Umm, okay." She looked pleasantly confused.

I pulled a chair over to talk to her.

"Look, you know I haven't left Firenze much. I have been to our home in Reggio di Calabria several times, and I stayed that one night at the Jamessons' house with you. But the only time I have ever stayed in a hotel was when my father and I were in England for you.

"This is really hard for me, and I want to do it, but I probably will need to take baby steps. Please, just be patient with me."

"Yeah, sure! Sounds good to me. Let's go walk Snickers and then find something to eat."

That was so much easier than I thought it was going to be. Had I had that discussion with Papà or my brothers, they would have taken over, encouraging me to get out of my comfort zone. It was lovely to have someone hand the reins over to me.

And at that moment, I realised that I was free. Truly free. Maybe for the first time ever.

My father and brothers were many kilometres away. No one in San Gimignano knew me. I was completely anonymous. The credit card I was using wasn't even in my name. I was not on a timeline, and I had the funds and a vehicle to go where I wanted. I could do just about anything I wanted to do.

And upon that epiphany, I was almost dizzy with excitement. The freedom I felt was exhilarating.

The only place Bunny and I visited that first night was a quaint little trattoria

in the town square, where we could catch an early dinner. As anyone who has visited San Gimignano can tell you, getting to the piazza is much easier said than done, as it is at the top of a very steep hill. It wasn't far from our hotel, but the effort it took to get there was immense. The meal was lovely, and Bunny took some sips of my wine when no one was looking.

The walk back, although downhill, was almost as challenging. It was a hot and humid evening, and by the time we returned to the hotel, we were both dripping with sweat.

There were two showers at the end of the hall for all the guests on that floor, so Bunny quickly grabbed her towel and a change of clothes and said, "I'm feeling pretty gross. I'll be right back."

I watched her walk out the door and then glanced down at the desk. Before we left for the restaurant, she put on a bit of makeup, including eyeliner and mascara, which I noticed she had left out. I stared at them for a long moment.

I walked over to the door, opened it, and looked down the hallway. Bunny was just closing the door to the shower behind her.

I walked back to the desk and looked again at the long, pink tube of mascara. For a moment, I was frozen, caught between what I so desperately wanted to do and the nagging, destructive messages I so often told myself.

My desire won out.

I picked up the vial and unscrewed the wand, having an indescribable yearning to try it. My hands were shaking.

I slowly removed the wand from the tube, stood in front of the mirror, and carefully applied the mascara as best I could.

Bunny shocked me when she burst back into the room, muttering something about forgetting the shampoo, and saw what I was doing. She stopped and stared at me.

I panicked and turned away from her. I was humiliated, completely ashamed, and I could feel tears well up in my eyes.

I had my back to her, but my peripheral vision could see in the mirror that she was staring at the back of my head. She looked as if she was waiting for me to say something, and I was a bit startled when she walked over and gently grabbed the mascara out of my hands.

She put the wand back in the tube, slowly lifted my chin with her pointer finger so I would look directly at her, and softly said, "It's never a good idea to put makeup on a dirty, sweaty face. Go take a shower and scrub your face really well. Then, I'll show you how to apply it properly."

I said, "Okay," quietly, grabbed my towel, pyjama bottoms, and a t-shirt, and ran out of the room.

As I showered, I thought about what had transpired. Did I understand her correctly? Was Bunny going to show me how to apply makeup? I certainly didn't want that.

She completely misunderstood. I created a whole scenario in my head of

what I was going to tell her when I returned to the room. She needed to know that she was the one who was confused about the situation.

After my shower, I walked back down the hallway and entered the room. Bunny was sitting on the bed in her pyjamas, a line of makeup products in front of her.

"Look, I don't want to put on makeup. I was just curious."

"Okay. That's fine. Can you just try it for me, then? Just for fun? If you hate it, you never have to put it on again. Deal?" she said.

The entire time she worked on my face, I pretended that I was sitting there completely against my will, but, in reality, I was more than curious to see what I would look like.

I sat still as Bunny applied the makeup to my face. I couldn't see what she was doing as I had my back to the mirror. She pulled my shoulder-length hair into a bun high on my head and worked on me for about 30 minutes.

Then, she told me I could turn around.

I looked in the mirror and gasped at my reflection. I didn't recognise myself. For reasons I didn't understand at the time, I burst into tears.

Bunny immediately said, "No, no, no! You'll ruin your makeup!" and quickly showed me how to dry my tears by blotting the corners of my eyes.

When I stopped crying, she grabbed me by my shoulders and kneeled on the bed behind me. She gently turned me towards the mirror again.

"Look at you!" she said sweetly, stroking my hair. "You look so beautiful."

That was the moment.

That was it.

Bunny could see me. She could *see* me.

Had my father or brothers seen me like that, they would have been furious. But Bunny? She told me I was beautiful. And you know what? I *was* beautiful. I liked who was looking back at me in that mirror.

I was shocked at the job that she did. She was able to highlight my best features and soften and conceal the scars and other areas that needed them. I found that so funny, as I always thought she was kind of terrible at putting makeup on her own face. It looked like she didn't care, and I realised at that moment that it was because she actually didn't.

Putting makeup on herself was not important to her.

Putting makeup on me was *very* important to her.

Everything was starting to become so clear. In some ways, I was more feminine than she was. What a revelation. Inside, at times, she was the scruffy boy to my inner girl.

It all made sense at that moment.

Papà had always worried about us being inappropriate with each other. He was thinking of us as a 23-year-old man wanting to have sex with a 14-year-old girl. He was worried I would be thrown in jail for deviant behaviour. What he and I both didn't recognize was that I was completely unaware of my sexuality

at that point, and in all probability, so was Bunny.

We were very loving to one another. We would hug often, hold hands when walking together, and snuggle on the couch. But it never occurred to us to rip each other's clothes off and make out. We were both going to sleep in that same hotel bed together that night, and I knew that neither one of us was thinking about sex. We were just so happy to be exactly 100% who we were with each other.

To me, that was way better than sex. That was the definition of intimacy.

Bunny still slept with her wrists in braces each night. If she did not wear them, the mornings would be unbearable for her, and she would be in excruciating pain. Even when she did wear them, she would still wake up in agony, but with the help of meds, the discomfort was tolerable. So, when I awoke the next morning after a very good night's rest, I saw Bunny standing next to me, dressed and ready to go, wearing her wrist braces.

She said very matter-of-factly, "Come on! I know what I want to do today."

I got up, showered, and got dressed quickly while she took Snickers out for a walk and fed him. He was such a good dog, and as tiny as he was, he was a big and positive presence.

I would guess that Bunny had spoken to a hotel worker who had given her directions, as she knew exactly where to go. We walked halfway up the hill on the road that led to the town square and stopped in front of a beauty supply store. With her arms stretched out and while shaking her hands, she sang, "Ta-Da!"

We walked in, and I was amazed at how much was packed into the small store. The women at the shop all spoke a small amount of English, but not much, so Bunny had me translate. She asked to speak to someone who knew a good deal about makeup and applying it. The older woman who was helping us went to the back and called for "Carla."

A woman who I presumed to be Carla came out, and she was a busty Italian vixen. I looked at Bunny, and she lifted her eyebrows twice quickly. I could feel myself smile widely.

Bunny began speaking, and I translated.

"Hello, Carla. My name is Bunny, and this is my cousin, Michael. I was involved in a terrible accident a few years ago and have lost much use of my hands."

She held up her hands to prominently display the braces for full effect.

"I'm 14 now and want to start wearing makeup, but there is no way at this time I can apply it myself. So, my wonderful cousin here has agreed to help me this summer. Whatever makeup you use to show him how to apply to my face, we will buy. We're prepared to spend thousands and thousands of lire here today, Carla. Can you help us?"

At first, I felt like an idiot repeating what Bunny was saying, and it seemed that Carla clearly thought we were a bit odd. But as Bunny didn't seem to care,

neither did I.

As Carla was a professional working on commission, she spent almost two hours with us, showing me exactly how to apply the makeup to Bunny's face. I always wonder what Carla would have thought if she knew that all that makeup was going to be for me. I don't know—maybe she already did.

We left the store with bags and bags of makeup, brushes, applicators, and a large, silver carrying case for it all. I was positively giddy walking back to the hotel with our stash. But, as we walked down the hallway to our room, I realised that I had just paid for all the makeup with my father's credit card. Of course, he was going to see the statement.

I stopped in my tracks and said, "I just bought makeup. Papà is going to murder me when he sees the bill."

Bunny said, "Are you crazy?! Papà is going to be over the moon when he sees that bill!"

"What?! No. No, he won't!" I cried.

"Don't you get it? You bought all of this for your 'girlfriend.'"

Bunny lifted her hands while still carrying the bags and did awkward air quotes while saying the word "girlfriend."

"Let's see—what should we call her? I think she looks like a Bianca. Yes, Bianca! Perfect! You have liked this *Bianca* for a while, so you took *Bianca* on a trip to San Gimignano and bought *Bianca* some things she wanted. You're going to tell Papà you are sorry for using his card, and you will pay back every lira of it. And do you know what Papà is going to say? He's going to be thrilled that you have yourself a little girlfriend named *Bianca*, who, by the way, is the same age as you, don't you know?" she said with a sly, little laugh.

"Oh, I love Bianca so much! I. LOVE. BIANCA! Bianca is going to get us out of so much trouble on this trip!"

She let out a little "whoop!" and continued walking towards our room.

Even though we were back at the hotel by mid-morning, we didn't leave our room all day other than to walk Snickers. I spent the entire time putting on makeup, washing it off, and doing it again, loving every minute.

Sitting on the bed reading a magazine, Bunny said to my back, "You know, there is a reason why I called your imaginary girlfriend Bianca. I think that should be her name."

"Her name?"

"Yes. *Her* name. I think her name is Bianca."

She walked up next to me as I sat in the chair at the desk. She kissed my forehead, grabbed my chin so I would look up at her, and said, "I love you, Bianca. Almost as much as I love Michael."

I smiled and turned back to look at myself in the mirror. I said softly, "Nice to meet you, Bianca."

I played with the makeup for hours that night. When I was done, I carefully put it all away in the large case that Bunny chose. She leaned over me and

slipped a folded piece of paper into the case, just as I was closing it. I reopened the case and looked at the sheet. It had names on it that I couldn't understand.

Bunny sat back down on the bed and continued eating, which she had done for most of the evening. I held up the small piece of paper and gave her a quizzical look.

She shoved an entire handful of potato chips in her mouth and said while chewing, "That's what you bought today. It's the names of all of the products. I wrote them down before I threw the boxes out. Keep that in a special place so that you will know what to re-order in the future."

She grabbed the list from between my two fingers and reread it, ensuring she didn't forget anything.

Standing over her, looking down at the top of her head, I said softly, "I love you so much."

She looked up at me and smiled, potato chip remnants all over her mouth, and replied, "Duh."

Bunny ordered pizzas to our room for dinner, and we watched TV in bed, eating and snuggling with Snickers. I kept the makeup on all night.

She gave me a disapproving look and said, "This is the second night in a row that you're sleeping with makeup on. I wouldn't do that if I were you. It's going to fuck up your complexion."

I did it anyway. I loved how it felt. It was paradise, and I was having the time of my life.

It was our last morning in San Gimignano, and we strolled back up to the town square after feeding and walking Snickers. We had two hours before we had to be back at the hotel in time for checkout, so we went to grab some breakfast from the darling little coffee shop in the centre of town. Unfortunately, it didn't have any outdoor seating in the square, which I had hoped for, but it did have beautiful, overstuffed leather chairs inside.

It seemed to be a popular place, so there wasn't much available seating. Bunny and I got our food and caffè and sat down together in the same chair, as it was easily big enough to accommodate the two of us. She set her meal down on the coffee table in front of her and noticed a puzzle someone had started. She picked it up and inspected it.

"No way!" she said. "Look at it! It looks like some kind of cipher."

My father had taught Bunny about cypher codes not long after her "accident." He was trying to get her to exercise different areas of her brain, and she was a master at decoding them. Papà wasn't sure if she was so good at them because she liked them or because the brain damage that she had suffered years prior had enhanced certain areas of her math and reasoning skills.

Before she even ate, she asked for a pen from the barista, sat back in the chair, and completed the cypher. She finished it in about 90 seconds, put it back down on the table, and picked up her croissant.

Several minutes later, a large, well-dressed gentleman walked up to the

table. He looked at us quizzically.

I said, "Ci scusi, era seduto qui, signore?" (Pardon us, were you sitting here, sir?)

He stopped and thought. "Io—Io sono…"

"You speak English?" Bunny half-asked, half-stated.

"Yes, yes, I do! Sorry, I was sitting there before and accidentally left something on the seat. Did you happen to see it?"

Bunny said, "There was nothing on the seat, but this was on the table."

She passed the paper with the cypher on it over to him.

The man glanced down at it, then looked again, hard, really studying it. He looked up at us, then looked around the café.

"Did you see who wrote on this?"

"Yeah, I did. Sorry. I just thought someone left it there," Bunny said with a mouth full of croissant.

He gave her an incredulous look. "*You* completed this, young lady?"

"Yeah, I did."

The man gave her a quizzical look.

"What? You don't believe me?" Bunny said with a sassy tone.

He looked over at me. "Did you see her finish this?"

"She asked the barista for a pen. She was writing something on it. My father taught her about cyphers a few years ago."

The man looked surprised when I said the word "cypher."

I said to him, "You know, Americans didn't invent cyphers. They were created by an Italian."

The man smiled. He said, "How long will you two be sitting here? Would you be willing to wait here for about five minutes? I want to get something from my hotel."

"I guess," Bunny said sarcastically. "But it'll cost ya."

The man looked at her and said, "I'll make you a deal, young lady. I'll go get another one. If you can decipher it, I will buy you a dozen croissants."

"Chocolate croissants, and you got yourself a deal, mister."

The man left, and as he promised, he returned about five minutes later. He handed her a cypher someone had already started.

"Don't you have a new cipher? One that hasn't been written on? I don't like trying to solve ones that other people have started. It messes me up," Bunny said.

"Just give it a try. I'd like to see what you can do."

Bunny looked at the paper, grabbed the pen, got up, and walked over to a nearby table. She sat down and hunched over the cypher. She didn't move for a while.

The man was watching her intently.

I said to him, "I don't want you to be disappointed. She's good, but she's probably not going to be able to solve it. I just don't want you to think…"

With that, Bunny walked back to where the man was sitting and placed the paper and pen on the coffee table in front of him. He stared down at it with his mouth ajar for 30 seconds.

"How on earth…?"

"This really wasn't difficult. See, it's just a simple Caesar shift hidden in an anagram. But whoever was working on this messed it up right at the start. Do you see this?"

Bunny bent down next to him and pointed at a section of the paper.

"This should have been an 'l,' not an 'i.' Once I corrected that, the rest was easy to fix."

"Unreal," the man whispered. He looked at her. "Tell me a little bit about yourself."

Bunny looked directly at him, and in a condescending tone, she simply said, "No. You first."

She stood up again, walked back over to her chair, and sat down.

He laughed and introduced himself.

"My name is Louie. I own a consulting firm in New York City and have clients who need ciphers decoded. And you, little lady, figured out a code to something I have been working on for days."

Picking up her croissant again, Bunny said, "Well, you ain't that good, then, mister."

I was horrified by her response, but the man didn't take offence. Clearly, I was missing something in the translation, as it seemed to me that she was being incredibly rude and disrespectful.

Louie looked over and saw my face.

"No, no, she's fine. She tells it like it is. I like that."

Louie looked back at Bunny and asked her how old she was. She didn't answer. She just stared at him.

Uncomfortably, I said, "Her name is Bunny, and she's 14."

I didn't mind telling Louie her name, as it wasn't her real moniker.

Louie looked impressed. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a business card, and held it out to her.

"Bunny, when you are 18 and have graduated from high school, give me a call. I will gladly give you an internship at my firm. And, if you are as smart as I think you are, I may even pay for you to go to college."

I could feel my eyes widen. I looked over at her, motioning for her to accept his card. She didn't move, so I reached for it and put it in her hand.

"Thank you," she said quietly, looking down at the card, not sure what to make of the whole exchange.

"Oh, and one more thing…"

Louie opened his wallet and pulled a stack of bills from his billfold.

"I believe I promised you some chocolate croissants."

He tried to hand the money to Bunny, but she wouldn't take it from him,

so he laid it on the coffee table in front of her and gave her a small smile.

I looked at the large stack of bills and said to Louie, "Sir, that's very kind, but she doesn't need that much money to buy croissants."

I pulled one bill out of the pile. "This would be more than sufficient."

"It's okay. I'd like her to have it. Believe it or not, she completed a lot of work for me today. Plus, I'm on my way to the airport right now—I'm flying back to New York tonight, so I won't need lire."

Louie turned to her and bowed his head. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Bunny. I hope our paths cross again one day."

She just glared quizzically at him. Louie turned and shook my hand and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

I looked at her, then at him, and said, "I'm Michael."

"Take care, Michael."

And with that, Louie walked out of the café.

I glared at her. I was quite agitated with her rude behaviour.

"Why were you so weird? You were kind of mean to him."

Bunny scoffed. "He's a con artist, through and through."

I picked up the money Louie put on the table for her. I counted it, and it came to 5,450,000 lire, just over $3,000 U.S. dollars.

"Five million lire. Still think he's a con artist?" I asked her.

She looked at me with no expression and said, "Hey, don't spend the ones with Caravaggio on them. He's wicked cool. I wanna save those."

13 CHAPTER THIRTEEN: 1983, BUNNY AT 15 (I FEEL LOVED)

That year, I was still living off the high from the previous summer.

We had so much fun traveling around Tuscany and the Liguria region, and I knew there was no possible way the following summer could top it.

Our trip around central Italy lasted almost four weeks, and we went to San Gimignano, east to Greve in Chianti, down to Siena, west to Livorno, and up to Pisa, with our last stop being the Cinque Terre before we headed back home to Firenze. We stayed for several days in each city, just eating, walking, window shopping, and enjoying each other's company.

The Cinque Terre was stunning, but we only stayed there for two days, as neither of us enjoyed the beach or sunbathing. However, Bunny did relish sitting with Snickers on the patio outside our hotel room, reading her books on the lounge chair under a large umbrella.

While Bunny was gone that year, I spent my time experimenting with different makeup styles and techniques, and I was getting quite good at it. I was brazening enough to visit the same wig shop where Bunny had gotten her wigs years earlier, and I purchased two for myself. I told the saleswoman I needed them for a play I was in. She didn't ask any other questions, thankfully.

I rarely got mail from Bunny while she was in the States. It wasn't surprising, as I knew she had to keep much of her life in Italy a secret. I don't think her mother even knew our address, and Bunny wanted to keep it that way. But I did get a box from her in the mail, and when I opened it, I found a pair of red sparkly high heels in my size inside. They looked like what Dorothy wore in The Wizard of Oz but with a heel. They were gorgeous.

When Bunny arrived that year, she looked so different. Gone was the baby fat, and she had developed a lovely figure. Her hair was finally the length she wanted, and it was thick, long, and curly. I don't know how her mother didn't hate her for it.

She told me that at home, she wore oversized sweatshirts and sweat jackets so that she could hide most of her curls inside her shirts, making it look like her hair was much shorter than it was. She also dressed in very baggy, boyish

clothing around her mother. Even though she lived with her, it sounded like her mother had no idea what her daughter truly looked like.

Bunny had just arrived, and after she greeted my father in the courtyard, she went over to the stairs that led down to my room and chucked her bag as hard as she could down the steps. Then, she started heading over to the trampoline.

She turned and saw that I was still standing there, and said to me, "You coming?"

She climbed through the opening of the net enclosure, lay down on the trampoline, and then motioned for me to do the same.

"Okay, now tell me everything."

"Everything?"

"Are you gay? Are you bisexual? Are you a drag queen? What? What are you?"

"I… I don't know." I laughed. I was shocked by all the questions.

"Okay, this summer, we will figure out what you are."

"I don't want to *figure out* what I am. I'm just happy doing my own thing. Look, I love dressing up and putting on makeup, but I don't think I'm gay or transsexual or even bisexual. I'm just happy being on my own. I truly don't want a relationship right now."

She looked displeased.

"Damn. That's too bad. This summer would have been so much easier for us to hang out if you were gay. Ugh. Now we're going to get weird looks from Papà all summer long."

She looked at me again and smiled. "Are you sure you're not gay? *Really* sure? It's totally okay if you are."

"Bunny," I said sternly.

"Okay, fine. Ugh. You're so boring," she said with a smile.

She stood up on the trampoline and screamed, "Popcorn!"

She started jumping as hard as she could, bouncing me up and down until I was almost sick. I grabbed her legs, and she fell on top of me. We laughed hard and sat up, only to see Papà staring at us. He had watched our entire conversation up to that point. Thank goodness he was too far away to hear what we were discussing. Still, the way he looked at us, it was clear that he wanted to know what was up.

We got off the trampoline and sat at the table under the trellis. Papà brought out some iced tea and biscotti for us.

"Oh, I have something to tell you!" I was almost shouting at Bunny.

She looked at me incredulously.

"Brace yourself—Bobby is now a police officer."

"What the hell? Seriously?" she said, looking confused.

"Yeah. Turns out that he and Gio still keep in regular contact. He finished the academy last fall and is now an officer in New York City."

"New York City?"

"His mother died, so he moved to New York to be closer to his father and half-brother."

"I didn't even know he had a brother. Wow. Well, good for him."

I didn't tell Bunny that Bobby had come for Christmas and spent two weeks at the clinic with Gio. She would have probably been pretty upset at my brother for that. But it was her own fault, as she was the one who invited him into our house and our lives. I did not like him much and still felt on some level that he was a danger to my family, but Gio and my father seemed to believe that he was a good man, deep down.

It pained me to believe that he probably was one of Gio's best friends at that point. I tried to see my father's point of view: Bobby made one really terrible decision. It could have led him down a very different path, but I am happy to know that in a do-or-die situation, Bunny knew the right thing to do.

I always thought about how she pulled out that $300.00 to give to Bobby at that critical moment. I wondered how much money she now had sewn into the lining of that old backpack. I would venture to guess that she never spent a cent of the money I gave her, nor any of the funds that Louie gifted to her the previous year. If that were the case, she would have saved up thousands of dollars by then, all of it tucked away in the seams of that worn, dirty bag. I think having that money gave her peace and sanity, as she always knew that if something happened, she would always have enough on her to get her to safety. She certainly couldn't rely on her parents for that.

Bunny and I always started each summer planning what we would work on for those three months outside of our clinic work. Every year, we tried to do something different, but that year, she wanted to focus on her music. She told me that back in the U.S., she would practice on the piano as much as she could and carried around a folding cardboard cut-out of a full piano keyboard to practice on. She also bought a used guitar, keeping it at school in one of the band lockers that a friend wasn't using. She kept nothing that she loved at her parents' house, nothing of value to her. Any photos of us, any presents I gave her, went with her in the backpack she took everywhere.

Bunny told me that she had a secret job cleaning offices in the early morning. She would get up around 2:00 and sneak out of the house, bringing her school clothes with her. She would scrub those offices for four hours and get to her high school by 7:00, where she would shower and get ready in the gym. She ate both breakfast and lunch at school, fraudulently filling out the applications for the free lunch program herself. Her father made a half-million dollars a year at his job, but Bunny lied on every form she could to get free help, food, and services at school. One organisation even gave her a free winter coat every year. The best part was that if anyone ever discovered the misinformation on those forms, it would come back on her parents and not her.

Any money Bunny made continued to be sewn into the lining of her

backpack, as she couldn't get a bank account without a parent's signature. She certainly wasn't about to ask either parent to do that. On numerous occasions, she had gone with her mother to the bank and had seen her take money from her sisters' accounts. That was not going to happen to her.

Between her job, school, and dealing with her mother, Bunny had almost no time for her music. So, soon after she arrived at our home that summer, she was excited for me to teach her as much as I could. She told me she needed to learn how to write music. Not wanted—*needed*. She said that she had "a bunch of songs flying around" in her head "like butterflies" and had to get them out and "set them free."

We took turns switching off playing the piano, drums, and guitar, and we often had little "jam sessions." However, one afternoon, after we were done with our clinic work, we were pleasantly surprised when Dr Kuhmalo rang the buzzer for the front gate, and when I let him in, he walked into the courtyard, dragging a cart behind him. He said he heard us playing and wanted to "join in on the fun." He lifted the cloth covering the small cart to reveal that he had brought his electric guitar and amp.

Bernard sat down and started playing, almost as if he were auditioning for us. It was a master class. He was, by far, the best guitarist I had ever heard live. Bunny and I knew we would have to up our game in order to play with him, so we practised more than we ever had previously, and by the end of July, the three of us almost sounded like we knew what we were doing.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of August, Brigitte received a call from family in Germany, telling her that her mother had died. Brigitte was an only child, so she and Bernard were going to need to be in Germany for the rest of the summer to take care of her mother's affairs and sell her home. We were so sad to lose a member of our trio, and it wasn't the same playing without him.

We didn't practice quite as much with Bernard gone, and our clinic work had come to an end, so we had a bit more free time. One night, Bunny looked at me and said, "Hey, you wanna dance with me?"

I had no idea how to answer that one.

Yes, of course, I wanted to dance.

No, I didn't want my father or brothers to see me dance.

The comments we would receive? It wouldn't be pretty. And holding Bunny close to me? I could only imagine how Papà would react to that. I was sure that Papà's overactive imagination would conjure up those dance moves into a whole host of sexual positions that we were doing with our clothes on. So, if we danced, it would have to be in secret.

Papà had taken on a few weeks of clinic work at the hospital, so he wouldn't leave with Renata for their two months in Reggio di Calabria until late August, about the same time Bunny was scheduled to fly home. So, at 9:00 each morning, Papà would leave for work and wouldn't usually return until close to 16:00. And several days each week, I did some organising and deep cleaning at

the clinic with Gio from 10:00-13:00, so Bunny and I would have three hours in the afternoon where we would have the house to ourselves. The only room that would be big enough for us to dance in without rearranging all the furniture was the formal dining room. No one hardly went in there, and we could easily push the table and chairs over to one side.

For sources of inspiration, I knew exactly where to go. I got the step ladder and climbed into the crawl space to locate the big box containing Luca's old VHS tapes. Most consisted of short segments from old American TV dance shows from the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as Soul Train, American Bandstand, and Solid Gold. Bunny and I watched each recording, looking for the most challenging routines, and took pieces here and there to make our own. What we had put together was only two and a half minutes long, but it was a complete workout, and the training was exhausting.

One afternoon, after several weeks of rehearsals, Bunny and I just finished practising our routine when we walked into the kitchen to get something to drink. My father had arrived home early from work that day, and he and Gio were there.

Papà looked at us and became furious. I had only shorts and sneakers on, and Bunny was in a tank top, bikini bottoms, and high heels. It probably looked like we were doing something we weren't supposed to be doing.

Papà pointed at Bunny and yelled in English, "You! You are going home now!"

He then looked at Gio and said in Italian, "You take care of it. I can't stand to look at either one of them."

Papà left to go upstairs, and Gio waited to talk to me until he was out of earshot. When the coast was clear, he grabbed my arm and growled, "What the hell is the matter with you? Papà made it very clear to you that this was not okay."

"He has no idea what we were doing," Bunny mumbled under her breath.

Gio was livid. He pointed at her and said, "You, go pack. Right now."

I clearly didn't want Gio to see me dancing, but at that point, I really didn't have much choice. That pretty much was going to be the only thing that would calm the situation down. I knew that if Bunny left, Papà would never allow her to return to our home.

"Gio, we were dancing."

"Yeah, I bet you were."

"Come on, Gio. We'll show you. Come on."

He scoffed, shook his head, and followed us into the dining room.

We put on the song that we had heard a thousand times and practised over and over again and started to dance. We were 15 seconds into our routine when Gio put his hand up in a stop motion, got up, and walked out of the room. We turned off the music and looked at each other. Shit. Were we now in trouble for dancing? Bunny looked mad, and I was worried and confused.

Several minutes later, my brother walked back into the room again with my father reluctantly in tow. He motioned for Papà to sit in the chair he had just gotten up from and stood beside him.

Gio calmly said to us, "Please start the music again. Papà needs to see this."

We looked at each other for a moment, and then Bunny walked over to the boombox. She rewound the tape and started the music, and we began the routine again. In the two minutes we danced, I could hear Papà and Gio audibly gasp at several of the moves we did, especially the ones where I had to swing Bunny around like a rag doll.

We finished the routine, and the song continued to play in the background. We were both breathing hard.

Bunny said, "That's it. That's all we have thus far. We're still working on it."

She wiped the sweat from her brow.

I walked over to the tape player and turned it off. I was still panting a bit when Papà stood up and looked up at me, a small smile on his face.

"I'm actually very impressed. That was beautiful."

Bunny said very matter-of-factly, "So, you're not mad?"

My father shook his head no.

"Really? Are you sure? Do you mean it, Papà?" she asked with a demanding tone.

He replied, "Yes, I do," seeming a bit agitated.

I knew what she was doing and smiled.

Bunny pressed further. "Do you really mean it? You liked it? A lot?"

He looked directly at her and said impatiently, "Yes, I liked it very much."

She turned and started walking towards the wall. Looking over her shoulder, she said, "Well, I hope you liked it as much as you say you do because…"

There were two very large terracotta pots, each with a large Parlor Palm, side by side over on one side of the room. She moved each one of the large planters away from the wall, revealing a large hole. She then proceeded to match her body to the indentation to show how the hole was created.

Papà laughed hard. So did Gio.

She looked at him and mouthed, "Sorry."

Even though the mood was still light, I looked at Papà seriously and asked if we could go outside to talk. He looked back at me, and the smile disappeared from his face. He nodded. He understood it was important to me.

We walked through the kitchen to sit under the trellis but not before Papà grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses. As he poured, I told him everything. I told him that, emotionally and mentally, I was struggling and wasn't functioning the way most 24-year-old men should be. I told him that I was unaware of my sexuality and, at that point, I was still a virgin. I told him that Bunny was probably as sexually confused as I was.

He stopped me right there.

"Bunny is not confused. She is still having issues medically from her 'accident.'"

He paused for a moment. "She will need at least one more reconstructive procedure before she will safely be able to have any kind of relationship with a man."

I didn't know that. I was completely unaware. She hadn't told me. I was asexual, and she couldn't have sex. We were quite a pair.

"That is why I have been so concerned about you two. I didn't want her to do anything that could affect her surgery and recovery."

Papà looked at me and gave me a small smile. He informed me that Bunny would have the surgery when she returned to California, and that one of his good friends from medical school, Dr Rafaelo, would oversee the surgery and her post-operative care. Papà took a small sip of wine and said that he agreed to cover the cost of it all.

He then stared at me lovingly and asked, "Are you okay? Are you truly okay?"

Looking down at the ground, I replied quietly, "Yeah, Papà. I'm good."

I glanced up and looked him in the eye. I said, "I'm really good."

And it was the truth.

I had just told my father something that I thought was going to devastate him or cause him to be ashamed of me. Instead of getting mad, he acted like it was information he already knew.

No judgement. So, yeah, I was good.

14 CHAPTER FOURTEEN: 1984, BUNNY AT 16 (HALO)

Bunny went back to the States and got the surgery she needed.

According to Dr Rafaelo, the procedure couldn't have gone better, and Bunny recovered quickly. As far as we knew, that was the last surgery that she would need, at least for a while. It was too bad I couldn't have celebrated that milestone with her.

Two summers prior, when we were on our tour of Italy, a family from Iceland had moved into the house next door. They were all very quiet and very private, so much so that we didn't know they had moved in until months after the fact. It was hard to believe that four people were living so close to us, yet we hadn't seen or heard anything coming from the other side of our shared wall.

Every member of their family looked like a model, but the daughter, Anja, was truly gorgeous. She was tall and thin, with a pale complexion and long, blonde hair. Even I, asexual as I was, thought she was stunning. She was the only member of that family whose name I had learned, as my brother Gio, a married man at that point, said it quite frequently when he came over. Gio's wife, Alessandra, was truly lovely, and he should have been thrilled to be married to her, but unfortunately, he was still a playboy at heart, and it was clear that he was having a bit of trouble getting rid of that trait.

The neighbouring residence had been vacant for many years, but we learned that Anja's father had some kind of business relationship with the property's owner. The house was much nicer than ours (it was almost a small palace), and there was always a high level of security—cameras, bodyguards accompanying them when they came and went, etc. It was a bit strange.

We had no security at our home other than a gate at our driveway, and the only reason my father had it installed was that he was tired of drunk teenagers driving off the road and into our courtyard. That happened twice before Papà installed the gate, and two more cars have crashed into it in the years since.

One cannot truly blame them, however. The street we live on is not only incredibly curvy but also has a steep incline. As teenagers, even my brothers

used to drive up and down at high speeds. According to them, it's hard to resist.

After Bunny left the previous summer, I became more curious about exploring my sexuality. I wasn't really prepared for anything overtly sexual, but I wanted to try out the waters a bit to see which way I might be leaning, if any.

I asked Luca and Gio to take me to gay and straight clubs (respectively). Yes, Gio was married, but he was more than happy to go with me, explaining to his wife that it was all in the name of helping me find a mate.

More frequently than not, Gio used the phrases, "I was just talking to her" or "I was only looking," when confronted with situations when I caught him flirting, or worse. He was making me feel that if that was what a straight relationship was going to look like, maybe I didn't want any part of it.

Luca brought me to a drag club one night, and I was hooked. He had no idea that I dressed up as a woman nightly in the comfort and safety of my room, so when I was absolutely ogling over each drag queen's outfit, he seemed a bit puzzled. He leaned over to me in the very crowded, very loud club and said, "Hey, that's my job," meaning he was the Aceti family's resident gay. I smiled at him.

Luca and I went out every week, checking out different bars and dance clubs, but all I wanted to do was return to the few drag clubs each time. But I was happy to go out with him, no matter where we ended up.

One night, we were sitting at some random gay bar when Luca excused himself to chat with some friends. I sat at the bar all alone until a young woman came up and sat beside me. She was quite pretty, and I smiled at her quickly and looked back down at my drink.

"You don't remember me, do you?" she asked.

Other than my brothers' wives, the only women I had ever really met and could say that I knew were Bunny, Mrs Khumalo, our housekeeper Marta, and Mrs Jamesson in England. So, no, I didn't remember this woman, and I was pretty sure she had the wrong person.

I looked at her, pursed my lips, and shook my head no.

Even though the club was loud, she leaned over and whispered softly in my ear, "I'm your neighbour."

She pulled away from me so that I could have another look.

I stared at her, trying to recall, and had no success. I shook my head no.

She pointed at herself and said, "Gunnar."

My eyes widened. This was Anja's brother.

I would have never recognised him. Instead of being shocked by how he looked, my first reaction was jealousy over his style and makeup techniques. And I would have just about killed for the shoes he was wearing. They put my beautiful ruby red "slippers" to shame.

Gunnar held out his hand in a very effeminate way, and I took it. I was never good at shaking hands, but this felt comfortable.

"Do you want to go outside and talk?" he asked.

Looking nervously around the room for Luca, I said, "I can't. I'm here with my brother."

"Come on. Just for a few minutes."

Gunnar and I took our drinks and headed for the outside seating area in the back. I sat on the bench against the wall, and he came over and sat very close to me, putting his hand on my knee.

He looked at me and gently demanded, "Put your arm around me."

I obliged, though I'm not sure why. I felt quite uncomfortable. I wanted to leave. Where was Luca?

Gunnar kept looking me over, up and down. He smiled seductively, and I honestly couldn't tell if he was genuinely interested in me or if this was a colossal joke being played on me. I kept looking around to see if Luca was there and had put Gunnar up to doing this.

I swallowed hard and started to say something, but Gunnar interrupted.

"Let's get a taxi back to your house."

He picked up his drink and swallowed the entirety of it in one large gulp.

I felt a wave of relief. I thought to myself, "Yes, let's go back to my house. We can sit in the courtyard and have a few beers and talk. Sounds perfect."

I put down my drink and started to walk back into the bar, heading towards the club entrance. I felt Gunnar slip his hand into mine, and we walked out. A taxi was waiting down the street, and we got in.

We said nothing to each other the entire cab ride back, but I could feel Gunnar's fingers run up and down my leg. He brushed up against my penis, and I pushed away from him, sliding over in the back seat to be closer to the door. I didn't look at him the rest of the car ride back.

When the taxi dropped us off in front of the gate to the house, I expected Gunnar to walk back to his own home, but he didn't. Instead, he followed me in through the front gate of our home and up the stairs to the courtyard. I stopped and stood still, not wanting him to go further onto our property.

Gunnar was relentless. He pulled my arm forcefully so that we both ended up against the brick retaining wall surrounding our yard. I tried to pull away, but he grabbed my waist and pulled me close while sliding his hand down my pants. He kissed me hard on the lips, not letting me pull away.

Finally, I pushed him away with all my might and screamed, "No! No. I don't want this. I'm sorry. I think you misunderstood."

I was expecting Gunnar to be mad at me, or at least sad, but he smiled a sly smile and touched the outside of his lips with one finger, trying to fix his smeared lipstick.

He slowly and casually walked to the front gate, opened the wicket door, and said with a smile, "Thanks for the memories."

I turned and ran through the courtyard and down the stairs to my room. I locked the outside door as well as my bedroom door behind me. Once inside, I took a few steps backwards and collapsed to the floor. I was shaking and could

barely catch my breath.

What the hell was that? What had just happened?

I was baffled and slightly terrified. What kind of signal was I sending to make Gunnar do that to me? For days after, I kept thinking that I was in the wrong and had done something to provoke that response from him.

It wasn't until weeks later that I would find out that I had been set up and that my whole life was about to implode.

It was a rainy, cold March morning when I walked into the kitchen to get some coffee. I heard my father, who had not yet left for work, speaking quite seriously with a man in the formal dining room. I had never heard that voice before, and this perplexed me, as Papà always handled any business at his office next door, never in our home.

I was inching closer to the dining room to see if I could listen to the conversation when I heard the man wish my father a good day. He let himself out of the French doors in the dining room, and I watched him exit through our front gate. He had no car with him to speak of that I could see.

I walked into the dining room and saw Papà sitting at one end of the formal dining table, which we had almost never used. There were about 15 8x10 black-and-white photos scattered across the table. My father looked up with tears in his eyes.

But they were not tears of sadness. He was furious.

"You have destroyed us! What were you thinking?" he growled.

Was he talking to me? I was reeling. What was he talking about?

I looked down at the pictures. They appeared to be stills taken from what looked to be our neighbour's security camera, based solely on the angle of the images. They were of Gunnar and me, the evening we came home from the bar. Although it was the dead of night when the security camera would have been filming us, the photos were crystal clear. One could make out every detail.

I was embarrassed. Although I distinctly remember not being interested in Gunnar, the photos made it look like I was thoroughly enjoying myself, almost forcing myself on him.

I was so ashamed that my father saw me like that, but I also knew that Papà was not a homophobe. Luca was a homosexual, and it was known to all of us that he was gay very early on. He wasn't even a teenager before he would be dancing, dressed like Liza Minelli from Cabaret, singing Shirley Bassey tunes all around the house.

So, I couldn't even fathom what he meant by these photos destroying us. And who was "us"?

"Papà, I'm sorry. These are not…"

He stopped me right there. He was seething.

"Do you have any idea how old the child in these photos is?"

I didn't answer. I was frozen with fear. I was positively terrified.

"He is 15. Fifteen years old, Bastian! You are a 25-year-old man! Do you

have any idea how much trouble you are in? Do you know what they do to child molesters in prison? And what about your career as a physician? That is over—gone forever! My Lord, Bastian, our clinic is set up to help children! We provide help and services to children! Do you know what will happen to our clinic? To my career? To Gio's? It's all gone. Your one action has disgraced us all indefinitely!"

I stood there, shell-shocked.

"Say something!" my father screamed at me.

But I couldn't. I had no words.

He looked away from me and said, "Get the fuck out of my sight. I can't stand to look at you."

I walked out of the room and out of the house. In a daze, I walked across the courtyard and down the steps. I entered my room, sat on my bed, and looked around.

I kept thinking to myself, "What have I done? How much longer was I going to be allowed to be here? When were the police going to arrive to arrest me?"

I tried to think of what I needed to do before I left, before they took me away, but nothing was coming to my mind. At that moment, Snickers jumped up on the bed next to me and knelt in the playful position, his little nub-ish tail wagging.

Snickers.

I picked up a pen and paper and started writing a list of what Snickers' new owners would need to do—how much he needed to be fed, which brands of dog food worked best with his finicky digestive tract, what his favourite toys were.

I stopped writing mid-sentence.

Bunny.

What was I going to tell Bunny?

I felt a wave come over me, and suddenly, I was sobbing.

I didn't know he was 15. My Lord, I didn't know. And he was the aggressor, not me. I had no interest in him. But the photos showed something altogether different, didn't they? I kept thinking, "This can't be real."

I don't know how, but I cried myself to sleep. The stress was overwhelming.

I had only awoken when I heard a large group of people walking and talking through the courtyard. The police are here, I thought. They are coming to take me away, probably forever.

But no one came down the stairs from the courtyard.

Maybe they didn't know where to find me. Should I go upstairs? I didn't know what to do in that situation.

I slowly walked up the outside stairs to the courtyard to see a large gathering around the table in the dining room. My father was there, and Gio, but it also

looked like Anja and her parents were there, along with several other men I assumed were either lawyers or police detectives. They talked for only a few minutes and then got up and left our house.

I stood in the middle of the courtyard, waiting for someone to arrest me or yell at me or take me away. That didn't happen. The entire group walked right past me, all looking directly at me and smirking, apart from the daughter. She looked as miserable as I felt.

I looked to my father, who was standing just outside the door to the dining room. He said my name and motioned for me to follow him into the house.

When I entered the dining room, Papà said, "Not here. Let's go to the library."

The library was our equivalent of a living room. My father did not like to watch television, so we boys all had TVs in our respective bedrooms, but there were none in the shared spaces of our home.

Papà asked Gio to call Luca and tell him to come to the house. He said Michele had already been contacted and was on his way from Milano.

I sat in the library alone with Papà in complete silence for over an hour, neither of us looking at the other. Finally, the sound of the kitchen door opening could be heard, with low muttering accompanying it. Michele, Gio, and Luca all walked in and sat in chairs around the room, facing me. None of them sat anywhere near me.

It was surreal. Had this been any other time, my father would have been over the moon to have all four of his boys together, as that did not happen frequently.

Papà looked at Gio. "I can't tell him. Can you please speak on my behalf?"

Without responding, Gio looked at me and said, "The Friggsson family were just here, and they were frank with us. It turns out that the family is in a great deal of trouble in their native Iceland. Mr Friggsson stole quite a lot of money from his former employer, and Iceland would like him to be extradited back. Italy does not have any kind of agreement with Iceland, so, in terms of being deported, for now, they are safe.

"The problem is that they are here only on tourist visas, and every 90 days, they drive to Germany to re-enter Italy with new visas. However, that can no longer be done, as Germany does have an extradition agreement with Iceland. Every country that borders Italy does. So, they need to stay here and start the process of becoming Italian citizens. To begin that process, Anja needs to get married. And they would like you to marry her."

I quickly looked up at Gio and shook my head.

"I'm sorry… I'm very confused. They would like me to do what? I thought this was about Gunnar."

"They would like for you and Anja to get married. It needs to look authentic, so no one questions it. If you get married, Anja and her family can get Blue Cards and stay here long-term. If you stay married to her for three

years, the entire family can apply for Italian citizenship."

"And, if I say no…"

"Yes, it means that they will go to the police with the photos and with Gunnar's statement. You will go to prison, and our lives will be ruined."

I looked at my father, who had said nothing that entire time.

"Papà," I called to him, but he wouldn't look at me.

"I'm sorry, Bastian. They set you up. They told us so. It doesn't matter, unfortunately."

Papà finally looked at me and leaned forward in his chair. "They told us that Gunnar said that you rejected his advances."

Gio started to speak again. "Bastian, I'm sorry, but this also means that you won't be able to see Bunny anymore."

This was just so unfair.

"It must appear as if you and Anja have a legitimate marriage. Bunny would destroy that image. You can't tell her what's happening. You will have to end your relationship with her and have a clean break. She can't be the wiser."

I thought for a few moments.

"If I do marry Anja, then the photos…?"

"Yes, the photos will be destroyed. Our careers and reputations will remain intact. In fact, they need our reputations to be spotless to pull this off."

I looked around the room at my entire family. Everyone looked distraught.

"Okay. Okay. I'll do it. I'll marry Anja." I could barely get the words out.

I could hear my father breathe a sigh of relief.

Three years. I needed to be married to Anja for three years.

Bunny would never forgive me. She would be nineteen before I would even be able to see or talk to her again. By then, she would have graduated from high school and would be on her own, maybe in college, with a boyfriend. She would have forgotten all about me, or worse—hated me for cutting her out of my life.

At that moment, I realised I would never see my best friend again.

Diarah (a.k.a. DJ, Bunny, Dolores)

15 CHAPTER FIFTEEN: 1984
BUNNY AT 16 / DIARAH AT 21
(WRONG)

I got off the plane in Firenze that summer, as I always did, as I had done a thousand times before. This time, however, was not the same.

I was so mad at Michael. Yes, of course, I know his name is Bastian, but let's face it, Bastian is about as attractive of a name as Dolores. Bastian and Dolores. Truthfully, does that sound like a couple you'd want to hang out with? Exactly.

I tried calling Michael a million times, but he wouldn't pick up. None of his brothers or his father would answer, either. What the hell was going on?

I got one phone message on the machine from him, asking me not to go to Italy that year. He said he couldn't explain anything at that moment and promised, one day soon, he would tell me everything.

Sorry, but that was total B.S. After 11 years of summers, the Aceti house was my second home. If Michael had found himself a girlfriend (or a boyfriend), I wouldn't care. Honestly, I wouldn't. The only thing I had ever wanted was for him to be happy.

So, I got on a plane to tell him so. But flying there that time really sucked because I had to be the one to shell out the money to get me to Florence. Papà Aceti wouldn't be covering the cost of my flights any longer, it seemed.

My taxi pulled up to the gate of the Aceti household. I paid the driver, and he left. I only had one small bag in addition to my backpack, which I took everywhere with me. Even when I was in school, I would never keep that bag in my locker, nor would I leave it in the classroom when I needed to use the facilities. If the teacher was not going to let me bring that backpack with me into the restroom, I either held it in or, if it were an emergency, convinced the teacher that the backpack contained items necessary for the bathroom.

Sometimes, it's nice being a girl. We get away with so much more than boys do.

I rang the buzzer for the gate. The latch on the wicket door didn't give, and no one came out to greet me. So, I hit the buzzer again. I hit it over and over

until someone finally came out. It was Papà.

I smiled and said, "Hello, Papà!"

He didn't smile back. He stopped in his tracks and looked at me.

"Go home, Dolores. You're not welcome here anymore."

I could feel the smile drain from my face.

"Let me speak to Bastian, please," I quietly demanded.

He shook his head no.

I was seething and started to bang on the gate. I screamed into the courtyard, "Michael! Michael! It's Bunny! Can you come out here, please?!"

Gio came out of the house and started to walk towards me. I then saw Michael coming up the stairs into the courtyard.

"Michael! What is going on? What did I do? Did I do something wrong?"

Michael just stood in one spot with a sad look on his face.

Papà screamed at him, "Get downstairs, now!"

I could see Michael still looking at me as he slowly walked down the stairs. I kept eye contact with him, so I hadn't realized Gio had come out to the sidewalk. He grabbed me by the arm and led me down the street towards his car, which was parked against the curb.

"Gio, what did I do wrong? Why does everyone hate me?"

Gio said nothing. He opened the passenger-side door to his vehicle, shoved me inside, and slammed it shut. He started to walk around the car to the driver's side. I opened my door and was about to get out when Gio looked at me through the windshield. His demeanor indicated that it would be best if I just stayed in the car. I hesitated for a moment and then reluctantly pulled the door closed.

He got in the car and started driving. I turned my body so that I was facing the door. I didn't want him to see me crying. He was driving me back to the airport, this much I knew. We didn't speak to each other the entire ride there, which took almost 30 minutes.

He pulled up where the signage said "Partenze/Departures" and parked next to the curb. He then put the car's hazard lights on and turned towards me.

"Look, Bunny, there is no way I can tell you what is happening right now, but Bastian is okay. He's not hurt, and he's not sick. He's just at a point in his life where he can no longer be friends with a 16-year-old girl.

"You are stunting his growth into manhood. You're holding him back. If you truly wanted the best for him and our family, you must get back on a plane and go home."

I had my back to him the entire time he spoke. He gently grabbed my shoulder to turn me around so that I was facing him. He then delicately placed his hand under my chin and raised my face up until I was looking at him.

Gio had such a kind expression, and he truly looked sad.

"Tesora, will you do me a favour? Go home and have a beautiful summer with your friends. Be a teenager, not a babysitter for a broken man. Do stupid

things that stupid teenagers do. Finish high school. Graduate. Go to college. And, maybe one day, you and Bastian can find each other again. But not now. Your friendship has come to an end for the time being. Know that he loves you with all his heart and that we will all be thinking of you and wishing you well."

I should have been kind and gracious at that moment. That family had taken care of me for years and had essentially raised me into the person I was. But with all his beautiful words and sentiments, I felt like a dog being abandoned on the side of the road by its owners.

I got out of his car and looked back at him.

"Giovanni, you're a fucking asshole. Don't talk to me like I'm four, and don't tell me what I should do or how I should feel. Tell Michael that I never want to see him again as long as I fucking live. He can go to fucking hell. And if anyone in your family cares, tell them thank you for loving me and caring for me all those years. I'm sorry you all consider me garbage and totally worthless now. I will not bother any of you ever again."

With that, I grabbed my bag and backpack and slammed his car door as hard as I could. I walked into the airport without looking back.

All I kept thinking was "shit, shit, shit."

I had no idea what I was going to do or where I could go.

I was not going back to California. I would literally die if I had to go back to California. No, I was done with the insanity that was my life.

What Michael did to me killed me inside. It killed me. If Dolores was already dead on the inside, I was going to finish her off, once and for all. I was going to start a new life and never rely on anyone ever again.

That was my goal. Fuck them all.

I was standing next to the ticket counter, not knowing which destination I should buy a plane ticket for. Think, Bunny, think! I never had many people I could turn to, but…

There was one person who owed me, big time. God, he was the last person I wanted to see, but I was desperate. I went up to the ticket counter and asked for one ticket to JFK.

I didn't have Bobby's phone number or address. All I knew was that he was a police officer in the city. What was his last name again? Oh, yeah—Garza. And I was fairly sure I heard that Jack lived there, as well, though I had no idea where. Good—two people in the city who could possibly help me.

I didn't sleep a wink on the plane. My brain was going a mile a minute, trying to figure out my plan. Once my flight landed at JFK, I took the bus from the airport into Manhattan.

I had no idea where to find Bobby, but I figured if I started at one police station, somehow, someway, they would put me in the right direction. It was getting dark, so I figured I should wait until the morning to start searching. I was going to get a hotel room somewhere, but the first place I went to, the guy behind the counter looked at my passport and said I had to be an adult to get a

room.

Okay, fine. Plan B.

I found a lovely little 24-hour café near Central Park. I ordered myself some dinner and was able to drag out my meal for hours, ordering each item individually—salad, then a drink, then a burger, then an order of fries, then a piece of pie, then some coffee. Four hours later, the waitress came up and asked, "Is everything okay, sweetie?"

I said, "Honestly, no. My flight to Italy got canceled. I don't have enough money to get a hotel room, and even if I did, I'm not old enough to get one on my own. I don't want to go to a shelter, either. So…" I started to whisper. "If I gave you a $50.00 tip, would you let me just hang out in this booth? I'll keep ordering food, I promise."

I took out a $50 bill for her from my backpack and slid it slowly across the table. She looked at the money and then around the restaurant to make sure no one was watching her.

"Fine. But if you cause me one ounce of trouble, out you go."

"Deal," I said.

I got out my journal and my book. I kept the cup of coffee in front of me even though I wasn't drinking it but pretended to do so anytime one of the wait staff would walk by. I fell asleep a couple of times. The waitress let me nap and would kick my foot to wake me only if her boss or a police officer came in. I felt safe, and she was worth every penny of that $50.00.

The first thing the next morning, I grabbed breakfast at the diner and washed up as best I could in the bathroom sink. I didn't want to look as bad as I felt.

I was prepared for it to take me days to find Bobby. I was expecting to have to go from one police station to another to find him.

It only took me four hours to locate him. That was the good news. The bad news, however, was that he had been reprimanded for inappropriate behavior and was on a two-week paid leave.

Even though I lied and said Bobby and I were related, the desk sergeant at the station wasn't about to give me his address. For a moment, I had lost all hope. But as I was walking out of the station, a very nice older woman slipped me a piece of paper.

Her exact words to me, as she patted me on the shoulder, were, "You look a lot like Bobby. I see the family resemblance. Here you go."

I could have punched her for saying that I looked like that psychopath, but she was trying to help.

I took the subway to Brooklyn and got off at the first stop. He did not live anywhere near the station, and it took me quite a while to walk to his place. My bag and backpack weren't technically heavy, but carrying them all over New York wasn't fun, either.

I found the house and walked up to the door. The yard was a mess, with

the grass being about a foot overgrown. The stairs to his front deck were bowed, and it felt like the porch I was standing on could have caved in at any moment. I knocked and knocked, but no one answered.

I was so tired and had no place to go, so I sat down on the warped steps for a moment and looked around the neighborhood. The houses on the street were mostly very nice, and the area was quiet. Up a bit on the other side of the street, I could see an older man sitting on his front porch, staring at me. I got up and started to walk towards him and stopped just outside his front gate.

"Hello, sir! Do you happen to know the people who live in that house? And, if so, do you know if they're coming back anytime soon?"

The older man, keeping his eyes on me, yelled, "Rex!"

The house was two doubles, and another man came out from the other side. He had no shirt on, and it appeared as if he had just shaved as he was wiping remnants of shaving cream off his face with a towel.

"Yeah?"

"This little lady here is looking for Tango."

"Actually, I'm looking for a man named Bobby," I said.

The two men smiled.

The shirtless man said, "Tango is Bobby's nickname at the station."

"Oh, sorry. Yeah, well, do you know when he will be home?"

The younger man blew air out of his pursed lips. "He probably won't be home until late. Anything we can do for you?"

I lied, "I'm Bobby's sister—uh, half-sister. He didn't know I was coming today, but I have nowhere to go and was hoping to crash at his place."

They looked at me in disbelief, and the older man said, "Bobby don't have no sister."

I thought quickly and replied, "Yeah, well, if you were to ask any of my friends, they would say that I don't have a brother, either."

I was hoping that a bit of humor would diffuse the situation, but neither of the two men smiled.

The older gentleman said, "I'll make you a deal, little girl."

I nodded, although I wasn't loving the nickname.

"If you go shopping to get me some food, I'll let you hang out here until Bobby gets home."

"Deal!"

He gave me his list and some money. I asked if I could keep my bigger bag on the porch with him until I got back.

As I was walking down his front stoop, the younger man said, "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, Dad."

Dad. That was his dad. Okay, that was good information.

I returned from my shopping trip with four bags of groceries. I opened the gate to his house with one finger, letting it slam behind me. He did not look pleased by that. He opened his front door for me, and I brought the bags

through the living room and into the kitchen. His house was in complete disarray. I looked around the place, then at him.

"It's the housekeeper's week off," he said, trying to be humorous. I didn't laugh.

I unpacked the groceries and put them away as best I could. Then, the older man asked, "What's for dinner, little girl?"

"Could you please not call me that?" I asked.

"Nope," he said. "I don't know your name."

"You can call me Bunny," I said while starting to clean up the kitchen.

"Bunny? What the hell? I'm not calling you Bunny. You're out of your goddamn mind. Give me your real name."

A real name. That had possibilities. Of course, I wasn't going to tell him to call me Dolores. I could give him a fake name. I could reinvent myself.

I needed to keep it a D name that kind of sounded close to mine. Otherwise, it could be confusing. I quickly went through names in my head: Deana? No. Dahlia? No. Darcy? No. Dana? No. Diarah? Hmm. Maybe. Friends could call me Dia. Yes, I liked it.

I tried it out. "My name is Diarah, but my friends call me Dia."

"Nice name."

Yeah, it is, I thought.

"And your name?" I asked him.

"Roy, but everyone calls me Pops."

I spent the next hour cleaning Pops' kitchen, only to mess it up again making dinner. I bought a few extra items with my own money, including some fish, some items for a salad, shrimp, pasta, and beer. I knew what beer he liked, as I had noticed the empty cans all over the porch. They were hard to miss.

I made him broiled pollock with a buttery shrimp sauce over pasta, along with a side salad. I set the table beautifully, but as soon as dinner was served, he picked up his plate and beer and brought them over to his La-Z-Boy. He set his dish down on the TV tray next to his favorite chair and began to eat, not even acknowledging the work I had put into the meal.

I thought to myself, "Geez. It's no surprise that women aren't banging down the door to be with this guy."

I ate dinner by myself at the table and cleaned up afterwards. The kitchen was spotless, but the rest of the house left something to be desired. I walked out his front door and looked down the street to see if I could see any lights on at Bobby's place. It was still dark.

I went back in and said, "Pops, it doesn't look like Bobby's home yet, and it's getting late. I should let you be. But thank you for letting me stay for a bit. It was very nice of you."

Without taking his eyes off the TV, he said, "You can stay here tonight. Who knows when Bobby will be home. You can sleep out back on the three-season porch."

Oh, thank the Lord! I had nowhere else to go.

I picked up my bag and went through the kitchen and out the back door. There was a porch, alright, but it was filled with junk and books and newspapers and half-finished projects and tools. Pops followed me out and pointed over to the corner on the opposite side.

"There's a cot back there under those toys."

Lo and behold, there was a small cot. It took 10 minutes to clear away the toys, but once they were gone, it didn't look half-bad.

Pops brought out the blanket and the pillow I saw lying on the couch in the living room.

"Here. You should be nice and cozy out here. I'll leave the back porch light on for you and will keep the kitchen door unlocked in case you need to use the restroom. Good night!"

And with that, I heard him shut and lock the back door. Out of habit, he locked me out. Well, I hoped I wouldn't have to pee in his garden during the night.

I fell asleep pretty quickly, only to be startled awake by someone gently kicking my leg. I cracked one eye open. It was Rex. He smelled of hard alcohol and cigarettes.

"Hey, what are you doing out here, girly?"

I tried to sit up, still exhausted. "Bobby never came home."

"Yeah, no shit. He was out with me. He said he doesn't have no sister."

I paused for a moment. I looked up at him, the backyard light almost blinding me.

"You gonna believe him or me?"

He smiled. "Okay, come on. You can sleep on my couch tonight. We don't want the raccoons gettin' ya, do we?"

It was weird. We were in the heart of New York City, yet here was this man pretending to be a cowboy with a harsh Texas twang. And I was happy to let him pretend if it meant having a warm, safe space to sleep. It was late May, and there was still a bit of a chill in the air at night.

I grabbed my bag. I was still wearing my backpack.

We walked into his house, and he pointed to his couch. "There you go."

And with that, he walked up the stairs.

When I woke up the next morning, I was able to get a good look at his place and realized he had the same decorator as his father—his place was a pigsty, as well. I sighed and started picking up.

I washed a ton of dishes and took out three bags of garbage, all filled with to-go cartons and pizza boxes. There was a ton of dirty clothes in a pile by his La-Z-Boy chair, and I took them downstairs into his basement and started a load. As I was coming up the stairs, his father walked in, his cane across his wrist, carrying two cups of coffee.

I saw him and said, "I think Rex is still asleep."

"This one's for you, my dear. I saw you taking out the trash and knew you were cleaning his place up a bit."

The coffee was instant and truly awful, but I thanked him profusely.

He said, "I'm assuming that neither Bobby nor Rex will be up for a while. They both tied one on pretty good last night."

He guffawed in almost a proud tone.

"So, would you like to help me with a few more errands and chores? I will gladly pay you. Between Rex's schedule and my arthritis, not much cleaning gets done around here."

"Yeah, of course," I said, never one to turn my nose up at a chance to earn money. "So, I assume that Rex and Bobby are good friends?"

"I wouldn't say they're friends. They're on the force together. Rex is Bobby's direct supervisor. He helped Bobby get into the police academy."

"Did Bobby and Rex grow up together? You live down the street from each other."

"No, that was Bobby's father's place. He died… oh, I guess it was about two years ago now. Bobby moved in there with his son to help him take care of his father, Victor, who was suffering from throat cancer. It was horrible for all of them. Victor was in a lot of pain towards the end."

I had no idea that Bobby had a son. I wanted to ask Pops about him, but then he would clearly know that I was in no relation to Bobby. I guess I would have to wait to find out everything.

"So, clearly, you are not Victor's daughter?" Pops asked.

"No. Bobby and I share a mother. I met Victor once, but only very briefly."

I hated lying. Normally, I was quite bad at it, but it seemed that it was coming more naturally to me.

Pops stayed at Rex's and watched TV for a couple of hours while I cleaned the kitchen and living room. It didn't look half-bad by the time I was finished. Then, Pops and I went back over to his place, and I finished the cleaning job I had started the night before.

Just as I was finishing up, Pops shouted over to me, "Hey, Dia, your brother's outside, getting his mail. If you hurry, you can catch him."

I grabbed my backpack and ran out of the house and down the block. Bobby saw me coming and stood frozen. He looked angry.

"Did the therapist call you?" he asked.

I stopped in my tracks. "What? No."

"Why are you here?"

"Because I need your help, and you owe me."

"Shit. Get inside. I don't want anyone to see you."

He pulled me by my arm up the stairs of his porch and into his house. His place looked even worse on the inside than it did on the outside.

"You need to go away. Now," he said.

"I will, but I need you to do something for me. I need a fake passport."

"I can't get that for you. That's impossible."

"I have money. Just point me in the right direction, and..."

He interrupted me. "I was just put on a two-week suspension because of you."

"What the hell did I do?!"

"I told the therapist—the psychiatrist—all about you, and she had to report it to my superiors."

"Who? Rex? I'll go across the street and talk to him about it."

"Don't you fucking dare! Are you fucking insane? Right now, I'm on paid leave. If you go over there, I'll be fired."

He was talking so emphatically that he was practically spitting.

"I just came from there. I spent the night on Rex's couch." I took a deep breath. "What did you do?"

"I told the therapist and the captain everything. I told them how I kidnapped you and how I wanted to hurt you."

"That was stupid. Why did you say anything?!" I took a moment to calm down and continued, "Yeah, you may have wanted to, but you never did. You're a complete asshole, but you never hurt me."

He sat down on his couch, looking dejected.

"Look, Bunny, I don't know if I would have hurt you. Maybe if I had the chance then, I would have. To be honest, I'm not 100% sure that I'm sane. I feel suicidal all the time. My life is a mess.

"The summer in Italy was amazing, but I came back to all the same problems, and I am just completely overwhelmed. Both of my parents are dead. My son is being raised by his mother—I hardly ever see him. And my brother is in an institution.

"It's bad. Maybe I would be better off dead."

I just stared at him with a look of disgust.

"Seriously? You think your life is bad? I'm looking to get a fake passport with a new name so I can get away from my abusive parents and my crappy life. And I'm 16, motherfucker. Wanna try walking in my shoes? You have a job and a roof over your head, as repulsive as it is," I said as I paused to look around.

I continued, "We need to help each other out, okay? Believe it or not, we need each other right now. You need me to vouch for you, and I need you to get me that fake ID."

Bobby stared at the floor without saying a word. He slowly nodded his head in agreement.

I said, "I'll go down to the station tomorrow and talk to the therapist. What's his name?"

"Her name. Willoughby," he replied.

"Okay, good. And, if I fix things on your end, will you come through for me?" I asked.

He slowly nodded his head in the affirmative again.

"Good. Now, I need to crash here for a few days until you can get me that fake passport. Do you hear me?"

"Fine," he said quietly.

I walked back down to Pops' place, thanked him for his help, and got my bag. As soon as I got back to Bobby's, I crashed on his couch and fell asleep immediately. As disgusting as his place was, I slept remarkably well on that sofa.

The next morning, I showered, dressed, and went down to the station first thing. Arriving about 40 minutes later, I walked in and saw Rex behind the front counter.

"Hey, remember me? You look kind of handsome today!"

He was busy writing something but gave a small smile. "It's the uniform," he mumbled without looking up.

"Oh, Lord, yes, I know. Without it, you're hideous," I said, hoping to incite another smile. I got a smirk. Good enough.

I continued, "Hey, I'm here to see a Dr. Willoughby."

"She's not available," he said.

"Do you mean now or, like, ever?"

"She's not available to speak to the public."

I frowned. "If I gave you a note, would you give it to her right away? It's really important."

He looked at me in a manner that let me know my presence was thoroughly irritating him.

"Fine. But do it quickly. I'm about to go on break."

On a piece of paper, I wrote, *I'm the girl that Bobby Garza kidnapped.*

I folded it and handed it to Rex. I was kind of excited to see how fast she would come to the lobby to see me.

Within one minute, Dr. Willoughby was standing in front of me. She was a young woman with bright red hair, and she truly didn't look much older than me. The cops here must have loved being sent to talk to this therapist. I probably wasn't a lesbian, but she was hot.

"We'd love to chat with you. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure," I said, not knowing exactly who "we" was supposed to be.

I followed Dr. Willoughby into a beautiful office on the second floor. It was large and had a glass wall on one side. She stood behind the desk but never sat down. She instead leaned up against the credenza behind her and motioned for me to take a chair in front of the desk.

An incredibly handsome man in his early 40s walked in and immediately went over to shut the blinds on the windows facing the rest of the office. When he was done, he came around the desk and sat down in the chair.

"I'm James Dennehy, the captain here. And you are… Bunny? Is that correct?"

I stared at them both for a moment and said, "You two are ridiculously attractive. Do you know that?"

They both smiled and looked down.

"Look, if you're only hiring good-looking, sexy people, you should probably let Rex go."

They both let out a tiny chuckle.

I continued, "My nickname's Bunny, but you can call me Dia. I heard that Bobby is in trouble because of me. I'm here to see if I can help fix that."

The handsome Captain Dennehy said, "Well, I must admit that the timing of this is a bit suspect. Bobby was just put on administrative leave several days ago, and then you show up. Sounds like he orchestrated your visit today. How are we to know you are who you say you are?"

"Well, I can tell you what happened, and then you can judge for yourselves. Deal?"

"Would you mind if we recorded this, so I don't have to take notes?" Dr. Willoughby asked.

"Knock yourself out," I replied unenthusiastically.

I took a deep breath and then told them the entire story, from me at camp, sitting down next to Bobby at that pavilion, right up to the point where he dropped me off at my parents' home in California two months later. I didn't lie or exaggerate. I told them exactly how it was, exactly what happened.

Captain Dennehy seemed engrossed and stared right at me the entire time I spoke. When I was done, he turned his chair, sat way back in it, and rubbed his chin.

"Well, what do you think, Doc?" the captain asked Dr. Willoughby.

"It sounds close to identical to what Officer Garza told me."

"I haven't seen Bobby in years. Here, look."

I pulled out of my backpack the seat assignment from my plane ticket from two days prior and slid it across the desk toward Captain Dennehy.

"I just got into town. Bobby and I didn't have time to coordinate our stories. And let's face it—Bobby's not the sharpest knife in the drawer. There is no way he would be able to memorize all the details that perfectly."

They were both very quiet for a while.

I broke the silence by asking, "What does this mean for him?"

Dr. Willoughby spoke up. "We are trying to establish if Officer Garza was suffering from some psychosis. His father had mental issues, and he himself has had some trouble in the past, but he's been very good about taking his medication on a regular basis. When he told me this story last week, I thought he was entering into a fugue state."

"Look, you all clearly know how to do your jobs. And I don't profess to know Bobby that well, at all. But what I do know is that Bobby seems to do better with consistency in his life.

"Right now, you've taken his job away from him, something he clearly loves very much. And he's scared to death, trying to figure out if he will even have a position to go back to after this 'leave.' If he is let go, that will affect his ability

to live, his ability to pay his child support, and his ability to get the help, meds, and therapy he desperately needs.

"He has reached out to me multiple times, trying to make amends. Have I forgiven him? Hell, no. But I do recognize that he is trying, and for that, I have to commend him. He's a piece of shit, but he's trying not to be."

They both looked at me, not saying anything.

"Please, just give him his job back. He can't become a better person without it, and if he doesn't, I won't be able to forgive him. And I need to forgive him. I don't want to carry around this anger with me forever. That would suck. It would only hurt me. Not him."

The two of them sat quietly for a few seconds, not saying anything. Suddenly, the handsome captain spoke.

"Okay. Thank you for coming in. Let us talk, and we'll get back to you. Do you have a local number in case we need to reach you again?"

"Actually, I don't," I said. "The place I'm staying at doesn't have a phone. But I am helping Rex's father out. I'm stopping by his house each day to check on him and make him meals."

That wasn't a total lie.

"So, if you need to get in touch with me, tell Rex to let his father know, and I will get in touch with you as soon as I can."

"Okay. Will do. Thanks for stopping in," Captain Dennehy said.

"My Lord, that is one good-looking man," I said to myself as I got up and started walking out of his office. He had a full head of gray hair, but his eyes were a beautiful shade of blue, and his body was rocking. But aside from Dr. Willoughby, I didn't see any females walking around the office. What a waste.

I walked down to the subway and got on the first train back to Brooklyn. Before I had even knocked on his door, Bobby had already heard back from Captain Dennehy, saying that they were going to accept him back the next day on a probationary basis.

Bobby was thrilled. I realized that was the first time I had actually seen him smile. In all honesty, it looked a bit creepy.

"Great! You got what you wanted. Now, I need that passport."

"Okay. Okay."

I pulled out an envelope from my backpack. "Inside you will find a sheet of paper, some money, and some passport photos. This is exactly what I want it to say on my passport."

"I can't ask for specifics. You get what you get."

"Okay, fine. Then I'll just have no choice but to go back and talk to your hot supervisor and…"

"Okay! I'll see what I can do."

He read the list out loud. "You want your new name to be Diarah Theresa Jamesson."

He looked up at me. "Your new name looks like you misspelled 'diarrhea.'"

"Up yours, Bobby."

He continued, "You want your birthday to be October 31st…wait, this will make you 21 years old. You will never pass for that."

"It's what I want, Bobby. Just do it."

He said nothing else.

"The instant you get me my passport is the same instant I can move off of your couch and find a place of my own."

He grabbed his coat and headed out the door.

Had I been a betting woman, I would have guessed he was going to return shortly, within an hour. It didn't take an hour—it took three, so I was wrong—but I was thrilled with the results. It was fucking perfect.

"I could hug you, Bobby. Thank you. Do me a favor—start calling me Dia. No more Bunny. No more Dolores."

"Dolores? Dolores?!" The motherfucker was laughing at me. "Seriously, your name is Dolores?"

"Shut up, Bobby. It was Dolores. But Dolores is now officially dead, never to be heard from again. So, it doesn't matter what my name was."

He stared at me, not saying anything, trying not to laugh. I dropped my attitude and spoke to him a bit more calmly.

"Hey, it's getting late, and I know you have work tomorrow, thanks to me. So, how about I take you out for a quick bite? You in the mood for a steak?"

And, just like that, Bobby and I became friends. We didn't become friends because we were attracted to each other or enjoyed each other's company. We were friends out of sheer necessity. And that was okay.

After we were done eating, Bobby started heading back toward his house. I started to walk the opposite way.

"Hey, you don't need a place to crash tonight?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm gonna try this puppy out," I replied, holding up my new passport.

"Okay. Well, let me know if you need anything," he said, and I believed he meant it.

I walked down the street to one of the nicer hotels in that area of Brooklyn. I entered the lobby and asked for a room. I didn't have any clothes with me as my bag was still at Bobby's place, but I didn't care. I had to pay in advance, as I didn't have a credit card, something I was going to work on next. But I ordered a pizza and ate it on the bed while watching TV, which reminded me of my time with Michael in San Gimignano.

I hadn't thought of him much since I left Italy. Every time I did think of him, every time I started to get upset by the situation, I told myself repeatedly that it was not going to take me months to get over losing him.

No. I didn't need him. I didn't need him. I thought I did, but I didn't. I was going to be just fine on my own.

I took a long, hot bath in the tub and slept in the comfy white robe that

was provided. I slept better that night than I had in a very long time.

The next day, I found an "apartment" for myself, almost immediately. I had a method to my madness, and it was a good one.

I took out Louie's business card, the one he had given me two years prior in that café in San Gimignano and tried to locate his office building first. Then, from there, I looked for the cheapest place I could find that was within walking distance.

I found an ad for a room for rent in a boarding residence (females only) that was something I thought I could afford. It turned out to be a group of rooms above a shelter. Those accommodations had their own private entrance, and there was a gate at the bottom of the stairwell as well as at the top to ensure that no homeless people could sneak up.

A girl named Candy showed me the available room. It was the size of a large closet and had just enough space for a single bed and possibly a small dresser. It was the most expensive room as it had its own private toilet and tiny sink. However, I would still have to share the shower down the hall with the other ladies.

I was thrilled to see that it already had a bed in it. All the units on that floor were about the same size, and many of the girls got creative in finding new ways to store their items. Oddly enough, all the rooms, including mine, had no door, only a gate, which discouraged any drug use, visitors, or illicit activities.

I looked at Candy and said, "I'll take it! Can I move in today?"

She handed me the rental agreement and a pen. "You can go ahead and sit in your room to fill this out. You can use the heating register as a desk. That's what a lot of us do."

She was correct. Even though I was fairly short, if I reached over just enough, I could sit and write at the same time.

I attempted to give the rental agreement back to her, and she said, "Hold on to it. Just return it with the first and last months' rent and deposit, and I'll give you your keys."

"Great! I'll be back in 10 minutes."

I wasn't about to let her know that I already had that kind of money on me, so I left and went down the street. I walked into the first bank I saw, went over to the standing desk, and carefully slid $600.00 out of the seam of the backpack. I stuck the money in the front pocket of my pants and headed back. Hopefully, that would be enough to convince the ladies I was going to live with that I didn't always have thousands of dollars in cash on me.

Once I had my keys, I took the subway back to Bobby's to retrieve my bag. Then, I stopped off at Pops' house, hoping to tell him that I found a place, but he was down at the pub. Instead, I saw Rex and let him know. He told me that it wasn't the safest place and that I needed to watch my back while living there. I was appreciative of the advice, but I didn't need to hear that. I was pretty good at freaking myself out all on my own.

On my way back to my new "home," I stopped off at Woolworths to purchase new bedding. I felt like such an adult.

The next morning, I got up and went up to the 47th floor of the Pan Am Building to see if I could find my good friend, Louie. I got his card out of my backpack and looked at it again, realizing that I didn't remember what his last name was. Muehlmeier. Louis Muehlmeier.

Geez, it's no wonder I couldn't remember.

The receptionist was a beautiful, well-coiffed woman just a few years older than me. I walked up to her desk and asked to speak to Louie. She looked at me incredulously.

I showed her the card and said, "I'd like to see Louie, please," again, thinking she was daft. She was gorgeous, but she clearly didn't understand what I was asking.

She looked indignant and gave me a firm, "No. You are not welcome here, young lady," and asked me to leave.

At that moment, I could see Louie walking down the hall behind her.

"Louie! Hey, Louie!" I called out loudly and unprofessionally. I was waving frantically so he would see me.

Louie squinted his eyes and looked over, initially not knowing who was calling his name. A look of recognition came across his face, and he smiled.

"Is that my good friend Bunny coming to visit me?"

"Yeah, I was trying to, but your robot won't let me in." I gestured towards the receptionist.

When he got close enough to me, I mumbled out of the corner of my mouth, "She looks like a Stepford wife."

He let out a big laugh.

"Come on, Bunny. Hop this way," he said, and I followed him down the hall, but not before I stuck my tongue out at the gorgeous receptionist.

Louie had the most amazing voice. It was not what you would picture a CEO of a big company to have. Instead, it was kind of geeky and squeaky, but I loved it. He made me feel right at home immediately.

We got to his office, a large, beautiful space with two walls of windows. I went over and pushed my hands and face against one of the glass panels, trying to see if I could see all the way down to the street.

"The cleaning people aren't going to be pleased tonight wiping off all of those fingerprints."

"Oops. Sorry!" I said and tried to rub the streaks off the glass with my shirt sleeve.

"Don't do that!" he yelled, scolding me while laughing.

Man, I liked him instantly. Why was I such a jerk to him in Italy? He was incredibly cool.

"So," he said, sitting down behind his big desk, motioning for me to grab a chair near him, "how's Michael?"

"Non-existent."

Louie looked at me with an overexaggerated frown. "Ouch."

I growled softly, "I'll tell you later if you're interested."

Changing topics quickly, Louie asked, "Okay, so how about ciphers? Are you still interested in those, or are they non-existent, too?"

"Oh, you're hilarious," I said with no affect. "Yeah, sure, I still like ciphers. Why? Do you have any you'd like me to look at?"

He searched his desk and picked up a sheet of paper to his left.

As he pushed it across his desk towards me, he said, "This one. This one has been giving us a good deal of trouble. Would you like to take a crack at it?"

"Is this, like, my job interview?"

"Let's say yes, it is."

"Alright. I'll give it a go."

Louie gestured for me to sit at the conference table that was off to one side of his office. But without thinking, I grabbed the armrests of the chair I was sitting in and pulled them towards the edge of his desk to use it as my writing surface. As I did so, I scraped the legs of the chair against the beautiful marble floor beneath me, and I could see Louie cringe.

"Sorry. You can take that out of my first paycheck."

Still smiling, Louie closed his eyes and shook his head in exasperation. For an instant, I thought he looked a lot like Papà. Papà made that expression a lot when I was around.

Six minutes later, I was handing him the sheet with the cipher decoded.

"How on earth can you do that?" he said, laughing.

"Michael told you that I have a pretty serious brain injury. It's true. I couldn't do things like this before the accident, but ever since I got whapped in the head, these just make sense to me. My sense of smell is all but gone, and some noises can make me dizzy and pass out for no reason, but ciphers? Ciphers are my friends."

I looked at him. "Plus, let's be honest—ciphers are far more interesting than most people."

He smiled. "Do you know that four of us have been working on that for two days, and it took you, what, 10 minutes to figure it out?"

"Six. Six minutes, Louie," I said smugly.

"Okay. You got the job. We'll start you part-time at $10.00 an hour. When can you start?"

My Lord, 10 dollars an hour was a lot of money.

"Tomorrow. But I want to work full-time," I said.

"Nope. Not possible. You need to start your college classes ASAP. How old are you again?"

"I'm 21."

He laughed. "No, you're not 21! I thought your friend in Italy told me that you were 14. That would make you, what, 17?"

"If you must know the truth, I was 16 yesterday, but I got a new passport. So, I'm 21 today."

"Let me see it."

I handed him my passport. "Is this your real name?"

I looked at him with big eyes and said nothing.

"I don't want to know any more."

"Okay. That's probably a good idea."

"Be here tomorrow at 9:00. And please dress much better than what you're wearing now. Do you need me to front you some money so you can get yourself some clothing?"

"Nah, I got it. But thank you."

I walked out of his office feeling as if I had just made my first real friend in the city.

As I headed to the elevator, I stopped a man in the hallway and asked if there was a mailbox nearby. He pointed to a large slot on the wall. I walked over to one of the big chairs in the lobby area, opened my backpack, and pulled out a letter I had written to Michael on the plane.

I didn't really understand what happened between us, and I probably never would, but I wanted my chance to say goodbye to him, even if it was just on paper. I was so incredibly mad and sad. I felt like I had a hundred different emotions all the time regarding him and the Aceti family.

I had just enough stamps on me to mail that letter. I dropped it in the slot and heard it slide down, on its way to the mailroom about 50 floors below. And with that, I had hoped that it had closed the chapter on my time with Michael. But, of course, that didn't happen.

Each week, every Friday, I would drop a letter to him in that same slot. None of those letters were particularly interesting. It was mostly just small things that happened to me during that week. I was pretty much all alone in that big city, and writing to Michael made me feel safe, like someone out there cared. He probably didn't, but I pretended he did and wrote them more for me than for him. No one knew me as "Bunny" in the city, and it gave me a small amount of comfort to sign my name as her once a week. It was crazy, but I felt like he could feel me thinking of him every time that letter was sent off, and that gave me a bit of happiness.

A week after I had started my job with Louie, his assistant, Mr. Jarvis, asked me to meet him for lunch. I went to his office, and it turned out that he didn't truly want to meet me for lunch at all. He, instead, wanted me to take off early and go down to the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

He told me that Louie thought it would be a good choice for my first year of college, and he wanted me to check out the campus and meet with a representative from admissions. Louie said that the position I held required at least a bachelor's degree. At that moment, I was 21 years old, for all intents and purposes, yet I didn't even have my high school diploma. That was

unacceptable. If I were going to stay working for Muehlmeier, I had to at least be pursuing my degree.

I visited BMCC's campus and spoke with an admissions representative. He was a nice guy and gave me a ton of information about their various programs. I saw that their Modern Languages department had a specialization in Italian. That was it—that was what I was going to study.

I didn't speak much Italian in the 11 summers I spent with the Aceti family, but I had to have picked up at least a little bit here and there. Plus, I was secretly hoping to learn enough Italian to be able to yell at Michael in his native language if I ever got the opportunity to see him again. I was going to make it a personal goal.

There were placement tests that I had to take, as I did not have my high school diploma in hand. Oddly enough, I scored quite high on all of them and did not have to take any remedial courses. An English 100 course was available during the summer session. I had already missed the first class, but the instructor said she would still let me enroll, so I did.

I nearly passed out when I saw how much the seven books for the course would cost. The class was only seven weeks long, for Christ's sake. But Louie kept the promise that he gave to me in San Gimignano and paid for college, books and all.

I wasn't looking forward to that first English class, but I actually liked it. It was remarkably different from high school, and I shocked myself by truly looking forward to the reading for the class each week. As I had no life outside of school and working for Louie, I dove into the assignments headfirst and probably spent more time on them than any of my peers.

On the last night of class, the instructor excused us early. The classroom was on the sixth floor, and once we were dismissed, I followed my classmates to the elevator to go down to street level. The elevator was full, but we stopped on the third floor to let on even more people.

And that's when I heard it. Music. Sweet, glorious music. Oh, it was being played truly horribly, but I was so, so happy to hear people practicing.

I pushed my way out of the elevator and slowly walked down the hall, peaking my head into each room. In one, I saw a classroom with a drum set up at the front. Five men were sitting in various seats scattered around the room. I took a chair at the very back, next to a man whom I could only describe as *fabulous!* And he was. From his pink hair to his rainbow-striped leg warmers, he was a sight to behold.

"Hey, what's going on here?" I whispered to him. He gave me a look like I wasn't worthy enough to talk to him.

"We're auditioning for a drummer for our band," he whispered back.

"If you ask me nicely, I'll be your drummer," I said with a smile.

He looked me up and down and scoffed audibly.

"Can I try out?" I asked.

"Nope," he said, standing up. "You weren't on the sign-up sheet."

"Uh, yes, I was," I stated in a very matter-of-fact tone. "Let me see the list."

He looked around the room, spotted it, and brought it over to me. I quickly scribbled a very large "DJ" at the bottom of the page. I was trying out new nicknames and had always wanted to be called DJ for some reason. It just sounded cool.

"Seeeeee," I whispered in a snarky tone.

"You're an ass," he replied without smiling.

"And I think you're positively amazing!" I said sincerely, with a smile.

Again, he looked disgusted and rolled his eyes.

"Fine. You can go after this monstrosity."

He pointed at the young kid at the drum kit who was desperately trying to find the beat. He finished his song, and there was a faint, half-hearted round of applause from the room. I dug into my backpack, found the drumming gloves that Michael made for me, and put them on.

It was my turn. I got up, walked over, and sat down at the kit. I had to quickly reconfigure the setup to accommodate for the lack of drumsticks.

There were only three people left in the room, all boys. The *fabulous* man spoke and pointed at himself and his friends, "I'm Duncan. This is John, and he's Jahmir."

"Hey," Jahmir said unenthusiastically and barely audibly.

"What the hell is on your hands?" John asked me.

"Let's just say I have a special technique."

"Look—," John began curtly, but Duncan cut him off.

"Let's just give her a shot, okay? We've got nothing to lose at this point. Everyone today was garbage, right?"

He turned to me. "Alright, sister, show us what you got. What are you going to play for us?"

"What do you want to hear?" I asked. The three boys looked at each other incredulously.

"Don't waste our time, bitch. What are you gonna play?" John was getting impatient.

"I'm not wasting your time, *bitch*. What do you want me to play?"

I never learned to read music very well, but I was fairly good at playing by ear and could mimic.

John walked over to the boombox on the far side of the room. He had a tape already in it, and it started in the middle of a song. It was "Roundabout" by Yes. It was one of my all-time favorite songs, and I felt as if the gods of music intervened on my behalf at that moment.

It wasn't easy to play, not at all, but I probably spent a week with Michael trying to learn it. I practiced it repeatedly, enough to make Papà leave one night and go out to see a movie so he didn't have to listen to me play anymore. I was so happy that this was the song that they chose.

I looked down and pursed my lips so as not to smile. I waited a few bars and then jumped in. John and Jahmir stood and watched me, completely expressionless. My boy Duncan, however, could not contain his enthusiasm.

I stopped playing after about two minutes, even though the song had not ended. I heard clapping, and it was coming from the hallway.

I gave a small chuckle. "Well…?"

"We'll have to think about it and get back to you," John said.

"Fine. If you don't want me, I'll find another—."

John cut me off.

"Look, chica, we're dead serious about this band. This is not fun time, and this is not a hobby for us. We're looking to make real music, not have to deal with your drama."

I looked at him dead in the eye. "Dude, I wish I *had* drama. I'm 21 years old. I work part-time at Muehlmeier and attend school full-time. I live above the shelter four blocks over. I have no boyfriend. Hell, I have no friends."

I looked at each one of them. "I'll make you a deal. Let me practice with you for two weeks. If I don't sound as good or work as hard as the drummer of your band should, I'll bow out. Okay? I mean it. I want this."

I really had no idea why I wanted it so badly. Yes, the idea of being in a band sounded like fun, but it wasn't a burning desire I always had. Maybe it was because of how much these three boys were discounting me. It made me mad. I felt as if I had something to prove. And, truthfully, I was sick of rejection.

John spoke up. "Two weeks. If we ask you to leave after two weeks, you leave without incident. Got it?"

"Yup, got it." I nodded my head in agreement.

"We practice every night from 9:00 to midnight."

I immediately thought about how difficult it would be to try to get upstairs to my rented room each night, walking through a large group of homeless men that would congregate outside of the shelter.

"Yes, I will see you tonight. Where?"

"Here. Dwayne is the night security guard at the main door. Just knock and tell him that you're practicing with us. He'll let you in. What is your name, anyway?"

"DJ," I said. "Thanks, boys. See you tonight."

I grabbed my backpack and left before they could change their minds.

That night, I showed up 30 minutes early with fried chicken and a dozen donuts. Turns out, the boys were as poor and pathetic as I was. None of them had any money, and Duncan had been living on the streets ever since his parents found out that he was gay. I wish I could have had him live with me, but it was an all-girls boarding residence. There was just no way.

I had more fun that night practicing with the band than I had had in a year, and I kept up with them just fine. But I found myself missing Michael so much with each song we practiced. I remembered how talented he was, as he was

adept at all the instruments just as much as any of the boys. But it made me mad that he was in my head.

John, who played lead guitar, wrote most of the band's music. Duncan played the bass, and Jahmir vacillated between backup guitar and keyboards. But everyone could play at least one additional instrument, as well. And some nights, we would switch, just to get out of our comfort zones for a bit.

Two weeks later, I didn't even have to ask the boys if I was in the band. After practice, we all sat down together, and John said, "Okay, everyone. Now that we're a band, we need to come up with an official name."

Yay, I was in the band! I tried to look cool and not too excited, but inside, I was dancing.

He continued, "We need to come up with a name that says something about all of us."

"We're all incredibly sexy, and we're all poor," Jahmir said, trying to be funny. None of us laughed. "We all like Lord of the Rings."

"Sorry, no. No, we don't," I quickly replied. Jahmir looked dejected. "Sorry," I whispered softly.

We all stopped to think. Duncan said, "High school. We were all in concert band, right? Wait, I don't think any of us went to the prom."

"What? None of us?" I looked around at the boys.

Duncan raised his hand and sang, "Gaaay! Plus, let's face it—they wouldn't have let me in with the dress I wanted to wear."

Jahmir raised his hand. "State track tournament."

Then John raised his hand. "No date—my girlfriend found out that I had slept with her sister the night before."

I raised my hand and mumbled, "Dropped out of high school."

We all looked around at each other, kind of sad. "We could call ourselves The Losers," Jahmir said solemnly.

"What about The Prom?" I offered.

"That's seriously stupid," John said.

Jahmir quickly responded, "No, think about it. We could represent all the losers who didn't go to the prom. We could be the prom for all of them."

"We could be the prom for all the gays who couldn't go, or who went with some girl they didn't want to go with," Duncan said.

"The Prom?" John asked.

"Yeah, we're The Prom." Duncan asked, "All in favor?"

Everyone raised their hand. Amazing. We were The Prom, and I could already see our name in lights.

I got up and said enthusiastically, "Come on! Let's go get breakfast. My treat. I want to celebrate being part of the best band ever—a band that will take over the world!" I made jazz hands.

"Easy there, Deej. Let's see if we can first get some kind of gig," John said and tousled my hair.

It was 2:00 in the morning by the time the four of us were done eating, and Duncan and I didn't have much interest in walking back to our respective shelters. We were strolling aimlessly through the city, enjoying the quiet of the usually hectic streets.

I stopped suddenly, grabbed his arm, and looked at him.

"Hey, I want to get a tattoo! Do you know of a good place?"

"You do? Really? Now, huh? Okay, I do know of a good place, but they are probably closed," he said.

"Can you take me there? Please?" I pleaded.

We walked six blocks over to a tiny place off Broadway. It was down on the basement level with an electronics store above it. It was called The Body is a Temple.

"The Body is a Temple? Really?" I asked Duncan as we walked up to the shop.

"Hey, bitch, how many tattoos do you have? How many do I have? I rest my case," he replied smugly.

The neon "open" sign had been turned off, but the lights inside were on, and someone was walking around. Duncan walked partway down the stairs and knocked on the window. He waved and pointed at the door, asking to be let in.

"Duncan, I'm not doing any more work on you. You still owe me for last time," said the scary-looking gentleman from behind the locked door.

Duncan was about to start arguing with him when I pushed in front of him on the stairs and pleaded, "I will pay you what Duncan owes you if you can do a small tattoo for me right now. Please, I need to do it now before I chicken out."

"He owes me almost $200."

"Deal. I'll pay it. I have cash. I have just enough."

That wasn't true. I had thousands of dollars on me, sewn into that backpack. I just didn't want this guy to rip me off.

He stared at me for a moment and said, "Fine. You have 30 minutes of my time. No more."

He unlocked and held the door open for Duncan and me and then locked it behind us after we entered.

He turned to me and held out his hand. "Jeremy. And you are?"

"I'm DJ. Hey, can I use the bathroom real quick before we get started?" I asked.

He pointed to a door at the back of the parlor. I walked into the bathroom, put my backpack on the sink, and carefully ripped the lining. I pulled out $300, hoping that would be enough for everything. I held onto the $200 and pushed the other $100 into my front pocket. I also pulled out my notebook and opened it up to the page of doodles I had drawn. Then, I flushed the toilet, washed my hands to keep up appearances, and went back out into the studio.

"Here you go, Jeremy," I said, handing him the money.

He counted it slowly. When he was satisfied, he looked at Duncan. "It must be nice to have a girlfriend to pay your debts for you."

Duncan and I looked at each other and snickered.

I handed Jeremy my notebook. "This is what I want drawn around my ring finger."

"All in black, or do you want the letters to stand out?"

"All in black, please. I want it to be almost difficult for someone to make out the letters, almost as if they're hidden within the ivy."

"Got it. Look, before we get started, you need to know that finger tattoos hurt to get done. There's not a lot of fat or muscle there. And fingers contain a ton of nerves. I'm not trying to talk you out of it. I just want you to know what to expect in the next few minutes," he said.

"Thanks, Jeremy. I appreciate the heads-up."

And with that, he started working.

Holy God, it was unbelievably painful. I thought I had built up my tolerance for pain after all those surgeries and therapies after my attack six years prior. But, no—this hurt like hell. Luckily for me, Jeremy was nothing but a professional. He worked fast, and the image on my hand looked identical to the one I drew in my book.

"Thank you. It's perfect," I whispered.

I shook my hand several times to try to get the blood back in it.

"Careful! Just let your hand rest," he said. "You know, people are going to assume it's a wedding band. A lot of couples are opting to get tattoos instead of purchasing rings."

"That's okay. It *is* sort of a wedding band," I replied, still admiring the perfect job that Jeremy did.

Duncan asked to see my hand.

"I wanna see this hidden message. Bass… Bass-tee-an. Bass-the-un. I don't get it."

"It's an acronym," I replied.

"For what?" Duncan asked.

"Oh, that's a story for another day, my friend," I said.

I then turned to Jeremy. "Thank you so much. It really is perfect. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I'm glad you like it. Now get out of my shop," he said with a smile.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"You're both paid in full," Jeremy replied as he unlocked the door to the shop. Duncan and I stepped outside and walked up the steps. The door locked behind us, and the lights turned off.

"Thanks, Duncan."

"For what?" he asked. "If anything, I should be thanking you. I've owed him money forever."

"Thank you for taking me here to get my beautiful tattoo, thank you for helping me get into the band, and thank you for being my friend."

Everything was slowly starting to fall into place, and I realized that the universe would provide me with all the love, friendship, and support I needed.

16 CHAPTER SIXTEEN: 1985, DIARAH AT 22 (DAMAGED PEOPLE)

My daily routine for that entire year was the same.

I would wake up at 7:00 to be at work by 8:30, at the office from 8:30 to 12:30, then leave for school (eat lunch on the way), classes from 2:00 to 7:00, dinner, study/homework, band rehearsal 9:00 to midnight, sneak into boarding house around 12:30 a.m. so as not to wake up anyone, shower, to bed by 1:00.

Oddly enough, the weekend schedule was just as busy. I was on call to work Saturdays from 8:30 to 12:30, and the band still practiced, even on weekends. So, instead of my college classes, I would take the subway out to Brooklyn and spend that time with Pops. I would do his weekly shopping for him and clean his place on Saturdays. On Sundays, I would take him to church, and he would take me out to my favorite soda fountain for lunch, where we would usually order tuna melts and egg creams.

One weekend, Bobby asked me to watch his son, Dominic, at the same time I usually spent with Pops, and the three of us had such a lovely time together that Dominic wanted to spend every weekend with us thereafter. Nicky, as I called him, had some learning delays, but you couldn't find a nicer, sweeter kid. I loved every moment I spent with him, and Pops enjoyed his company as much as I did. In reality, Nicky was only four years younger than me, but I felt very protective of him.

I didn't interact much with Bobby during this period. However, this wasn't a bad thing. I just really didn't have any reason to see him. After the first few times I retrieved Nicky from Bobby's house, Nicky just wanted to walk down to Pops' house on his own each Saturday and meet me there. He certainly was old enough and mature enough to do so. And, once that happened, weeks would go by without me laying eyes on Bobby.

However, just a few months later, that changed drastically.

One weekend that following spring, I arrived at Pops' place at our usual meeting time, and Nicky wasn't waiting for me out front, nor was Pops sitting in his rocking chair on the porch. This was alarming to me, as we three were like clockwork. I knocked on Pops' door, and there was no answer, so I quickly

jogged down to Bobby's home to see if everything was okay. It wasn't.

Bobby told me that Nicky wasn't coming to visit that weekend but that he and I needed to sit down and talk right away. He asked me to lunch, which bothered me immediately, as we were quite good at avoiding each other for the most part.

I had all but forgiven him for "the incident," but it didn't mean that I made any kind of effort to spend time with him. Honestly, the last thing I wanted to do was have a meal with him. However, on that day, he looked quite upset, almost sickly, and his coloring was a chalky shade of gray.

We walked to the diner up the block, and Bobby immediately asked the hostess to sit in the far booth. As I slid into the seat across from him, I did not feel comfortable. It felt vaguely familiar to our time in the diner in the Death Valley desert, waiting for his truck to be repaired, and thinking of it made me a bit sick to my stomach.

Bobby didn't look at the menu. He just sat there, silent, looking like he was about to cry or get sick.

He didn't mince words. "Janine doesn't want to be responsible for Dominic anymore. She's giving me full custody."

"That's great!" I said, looking up from my menu.

He didn't look happy.

I closed my menu slowly. "Wait… Isn't that great? No?"

"Bunny, I…"

"Dia. Call me Dia," I demanded.

"Dia, I can't do it. I can barely take care of myself. Janine has a new boyfriend, and I get that she doesn't want to raise a kid anymore. I do get it. But I don't know how to do it. Overnight? Fine. But long-term? You see him, right? He needs a lot of attention."

"Bobby, what exactly do you want from me? I live in a shelter, for God's sake. I work and go to school. What exactly do you think I can do for you?"

"I can't do it on my own, Dia. If you can't help me, I think I'm going to have to…"

I growled, "Wait, Bobby. Wait. You've got to be kidding me. Don't say it. Don't you dare. What? Give him up for adoption? Put him in a home? Is that what you were going to say?"

He looked dejected. "I don't know what I was going to say."

He didn't look up from the table.

I felt absolutely repulsed by the whole situation. The child had two parents, but neither was mature enough to care for him. Unbelievable.

"I gotta go," I said, standing up as quickly as I could. I had to get out of there, as I felt I could have turned quite violent at a moment's notice. I stood over him while he sat motionless in the booth.

"Don't do anything until I get back to you."

He nodded his head gently in agreement.

I punched his shoulder, hard. "I mean it, Bobby. Don't fucking do anything until you hear from me. Got it?"

He looked up at me with tears in his eyes and nodded his head a bit more forcefully.

I quickly walked out of the diner and onto the street. Had I stayed any longer, I don't know what I would have done.

Shit. This was a disaster. What was I going to do? There was no way I was going to let Bobby give up custody of Nicky.

I had to get back to Pops. I clearly needed to talk to him.

Pops was the closest thing I had to a parent at that moment, and I trusted him. I couldn't say that about many people in my life. And he always tried to help me see my options to every situation. For an old guy, his perspective was usually dead-on.

Yes, I couldn't have Dominic with me at the shelter, but maybe Pops would let me rent a room from him that Nicky and I could share. I remember thinking to myself, "Yeah, that might work." He certainly had the space.

I walked up the street towards Pops' place, and as I was approaching the gate, I slowed to a stop. I saw him sitting in his chair on his porch, crying. It was a surreal scene.

Pops was certainly not one to cry. He hated showing any emotion, especially one that indicated weakness.

I ran up to him and knelt in front of him. "Pops, what is it? Is it Rex?"

He nodded his head vigorously. I got a pit in my stomach.

"What? Is he hurt? Is he dead?" I didn't want to know the answer.

Pops was still crying, but I could see he was not sad, just angry. "No, he's not hurt… yet."

I thought for a moment about what he just said. "What? Pops, I'm not understanding."

He looked up at me and screamed, "He lost our house! He lost *my* house!"

I really was not putting all the pieces together, but I was afraid that if I pressed him more, he would get really mad and upset, or worse. Pops stopped and took several large breaths, breathing in and out slowly.

"Two years ago, I put our house, this house, in his name so he wouldn't have to pay taxes on it when I died. What a mistake. I should have just had him pay the damn taxes. I knew he had a gambling problem, a bad one, but I never thought he would put our home up as collateral."

His rage turned into sadness, and he began to sob.

"I've lived in this house for 41 years. Mary and I brought him home from the hospital to this house. And it's gone. He gambled it away."

Pops looked at the ground and whispered softly, "Where am I going to go? I'm going to have to live in an old folks' home now. I don't have any other family to go to. Everyone's gone."

He looked up at me, but I didn't know what to say. I was stunned by how

weak and frail he looked in that moment.

What the hell was happening? How could everything be imploding all at once? Everything. Everyone I had come to rely on now needed help of their own. I had to do something. I had to go. I had to find help.

"Pops, I need to go talk to someone right now. Please stay here. Please don't go anywhere, and don't talk to Rex until I get back, okay? Please?"

"You have to go?! My goddamn life is falling apart, and you need to go meet someone else?" Pops yelled.

"No, Pops, please trust me. I'm going to go see if I can get some help. Please trust me. Please?"

He was furious that I was leaving, but I had to.

Shit, I wasn't even 17 yet. I thought leaving California meant it was time for me to work on myself. But I had learned very quickly I was not alone in needing help. I couldn't escape it. I realized that there would always be people hurting anywhere I went.

I ran down the street, towards the phone booth at the intersection near the subway station. I took off my backpack and grabbed my day planner. Somewhere in there was Louie's home number, to use only in case of emergency. I found it. I pushed my way into the phone booth, put my quarter into the slot on the phone, and started to dial.

Louie picked up on the first ring.

"Lou? Is this you?" I asked.

"Who is calling, please?" he asked.

"Louie, it's Diarah. I know this number is only for emergencies. I'm sorry. But I have a problem, kind of a big one, and I need your help. Please. If you help me this time, I promise it will not become a habit."

"You know that I don't believe that, right?" he said with a chuckle. "Okay, fine, I can give you exactly 15 minutes of my time. Where are you? I will send my car to get you."

"You could just tell me the address."

"No. No chance of that."

That was weird. He trusted me enough to work for him and to have his home phone number but not to know his home address.

"I'm at the west entrance to the High Street station in Brooklyn."

"Stay there. I will tell my driver to look for you. His name is Frank."

"Thank—…"

I never got the chance to thank him, as he hung up on me without saying goodbye.

Frank showed up about 20 minutes later. A black Lincoln pulled up next to me, and the front passenger-side window rolled down.

"You Diarah?"

"Yeah. Hi, Frank."

"Get in, young lady. I will take you to Mr. Muehlmeier."

We drove to an area of Manhattan I hadn't been to before, and the Town Car pulled into what looked to be a dead end. We stopped and sat for a moment. There was a wall at the end of the road that began to move, and I realized it was a camouflaged gate. It opened to one side, and the car slowly pulled in. The first gate shut behind us, but I saw there was another gate, just up ahead, with a guard station next to it.

Frank rolled down the window. "Hey, Ted. Visitor for Mr. Muehlmeier."

The gentleman nodded.

As the second gate opened, a small, rectangular neighborhood was revealed. There were 10 homes in total inside, and each was very large and quite beautiful. A one-way street looped in front of them with a tiny park in the middle, fit with benches and a playground set. There were gorgeous flowers everywhere, and the landscaping was immaculate. It was a hidden village, right in the heart of Manhattan, surrounded by stone walls. One could walk right past it on the outside and never know it was there. Amazing.

Frank drove halfway around the loop and pulled into the driveway of what looked to be the oldest and largest home there.

"Should I get out here?" I asked.

"No, please stay in the vehicle."

He clicked a button, and the garage door opened. We pulled in. It was not an ordinary one-car garage but a ramp leading under the house to a full parking area that spanned the entire footprint of the home. There were eight parking spaces in all, and five of the spaces were filled with possibly the most beautiful and well-maintained cars I had ever seen. Gorgeous. Just gorgeous.

Frank parked the car in one of the spots and came around to open my door. I got out and saw Louie standing at the opposite end of the garage, waiting for me.

I walked up to him and said dreamily, "I think you're Batman," with total sincerity.

With a smile, he held up one finger to his pursed lips.

He then motioned for me to follow him. We walked up the steps, through the kitchen (beautiful kitchen), and outside to the veranda (gorgeous veranda).

"Time is money, Bunny. What do you want?"

He spoke in a very matter-of-fact tone as he sat down in one of the plush chairs and picked up his cup of coffee. Steam was rising from it.

I took a deep breath and said the following as fast as I could.

"Bobby can't take care of Dominic and wants to give him up for adoption, and Rex gambled the house away, and Pops has nowhere to go and will probably have to live in a home for seniors, and Duncan is homeless and has been living on the streets for over a year, and I want to help them all but I don't make enough money to qualify to rent my own apartment here in the city, and I probably couldn't find a place here that would be big enough for the six of us because I'm assuming Bobby and Rex would need to live there, too."

I ran out of air at the end and just whispered the last few words. I then took several deep breaths in and out so I wouldn't pass out.

"And you would like money from me to get an apartment for your many, many friends?" he asked.

"No, I don't need any money from you. I actually still have the $3,000 you gave me at the café in Italy."

Louie raised his eyebrows in surprise.

I continued, "No, what I need is for you to help me get a place, sign the rental agreement with me. No one is going to rent to just me, Lou. I have a part-time job and am a full-time college student. To use your terminology, I'm a financial high risk."

He smiled. "And how are you going to pay for the rent for this apartment?"

"I will probably have to use some of my savings for the first couple of months. But I will help Pops get Social Security and Medicare and whatever other services he qualifies for. And I will ask Rex to contribute towards rent, too. I should be able to get some kind of money from Bobby for taking care of Dominic. He's only 13."

"Who is Dominic?" he asked.

"Bobby's son," I said.

"And who is Bobby?" he asked.

"Um, how much time do you have?"

"So, you want to find a place that can house five to six people, is that correct?" he asked.

I nodded my head in the affirmative.

"Would you be willing to live outside of the city?" he asked.

I pondered that thought for a moment.

"Yeah, of course. I never even considered that."

"I may have a place for you. Do you have time now to go look at it?"

"Hell, yeah!" I shouted.

Louie peered around me. "Frank, please take Diarah to go see the units in Tarrytown."

Frank replied, "Very good, sir."

As I followed Frank back to the garage, I turned around, looked at Louie, and mouthed "Thank you," and formed my hands into the shape of a heart.

It took us just over an hour to drive from the city to Tarrytown, and that was with traffic. I had never been to Tarrytown before, and it was adorable. I loved it immediately. The main street consisted of quaint little shops and restaurants. It still had the flavor of the city and plenty of amenities but on a much smaller scale.

We pulled over in front of a building that housed an insurance office and a dance studio. It was a beautiful red-brick, two-story structure with large, long windows and colonial-looking shutters.

Frank turned off the car and came around to meet me on the sidewalk. He

led me to the back of the building, where there was a large outdoor staircase with a deck at the top. We walked up, and at the top of the stairs, there was a door that led to a type of entry area, just a small room with a bench, maybe like a mudroom, to keep dirty shoes. There were two doors opposite each other, labeled "A" and "B."

Frank said, "Go ahead."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Both are vacant."

"NO!" I squealed joyfully.

I literally ran into Apartment B. It was perfect. It was a very small but very clean one-bedroom. The kitchen was tiny, but it would be big enough for Dominic, Duncan, and me. Dominic wouldn't have his own room, but I could section off a part of the living room that could be just for him.

I opened the door to Apartment B and saw Frank waiting.

"Can I go over there, too?" I asked, pointing at the door for Apartment A.

"Knock yourself out, kid," he said, unenthusiastically.

I ran over to the door to Apartment A and pushed it open. It was perfect, too. It was a two-bedroom unit, similar to but not exactly like Apartment B. I ran out to the lobby/mudroom.

"I. Fucking. Love. It!" I said to Frank, doing a little circular dance. "Does Louie know the owner?"

"He *is* the owner."

I put my chin down to my chest and did a little running dance.

"Yes! Yes! Oh, yes! Whoop!" I stopped my theatrics. "Do you think he would let us move in here tonight?"

"Tonight? I'm not sure. Give me a moment. I will call him from the car."

Frank walked down the stairs, and I ran back into Apartment B, lay on the floor, and rolled around on the older-but-still-in-decent-shape carpet. Oh, my Lord, it was like a dream come true. I was going to have a home, one where I felt safe and had control, one that was all mine, one where I didn't feel like I was a guest.

Frank came in and stood over me.

"I spoke with Mr. Muehlmeier. He said you and your quote gaggle of friends unquote could move in immediately. Here are the keys, madam."

I started to cry. I stood up and hugged Frank around his midsection.

"Thank you, Frank. Thank you so much."

He held his arms up over his head, not wanting to hug me back. "Would you like a ride back to the city to retrieve your things?"

His hands were still above his head, but he lowered them slowly to gently push me away from him.

I let him go and wiped my happy tears away.

"Yeah. Thank you. Let's go."

As I started to close the door behind me, I looked around once more and

whispered to myself, "I'm home!"

We all spent the following weekend moving our items in. Pops used the furniture from his place in Brooklyn for Apartment A, which he was going to share with Rex, and Rex let us use most of his furniture for Apartment B. Bobby offered, but we decided not to use any furniture from Victor's old house, as most of it was in terrible condition.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Victor's house had already been condemned and was going to be torn down. Bobby got a little bit of money from the borough for the land, but it wasn't much. Honestly, I think Bobby was just happy to be rid of it.

The set up for Apartment B meant that Duncan and I got the bedroom, and we fashioned a portion of the living room into a space for Dominic. Apartment A had two bedrooms, with Pops getting the first bedroom, the one facing the main street, and Bobby and Rex sharing the second.

Both Bobby and Rex were able to stay overnight in the barracks on the days they worked in the city, so they only came back to Tarrytown two nights a week each. They alternated their schedules so that only one of them used that bedroom at a time. However, they each wanted their own bed in the room. So, their bedroom consisted of two queen beds and one small table with a small TV on it. That was it. Neither of them had many clothes, so they shared the closet.

It was perfect. We never locked the door to either apartment. Instead, I just gave everyone a key for the outside door to the entry/mudroom. This worked out perfectly, especially where the bathrooms were concerned. It was lovely to have two separate restrooms for six people.

The commute back and forth to the city wasn't easy, and it was a bit of a challenge to get Dominic up and ready for school and then myself ready and into the city by 8:30 each morning. It was early May, and there were only five weeks of school left for him, so at least there was a light at the end of the tunnel. I didn't even want to think about how we were going to handle things for the following school year.

We were in our apartments for about two weeks when Louie stopped by unannounced just as I was heading out the door with Dominic one morning.

"Good morning! Why don't we let Frank take Nicky to school today?" he asked.

All I could think was, "Oh, shit. He's going to fire me. I've lost my job, and I'm out on the street. We all are."

I was so close to crying, and I could feel my eyes well up.

Louie looked at me. "Hey, are you okay?"

I whispered, "Are you firing me? Have I not been doing a good job? I'm so sorry, Lou. I know I was late to work a couple of times. I'm so sorry. I'll work harder, I promise."

I was practically pleading with the man, and he gave me a look like I was

insane.

"Are you done with your theatrics? Can you at least give me a chance to tell you why I'm here?"

I calmed down instantly.

"Sorry. Everything is going so well right now. That is usually the sign when the whole gamut starts going to crap."

I took a deep breath and smiled my biggest, fakest smile. In the most syrupy-sweet voice, I said, "What can I do for you, Mr. Muehlmeier?"

"Ugh. Stop that immediately," he said with a laugh. "You look a bit manic when you smile that big. No, what I need from you is to go see a friend of mine from Fordham University, Marymount. Do you know where it's at?"

"Yeah, of course. It's just up the street. Do you need me to do some work there today?"

"No, I need you to see about transferring from BMCC to Fordham. There's no reason why you should make that long trek into the city every day for school."

"Well, I do work for you, and you're in the city, and The Prom practices at BMCC."

"I have spoken to a friend of mine, Reginald, who is on the board of directors for Fordham. Reggie has an office near the college for meetings regarding the endowment. He's only there one day a week and told me he would be happy to arrange for you to work out of his office the other four days. I could have Mr. Jarvis fax over your assignments each day, and when you complete them, you fax them back."

"So, I would work from here? From Tarrytown? But what about you? I wouldn't get to see you each day," I said sincerely. I absolutely loved him. Not seeing him every day would make my heart sad.

"Diarah, you have a lot going on. And I like what you are doing, and I want to help and support you. You know, I've stopped by before when you weren't here and have spoken at length with Roy and Rex and even Bobby. I know what you're doing for them. It's commendable."

He touched his fingertip to the tip of my nose lightly.

"But you are going to burn out soon if you keep up this ridiculous pace. I'm trying to help here, if you haven't realized that."

"Thank you. Thank you, Louie," I said sadly. "But honestly, Lou, is my work decent? I know I've been giving my time and attention to other things. I just don't want to let you down."

"Diarah, I don't normally make these kinds of concessions for my workers. I don't let them live in properties I own, and I don't find alternative spaces for them to work from when their lives become complicated. Clearly, if you didn't fully keep up your end of things, I wouldn't be doing this for you.

"I believe that you consistently try your best, I believe that you beat yourself up a bit when you are unsuccessful and cannot complete the work you are given,

and I believe that you probably are my most devoted employee. No, you are not perfect, but I do know that every day, you strive to be. That's enough for me."

I gasped softly and held back tears. How was I so lucky to have this man not only as my boss but also as my friend?

Frank returned with the car, and Louie handed me Reggie's information and left.

I took the day off from work to go see Reggie at Fordham. He was a very kind man and was more than happy to offer me the office and his assistant's desk four days a week. Oddly enough, after that initial meeting, I never saw Reggie again. Our schedules never overlapped, and there really was no reason for me to ever interact with him. If there were any issues, I would contact his assistant only.

In addition, I never sat at Reggie's desk (I knew my place), and his assistant's desk was perfect for my needs. The only time I entered Reggie's office was at the start and the end of my workday—to retrieve and send the faxes. I knew I had a really good gig, and I wasn't going to lose it by overstepping my bounds. I was even smart enough to leave presents for Reggie on his desk for his birthday and for Christmas. I wanted to keep in his good graces.

Furthermore, I was able to successfully transfer into Fordham's program, thanks to Louie's connections, so after one year of being a Blue Panther at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, I became a Bighorn Sheep. You cannot make this stuff up. Fordham's mascot was the Bighorn Sheep. I might be going out on a limb here, but I'm assuming it didn't conjure up much fear in Fordham's opponents.

The best part of this new arrangement was that Duncan and I were still able to get out to the city each night to practice with the band. I was so thankful that he was living with us, and he did his best to help when it came to Dominic. Nicky loved Duncan, and he ended up spending more time with him than with his own father.

Do you know the Yoruba proverb, "*It takes a village to raise a child*?" I can say with 100% certainty that in the case of Dominic, yes, it did. Bobby, Duncan, Rex, Pops, and I all took turns with Nicky, helping him with his homework, making sure he got fed, or giving him whatever else he needed. Rex coined our home "The Island of Misfit Toys," as we were a wonderfully mismatched group that somehow became a family. I loved it.

Our band practice started around Nicky's bedtime, so Pops would make sure Dominic got to bed at a decent hour each night, while Duncan and I would ride the train into the city together. We would try to find an empty car so we could practice and do our own versions of songs if no one else was riding with us.

And we would take a taxi back home each night. It was expensive, but it

was the only "non-essential" money I spent. I never ate out. I always brought my lunch and snacks to school and work with me, and I never went to the movies or out clubbing. In fact, the only time I ever went to a club or bar was when our band played gigs there.

The paid performances started slowly, but we became more in demand as time went on. We had our own music, but we were happy to play whatever the crowd wanted to hear, and we could perform just about any current pop song on the radio. It wouldn't be perfect, and we would put our own spin on it, but if we all had heard the song before and if one of us knew the key and chords, we could fake our way through just about anything.

One night in mid-August, Duncan and I were returning from one of our shows. It was the middle of the night, and as we got closer to our home, we saw a large man sitting at the bottom of the back stairs. I couldn't see all that well, as it was dark out, but I was fairly sure that I had never seen him before.

He had to be at least 6' 4", 300 pounds. He was chunky around the middle, and it didn't look like he worked out, but he did look like he could do some damage. If the situation called for it, Duncan, who was about my height and probably weighed 20 pounds less than I did, was going to be no help whatsoever in fighting this man off.

We stood back from the stairs in the shadows, about 30 feet away, waiting to see what this man was going to do. All we knew was that we couldn't really get past him on the stairs without bothering or dislocating him—he pretty much took up the entirety of the space of that step.

"Is… Is he… crying?" Duncan asked.

Duncan was right. It sounded like the soft sobs of a lost child.

I started to walk over to the man.

"Are you insane?" Duncan half-yelled-half-whispered at me, pulling on my arm.

"He doesn't look much like a threat at the moment."

I wrenched my arm away from Duncan's grasp and started walking over to the man.

"If he attacks me, save yourself," I whispered.

"Oh, you're damn right, I will. You're on your own, sister," Duncan whispered back angrily.

I stopped about ten feet away from the man. It was quite dark out, with the only light coming from the fixture above the door behind him, so I couldn't see his face.

"Hello. Hi. Um, do you need help?" I said as quietly and kindly as I could.

The man mumbled something, but he was speaking so softly that I couldn't quite hear him. I looked back at Duncan and shrugged my shoulders.

I turned back towards the man. "I'm sorry. What was that?" I asked again, trying not to piss him off.

"I need Bobby," the man said, sounding sad.

"Um, Bobby's not here tonight. He's in the city, working."

The man started sobbing again, but that time, it was quite loud. Lord Almighty, I had no idea what to do.

"Okay. Okay. Do you want to come inside for a minute?"

The man nodded.

Over my shoulder, I heard Duncan half-yell-half-whisper at me again. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Without looking at him, I shooed Duncan away with my hand behind my back.

"What's your name?" I asked before leading him up the stairs.

"Michael," he replied softly.

Of course, his name was Michael. Just as I was starting to put my own Michael behind me, another one shows up.

I unlocked the door upstairs and led him into Apartment B. We had two small couches in Dominic's room/the living room, and I told Michael to go and sit on one of them. I asked him if he wanted some water, and he nodded. It took me all of 30 seconds to get the glass and put water in it, but by the time I returned, he was already fast asleep on the couch.

He was so large that only his torso fit on the cushions—his legs hung off to the side. It was a warm night, so I didn't give him a blanket, but I did bring in an extra pillow from my bed. I tried to raise his head to put the pillow underneath, but his noggin was so big and heavy, I couldn't quite do it, so I just left it on the floor next to the couch.

I stopped and looked at him as he slept. I know it sounds odd, but to me, he looked a bit like Baby Huey from the cartoons I watched as a child.

It was then that I saw Nicky sit up in the top bunk of his bunk bed. He looked down and asked, "What's Uncle Mikey doing here?"

"Oh, my God. This is *that* Michael," I said to no one in particular.

It was Bobby's brother. Of course, it was. Bobby was tall—maybe 6'1"—and very slender with brown curly hair. Michael was a bit taller and probably could be slender with the right diet and exercise. They both had the same curly hair, but Bobby buzzed his short for the force. Michael's hair was in long, beautiful curls around his face. He had a bit more of a Roman nose than Bobby, and his eyes were blue, but other than that, the two of them looked quite a bit alike.

Why hadn't I seen it a few minutes prior?

"Is he coming to live with us now?" Dominic asked, still peering over the side of his bunk bed at his sleeping uncle.

"Live with us? No. Why?" I asked.

"'Cause Dad told me that he wanted him to live with us," Nicky said, and with that, he lay down and fell back asleep.

I just stared up at Dominic. I wasn't about to get mad, not at him. He was only the messenger. But I was thoroughly pissed at Bobby. Of course, he wasn't

going to be home from the city for three more days.

For the next two days, I tried to reach Bobby at the station, but every time I called, he somehow wasn't there, and every time I left a message, he never returned it. Either Bobby was being asked to work 24 hours a day, or he was avoiding me.

Our living room was a good size, but we now had two adult-ish people living in it. Nicky kept his bunk bed with the mattress on top and his desk below, and we brought Bobby's queen box-spring and mattress over from Pops' place. Bobby had a pop-up tent stored in the attic that he had only used once, so it was in relatively good shape. Between the four of us (Duncan, Michael, Dominic, and me), we were able to get the box spring and mattress into the tent. It wasn't his own bedroom, but I was hoping it would provide Mikey a bit of privacy.

As for Nicky, I installed curtain rods to the ceiling along two sides of his bunk bed. It sat in the corner of the room, so the other two sides of his bed were up against the walls. So, when the curtains were closed, it almost looked like a little fort up there. I just hoped he wouldn't get tripped up in them when climbing out of bed in the morning.

The next day, I called Dominic's social worker, Mark Ziller. Between Dominic's mother abandoning him and his delays in speech, social skills, and emotional development, Dominic was very lucky to have someone like Mark assigned to him.

Mark really did his best to help us out. He had to do visual inspections of our place each time he came to visit, and, of course, we had no idea when his next visit would be. He just dropped in when he was in town. So, I was becoming very worried about his next visit. The last thing I wanted was to have him fault me for having both "boys" living in the same room or for having a total of four people living in a one-bedroom apartment.

I was very surprised when Mark came for his next visit and didn't seem surprised by the living arrangements. He said that family members were allowed to share a room, especially one that size. (The living room area was quite large.) He thought the tent idea was a bit ingenious, and he liked how the curtains gave Nicky some added privacy. The room also contained two clothing racks for the boys' clothes, a desk for homework, a TV, a dresser, and two small couches.

Mark then asked Duncan and me to sit down with him at the kitchen table. Believe it or not, in our tiny place with a long and narrow kitchen, we were able to squeeze in a table in the back corner. One would have to walk sideways through a narrow passageway past the sink, the stove, the refrigerator, a small prep table, and a wire rack that we used for storage, in order to reach the table, so you would really have to have a strong desire to sit there to make all of that effort.

Mark talked about our "unique" living arrangement and said that although he personally didn't see anything wrong with Duncan living with us, it might

cause issues with his supervisor and the state. He asked if there was someplace Duncan could live instead.

Duncan and I had prepared for this, and we said yes, that he would be moving out the following weekend. That, of course, was not the truth. I loved having Duncan living with me, and he helped me out so much with Dominic and Pops. He finally had a home after living on the streets for years. So, no, he wasn't going anywhere. He was family.

Instead, we needed to become a bit cleverer in how we hid Duncan and his things. So, we removed his clothing from my room and interspersed his items amongst the boys' clothing on their rack. Any of Duncan's toiletries in my room were moved to the bathroom and, again, organized along with the boys' items. Every visible trace of him was removed from my bedroom and spread around the apartment. I'm not sure if Mark ever really believed that Duncan had moved out, but the small changes seemed to suffice.

Before Mark left that day, he conducted an intake with Mikey and said that, because both he and Nicky were members of the same family, he could act as the social worker for both. However, I couldn't get Mikey fully registered into any programs until I submitted his birth certificate, a photo ID, and all his health and medical records. I doubted Bobby would have any idea of where Mikey's legal documents were, so I called Mikey, who was in the next room, and asked him to come into the kitchen.

"Mikey, do you know where your birth certificate is? Or any of your important papers?"

He shook his head no. He was eating an apple. He was always eating.

I remembered Bobby saying something about a "Sunnyside" facility where Mikey lived.

"Hey, do you think the people at Sunnyside would have that information?"

Mikey's face contorted into a look of terror. He started to walk backwards out of the kitchen, dropping his apple and bumping into the stove and prep table as he tried to leave. He turned and ran out of the kitchen, out the door, and down the stairs. He didn't even have his shoes on.

"Mikey, stop, it's okay. I just—…"

"You're not taking me back there! I'd rather die than go back there!"

He started to run towards the busy street.

"Wait, Michael, listen to me. Please stop and listen to me!" I yelled as I ran down the back stairs after him. He stopped running, but he didn't turn around to look at me.

"Mikey, you never have to go back there ever again. I promise."

He didn't move, and he didn't turn around.

"Mikey, I didn't know you were at that place. Otherwise, I would have come to get you. This is your home now. You can live with me forever and ever. Promise."

He turned around, his face wet with tears.

"Do you promise-promise?"

"I promise-promise-promise."

He stared at me for a moment. Then, he took a deep breath in and started to walk back towards the stairs.

I was completely unaware that Mark was standing right behind me during Mikey's outburst, and he startled me a bit when he said, "Very nice."

"Are you being serious? You enjoyed watching Mikey have a major cow?" I whispered back.

"I meant you did a good job diffusing the situation. That could have gone very badly, but I think you did an excellent job calming him down."

When Mikey was back inside the apartment, he went to his tent, climbed in, and zipped it up so he could be alone.

I looked at Duncan and whispered, "What the hell do you think happened at Sunnyside to make him act like that?"

Unfortunately, I found out soon enough. I had arranged with Mark to visit Sunnyside the following week to see about those documents. What I was told initially was that it was a group home for adults with intellectual disabilities.

I was misinformed.

Several days later, we drove up to what was not a group home but a state psychiatric hospital. Mark was driving, and when I saw the sign that read Sunnyside Psychiatric Hospital, I looked over at him.

"He was living *here*? Michael was living *here*?"

He had some delays and behaved more like a six-year-old than the 30-year-old that he was, but he wasn't crazy. Why was he living there?

My heart sank.

We walked up the main stairs and went inside. Mark approached the receptionist's desk and was kind enough to do the talking. As he did, I peeked my head in through the doors. People were confined to wheelchairs, banging their heads against the bars on the windows, walking around like zombies.

I couldn't believe Mikey lived there. Who did he talk to? Who took care of him?

Mark came over and said, "Dr. Collins would like to speak with you."

I had no idea who that was, but I followed Mark. We were buzzed into a separate wing of the hospital, which housed the doctors' offices. It was nice and clean and bright and quiet. It looked nothing like what was on the other side of the building.

Dr. Collins looked pleasant enough. He was a short, bald man with glasses that had big black rims. And, he had a nice, kind face.

"So, I hear that you are Michael's half-sister, is that correct?" he said as Mark and I entered his beautiful office. It looked like a psychiatrist's office you would see on a made-for-TV movie: wood furniture, monolithic executive desk, overstuffed leather chairs, Persian rug.

"Yes," I lied and sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"I'm glad you're here. And I'm glad Michael is now with you. He is very crafty, that one. He was able to sneak out of here that night without anyone detecting him. I believe it was four days from the time he left here to the day he ended up on your doorstep," he said with a smile, which I thought was odd. I would have assumed he was going to be mad at Mikey for sneaking away. If anything, he seemed impressed.

He began again, "I will be honest with you—I never thought he deserved to be here. He has delays, but nothing that would prevent him from living a fairly normal life without incident."

"Then why on earth was he here, Dr. Collins?"

I was getting impatient and wanted to get the hell out of that place, even with as gorgeous and inviting as his office was.

"Michael probably could have done quite well in a traditional group home. He probably would have needed a social worker, such as Mark here, to assist him in getting additional help and services beyond what the group home could provide. But he was basically abandoned after his father got sick and was hospitalized. No one was able to get Michael set up with proper living arrangements, so he ended up here."

I was shocked. I was so mad, and I could feel tears streaming down my face.

I growled, "So, let me get this straight. The only reason Michael lived here for what? Three years?"

"Yes, three years," Dr. Collins agreed.

"He lived here for three years because no one in his family, namely his brother, could take the time to get him set up with services and a home?"

"In a word, yes."

I put my head in my hands. I was feeling woozy. Mikey was living in this hell for three years because his own brother abandoned him. I wanted to strangle Bobby with my bare hands.

Seeing that I was getting upset and wanting to diffuse the situation, Dr. Collins said, "So, if it's alright with you, Ms. Jamesson, I would like to work with Mr. Ziller to ensure that he gets all of Michael's paperwork and documentation. Mr. Ziller has mentioned that Michael will need another psychological evaluation and an IQ test. I would be more than happy to administer both for you, free of charge."

I tried my best to appear appreciative.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm not bringing him back here for—"

Dr. Collins interjected, "No, nor do I think you should. Nor should I come to your home. We should meet in a neutral area—your local library or a coffee shop, perhaps. We need to ensure that your home is a safe space for Michael. I advise that no testing of any kind take place there.

"It seems that Mr. Ziller has a good rapport with your son, Dominic. Is that correct?"

I nodded, not correcting him for calling Nicky my son.

"Please continue to have Mr. Ziller come to your home to see Dominic and interact with him. Of course, Mark can continue to observe Michael and take notes on his behavior, but I would request that, for the time being, Michael should only interact with Mark when he feels comfortable doing so. It should be Michael who makes the first move."

I nodded my head yes. I didn't want to, but I liked this Dr. Collins. It was somewhat disgusting to me that the doctor seemed to give a bigger shit about Mikey than his own brother.

But that truly wasn't correct. I knew it wasn't. I was wrong.

It was on the drive back home that I realized Bobby had been with me in Italy almost four years earlier. Bobby had a complete breakdown and wanted to hurt someone because his life was overwhelming. His father was diagnosed with cancer and was living in a facility, receiving palliative care. He couldn't take care of his brother. He didn't know what else to do. And, on top of all of that, his son was exhibiting undesirable behaviors and was having issues functioning, as well as having sensitivities to lights and sounds and the consistency of certain foods. It was all too much, and Bobby lost it.

I knew Bobby didn't want that life for Mikey. I knew this. And he was still trying to dig himself out of that hole. My God, he couldn't even handle taking care of his own child. For a moment, I wondered why he never asked me to help him find services for Michael. But I realized that it would have been impossible. He just couldn't. I was only 17, and yet I had helped him time and time again. He was ashamed, embarrassed, knowing he wasn't able to do it on his own.

So, at that moment, I chose not to bring that anger home with me. I was going to talk to Bobby about it—about all of it—but I wasn't going to come at him from a place of anger.

I rolled down the window of Mark's car and stuck my head out a bit. I decided once and for all that I needed to get off Bobby's case. Our Island of Misfit Toys needed to support each other, not tear each other apart.

I smiled and remembered that Bobby hadn't been home in close to two weeks, probably because he was slightly terrified, knowing he would have to deal with me. And I chuckled softly when I realized that whenever he did return, he would need to go shopping to replace the mattress and box spring we stole for Michael. That alone was punishment enough.

As for Mark, well, he was a magician. He was able to get help and services for Michael that I didn't even know existed. Shortly thereafter, Mikey started attending a day program where he learned self-help skills, and they even paid for his vocational training. He was terrible at everything, but it got him out of the house every day so that I could work and go to school, and for that, I will always be appreciative.

Pops was also amazing. As long as I brought him his morning paper and

coffee, packed his lunch in the fridge each day, and gave him a hot meal each night, he would do just about anything I asked of him. If I had a big assignment due the next day and neither Duncan nor Bobby were around, Pops gladly brought the boys over to his place to watch movies. He would stay home with whichever "child" was sick from school, and he would scale "those horrible wooden steps" to go wait for Mikey's bus to drop him off each afternoon. He even took care of Duncan for several days after his appendectomy. I have no idea what I would have done without him.

And although he would never admit it, I think Pops was much happier living in our apartment than he ever was living in his house in the city. In Tarrytown, he was surrounded by people who loved him, and he was never alone. His place was always clean, he always had home-cooked meals, his laundry was done for him, and he was never lonely.

Rex losing their house was a godsend. But I would never say that to his face.

Everything was starting to come together. I was beginning to get into a routine with the boys, and Pops was starting to come out of his shell a bit. He no longer spent his time with "the boys" at the local pub, as he did in Brooklyn. Instead, he ventured down the street each day to our local coffee shop. We soon realized that it was not the coffee Pops was enjoying so much but the barista named Terri.

Terri was an older woman, possibly in her early 60s, but she was striking. Just about all the widowers enjoyed flirting with her, but for some reason, she took a special liking to Pops. Most of us were very happy for him, except for Mikey and Nicky. Pops was one of the few constants in their lives, and if they ever needed help or companionship, they knew they could just walk across the mudroom to Apartment A and see him there. That was no longer the case. Pops was still there for them, but it was far less frequent.

Bobby, however, was home a bit more. He was put on probation again, this time for having sex in his patrol car with one of the prostitutes that he should have been arresting. He couldn't return to work for two weeks, and when he did go back, he was only allowed to do administrative work in the offices during regular office hours. He was not pleased by this, but it actually worked well for us as he finally had a consistent schedule. He wasn't permitted to reside in the barracks any longer, so he had to travel in each day from Tarrytown. The commute was hard on him, but at least his brother and son got to see him every day.

Three months later, Bobby got another surprise. It turned out that the prostitute, who was also a recreational cocaine user, was pregnant with Bobby's child.

Six months later, Bobby was going to have shared custody of a baby with this woman.

Let me rephrase that: *I* was going to have shared custody of that baby with

that woman.

17 CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: 1986, DIARAH AT 23 (WALKING IN MY SHOES)

My true 18th birthday (the real one in May, not the one on my passport, which shows it as October 31st) was quite uneventful.

It was a Monday, and I really didn't have the ability to do anything for myself that day. Louie had quite a bit of work for me, and it was the first week of the summer session at Fordham. If I were going to graduate within four years, I had to take at least one class every summer session. But that Friday, Bobby was home, and I asked him to make sure the boys got off to school that morning and were fed and taken care of that evening.

As I was leaving the house, they were eating breakfast and making plans that night to go to the drive-in in Warwick, about an hour away. I was thrilled that everything had worked out, and I truly had the entire day to myself. What a gift.

I had a plan and knew exactly what I was going to do that day.

I walked down the street to the local café and found a table near the back. It was after the morning breakfast rush, and there weren't a lot of people there, so I pretty much had the back room to myself. I took out my Casio mini keyboard, my headphones, and my songwriting journal. I had so much music, so many songs, that were rattling around in my brain, stirring with nowhere to go, and it was time to get them out.

It had been two years, but I still hadn't allowed myself to fully grieve over losing Michael. I knew that it wasn't good for me, and I wasn't able to move on. I had no interest in dating and truly didn't feel I deserved to have anyone. It was clear that I needed to take the time to truly experience the sorrow associated with losing my best friend. So, I wrote a whole series of "musical letters" to Michael in my head, and I needed to get them out and down on paper to free up some space in my brain for something new and positive in my life.

I don't even really remember what I did for those nine hours at the back of that café, as I was on autopilot, writing down those songs as fast as I could. Some of them had the lyrics completed with the music only partially finished, as I had other songs fighting to come out. By the time I was done, every page

of the notebook was filled, so I had to resort to writing a few other song lyrics with the basic melody and the signature key on the backs of flyers and other scraps of paper I found around the coffee shop. In fact, I was so desperate to get them all out that the last few from that day had to be written on napkins, as I ran out of paper altogether.

I know this is going to sound gross, but I don't know of any other way to describe it…

To me, it was like having "thought food poisoning," and the only way to rid myself of it was to regurgitate it all up so I could feel better. I "threw up" 16 songs that day, some complete, some incomplete, just one after the other. They just all came pouring out. I still had plenty more in my head, though, and could have probably written 100 more.

That day was so cathartic for me, and I became obsessed with having those songs out, but I needed more time, at least two more days. So, I called in every favor from every friend I could possibly think of to have them take care of the boys for me that weekend.

Duncan was amazing. Not only did he help watch the kids, but he also took those songs that I had started on scraps of paper and napkins and completed them as best he could. He didn't know exactly what was in my head, but he finished them enough to the point where, as a band, we could rework them if we chose to.

Actually, what I should have said was—We could rework them if *John* chose to.

The rest of us didn't really have much say in what songs we would play at our gigs or what we would work on during rehearsals. It didn't matter. Jahmir, Duncan, and I were not what you would call "leadership material." We were happy to just sit back and let John drive.

Over that weekend and into that following Monday, I pumped out 21 more songs. Again, none of them were fully developed, and most were just like the others, with the lyrics, key, and basic melody constructed. Over those five days, the bones of 37 songs were down on paper.

Although that time was good for me mentally and emotionally, I came out of that experience quite sick physically. I had developed a serious bladder infection from the hours I sat in one spot, denying myself the chance to go to the bathroom, afraid that I would lose my train of thought. I also gave myself some pretty bad gall bladder and stomach issues for a week or so from drinking so many iced coffees.

But the whole process overall was incredibly healing for me. Up until a week prior to pouring out those songs, I was still pretty upset with Michael for cutting me out of his life. But getting it all down on paper made me realize how much fun we had together and how much he and the rest of the Aceti family did for me. I was able to let the anger go and, therefore, let Michael go. And I let him go with love. I wished him well. I truly did.

I was a changed girl.

That following Wednesday, when Rex returned home from the city for a few days, I went up to him when no one was looking and kissed him, hard. I had always been attracted to him on some level, but while I held on to that anger, I wasn't able to move forward. This was my first step. Plus, even though my passport stated I was 23, I was only 18 in truth and was just ready to start a physical relationship with someone.

Rex and I were together for about a year. It was in secret, and no one we knew was aware of it. It wasn't love. It was a release. And a year after our relationship started, it ended just as quickly.

One weekend, he brought home a lovely Vietnamese-American woman named Kathy. He didn't tell me about it beforehand, and I would be lying if I said it didn't hurt my feelings a bit, but in hindsight, I'm glad he did. Our relationship wasn't real—it was just fun. We were never going to become boyfriend and girlfriend, and we were never going to get married. We both deserved more. It would have been nice if he had given me some warning, but he didn't. And I guess that was okay.

The winter that year was bad, and in mid-January, we were hit with a severe winter storm that dumped about a foot of snow, which essentially brought the Eastern Seaboard to a standstill. To make matters worse, five days later, a second storm came, and although we only got a few inches of snow that time around, the roads and sidewalks were icy and packed with treacherous sheets of snow. The temperatures fell 2 degrees an hour the night before, making the wind-chill factor 20 degrees below zero. So, yeah, it was nasty out.

In addition, the utility lines came down in various parts of the city, and the power went out for hours at a time. Rex and Bobby, who were scheduled to come home that weekend, didn't, as the city was paralyzed. The police were needed to help stranded motorists and the elderly who had no heating or electricity.

It was a Monday, and the schools were closed, so Pops, Duncan, the kids, and I were hunkered down, not planning on going anywhere. However, plans changed quickly when I received a phone call from a woman named Fionna.

Pops answered the cordless phone and handed it to me, saying that the woman on the other end of the line identified herself as Louie's mother.

"Hello? This is Diarah," I said.

"Diarah, this is Fionna Alderson-Muehlmeier, Louis Muehlmeier's mother."

"Yes, of course, Ms. Muehlmeier! How are you? How can I help you?"

"I was calling to see if you have heard from Louis. He did not come home last night, and he is not answering his phone at work. His driver, Frank, has not spoken to him, either."

"No, I'm so sorry, I haven't heard from him. When was the last time you spoke to him?" I asked.

"Yesterday afternoon. He went into the office this weekend, hoping to get some work done. The storm got worse, and he told me that he was going to wait until it blew over and then head home."

"You haven't heard from him for a full day? Jesus. Okay, I'll go into the city. I'll see if he's still at work. He may have just gotten stuck there."

"Thank you. I appreciate it. I've tried calling everyone, and no one is in a position to help right now. We haven't had any electricity here at the house for two days, as the ice has positively wreaked havoc around here."

I got her phone number and told her that I would call if I had any news. I then started to get dressed to head into the city. I wouldn't be able to take a taxi there—the roads were an icy mess—but the trains, thankfully, were still running.

Mikey saw me getting ready and said, "I want to come with you."

"Mikey, this trip is going to be very unpleasant. I'm going to go look for Louie. You're going to be miserable in this cold."

"I'll pack snacks!"

And he ran off to get ready. I stopped and thought. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to have Mikey come along with me. Who knows what trouble Louie got himself into? I might need the help.

By the time we left, Mikey and I were in our warmest clothing and our waterproof boots. We each had our own backpack—mine filled with a change of clothes for Mikey and me, and Mikey's filled with a thermos of hot tea, another thermos of vegetable soup, crackers, 2 cans of soda, 4 candy bars, and some beef jerky. I'm sure there was other food in there, as well. As we left the apartment, I thought, "Half of that stuff he is bringing will be consumed before we even reach the city."

Mikey also donned his large headlamp and his famous, huge, oversized keyring that boasted a total of one key on it—the key to the outside door of our apartment—but also included a Swiss Army knife, a small pair of nail clippers, a tiny first-aid kit, and a mini high-powered flashlight. He never went anywhere without it.

I said goodbye to Pops, Duncan, and Nicky, and Mikey and I started walking towards the station. It took a while, as the sidewalks were slippery. However, the train was surprisingly fast getting into the city. There were only a few others in our train car, and most of them appeared to be homeless individuals looking for a warm place to sleep.

I watched them and thought about how, without Louie's generosity, that could have been me. He gave me a job as soon as I got to New York, he broke the rules for me when he realized I didn't have my high-school diploma in hand, and he didn't care that I was living in a glorified shelter.

I realized exactly how lucky I was. I was so lucky that I met him in San Gimignano. I was lucky that I knew about ciphers. And I was lucky that he not only had his business in New York City but that he offered me a job on the

spot. I had never really stopped to think about how that one person changed my whole trajectory. My life in the city would have been much, much worse had it not been for him. So, I had to find him and make sure he was okay.

The Pan-Am Building was right above the Grand Central Terminal on Park Avenue, so we didn't have far to walk. There was no one on the streets, and the city was a ghost town. The stairs up to the building were icy and slippery, so we carefully walked up to the glass doors. I saw one of the security guards I knew, Hassan, and said hello to him by name. He remembered mine, which I was very thankful for, as I no longer had daily access to that building.

I explained the situation, that Louie had not been seen in over a day. He told me there were no workers in the building and that it was just him and another security guard. I asked him if one of them could please bring us upstairs to just look around for a minute. He looked like he was about to say no, but I gave him a look of absolute desperation. Plus, Mikey was complaining that he had to use the bathroom, so it was probably better for him to bring us up there just to get us out of his hair.

We took the elevator up to the 47th floor, and just as we exited, the electricity went out, and the elevator died.

"Yeah, the power has been on and off for the last few days. Don't worry, it'll come back on in a few minutes," Hassan said.

"Hey, you, go use the bathroom," I told Mikey, pointing at the men's room door.

He cracked the door a bit and whined, "I'm not going in there! It's dark!"

"You have your flashlight with you, right?"

"Come on, buddy. I'll go with you. I'll hold the door open, so you'll have some light from the hallway," Hassan said.

"Hassan, is it okay if I look around? I promise I won't disturb anything," I asked.

"I'm not supposed to let you do that," he replied, more informing me of the rules rather than forbidding me.

"I'll be right back."

The 47th floor was one large oval with offices on the outside and cubicles towards the middle. I called Louie's name as I walked around. I was three-fourths of the way around the oval when I called Louie's name again and faintly heard, "I'm over here!"

It took me a minute to locate where the sound was coming from—the emergency stairwell. I opened the door and saw Louie sitting on the landing a flight below.

I was about to run to him when he screamed, "Stay right there! Do not shut that door! I have been locked in here for days!"

I ran back and grabbed the door, frantically searching to find something to keep it propped open. I screamed for Hassan and Mikey. Once the door was fully held in place with a chair, I ran to Louie. He looked awful.

"Are you okay?" I whispered.

"I spent all night in here. It was freezing. I think I caught pneumonia," Louie said, hoarsely.

The stairwell was pitch black, and I saw Hassan and Mikey's shadows when they came to the doorway. Mikey came down immediately, while Hassan ran to call 9-1-1 for help.

I told Mikey to give Louie the thermos of tea while I got Mikey's change of clothing out of my backpack. We helped Louie out of his suit jacket and slid Mikey's heavy Fordham sweatshirt over his head.

He was weak. Who knew the last time he had something to eat?

"Mikey, get the soup out for Louie."

Mikey handed the thermos over to him while I took off Louie's dress shoes and put Mikey's large sweat socks on over his dress socks. After a few minutes, Louie was starting to feel a bit better and was able to stand long enough for me to get Mikey's sweatpants over his suit pants. That was all he could handle, though. He sat back down on the step with a heavy thud.

"Keep drinking that soup!" I demanded.

"Yes, ma'am," Louie said with no energy. I pulled the hood of the sweatshirt up over his head.

The three of us were sitting in the dark, with a small stream of light coming in from where the heavy, metal door had been propped open. Mikey got out his flashlight and put it in Louie's hand.

"There! Now you can see what we look like," Mikey said.

Louie gave a small chuckle and said, "Yes, that's very important at the moment."

Mikey was having the time of his life, taking his snacks out and eating with Louie. He acted as if it were a special and unique spot for a picnic.

I put my arms around Louie, running my hands up and down his back and arms to try to warm him up. I took off my scarf and hat, as dirty as they were, and put them on him. He looked hilarious in Mikey's sweats and my pink hat, as I had never seen Louie without his signature Italian suit, looking like a million bucks.

It felt like an eternity that we sat in that stairwell before the lights finally came back on. It was quiet, and I could hear Louie's breathing, which was a bit labored. Within two minutes, we heard the distant ding of the elevator arriving on the floor above.

The medics from the ambulance entered the stairwell and rushed down to check Louie's vitals. He wasn't doing well and was starting to lose consciousness. They had to get him to the hospital, stat.

Then, looking like a superhero of some kind, one of the firemen got underneath Louie's arm, picked him up, and carried him up the stairs in a fireman's carry. Mikey let out a big "Whoo-hoo!" that was totally inappropriate for the situation, but the accolades were clearly directed at the fireman, who

totally deserved them.

Louie was on the gurney, being loaded into the elevator, when he weakly said to me, "Please, go check on my mom."

I nodded my head. "I'll go right now."

And with that, the doors of the elevator closed. Hassan, Mikey, and I took our own elevator down.

As we started to exit the building, I shouted, "Thank you, Hassan. I will make sure Louie remembers to tip you well at Christmas."

He gave us a small, quick wave and a smile.

Mikey and I were exhausted and wanted to go home, but we had to check on Fionna, Louie's mom. The number 6 subway would take us to the Upper East Side, and from there, I was pretty sure I could remember how to get to the hidden neighborhood.

It wasn't far, but it took us over an hour to walk there with all the snow and ice. We were freezing and hungry when we reached the outer wall. There was a call box for the security guard, and I said a little prayer that someone would be there.

"Yes?" A voice answered.

"Hello. Ted, is it? I'm here to check on Fionna Muehlmeier. She knows I'm coming. My name is Diarah."

"Hold a moment."

A few minutes later, a door over to the side opened, and the same man whom I saw some nine months ago, when I first came to Louie's house, popped his head out.

"Please, come this way."

We walked through the first door, past the security guard station, and over to a second door at the other gate. The security guard opened the door for us and said, "You know which house, correct?"

"Yes, we do. Thank you so much!"

He closed the second door behind us. If it had not been so fucking cold, the view before us would have been beautiful. The snow- and ice-covered neighborhood looked like something straight out of a magazine. It was gorgeous. The most amazing part was that with all the snow that fell, the walkways, street, and driveways in this hidden neighborhood were all free of snow and ice, as if it were someone's job 24 hours a day to just be responsible for only that.

I later learned that the street and sidewalks were heated. Heated!

Walking to Louie's place from the gate was the easiest thing we had done that entire trip. We got to the house and knocked on the door, but no one answered. I was brazening and turned the doorknob. The door was unlocked. We walked into the living room, which was gorgeous, filled with antique furniture and grand chandeliers. I hadn't seen this room before, as last time, I was shepherded through the kitchen and into the backyard.

We saw a small figure sitting in a chair with her back to us. She was resting, almost sleeping, and was dressed to the nines, even during the storm. It was warmer inside the house than outside, but it was still quite cold in that room. I saw that the fire had been reduced to embers, so I set down my backpack, took off my jacket, and went to work getting it started again.

By the time I had the fire going, Louie's mother was waking up a bit. I hadn't noticed it before, but she had two cats sitting on her lap, and the three of them were doing their best to keep each other warm. However, when the fire was full and crackling, the cats jumped down and hopped up onto the hearth to take advantage of the heat.

"Hello, Ms. Muehlmeier. It's Diarah. This is my… uh, my nephew, Mikey."

I had never had to introduce Mikey to anyone before, so I didn't know what to say.

She started, "Please, call me Fionna. And I owe you my thanks, don't I? I received a call from the hospital. Louis will have to stay there for a few days. He has pneumonia and is terribly dehydrated, but he is expected to make a full recovery."

I smiled. "Oh, that is good news."

I looked around and didn't see any sign that Fionna had eaten in a while.

"Fionna, can I make you a cup of tea?"

"Oh, yes, please, that would be lovely."

I walked into the kitchen and put everything I needed to make tea on a tray. I brought it into the living room and set it next to Fionna. The kettle was put on a rack off to the side of the fire. Within minutes, she had a nice cup of tea and was eating a few of her favorite biscuits. She looked quite content.

"Okay. Now, dinner. What would you like?" I asked.

"Oh, no. I'm fine, really," she said.

"Is it okay if I look around your kitchen to see what you have?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Fionna said as she waved her hand gently towards the kitchen as an invitation for me to proceed. I knew she had to be hungry.

We found an old-fashioned waffle iron, pancake mix, some instant mashed potatoes, a jar of gravy, and some leftover fried chicken in the fridge. Mikey got excited when he saw the old waffle iron.

"Can I be in charge of that?" he said, pointing to it.

"Absolutely! I wouldn't have it any other way." I really was so thankful that he was with me.

Within 30 minutes, Fionna was eating a hot dinner of chicken and waffles. We cooked everything over the fire, like we were camping, and Mikey found the sweet spot in the flames where the waffles cooked without burning. Everything else just needed to be reheated. It wasn't the healthiest of meals, but I would venture to guess that it was probably the only meal Fionna had eaten in 24 hours.

By the time we went into the kitchen to wash the dishes, it was nighttime.

I called Pops, and I was pleased to hear that they were all fine. The electricity was spotty, turning on and off frequently throughout the day, but the apartment stayed fairly warm. When the electricity was on, they watched movies and made a frozen pizza and some Jiffy-Pop popcorn, and when the electricity was not on, they lit candles and played board games. Everything was good on their end. I told them that we weren't going to be home until the next day, and they were fine with that, as Duncan and Nicky had already planned to sleep on the couches at Pops' place.

As the electricity still hadn't fully come on at Louie's house, and it didn't look like it was going to anytime soon, Mikey and I pulled a twin mattress and box spring from one of the guest rooms upstairs and brought it downstairs. We put them close to the fire and made the bed up with lots of blankets and comforters, so it was quite warm and inviting. Fionna had initially fought to use it, saying that she was fine sleeping in her chair, but once she lay down in it, she fell asleep within minutes. Her two kitties curled up right alongside her.

I grabbed an alarm clock from one of the rooms upstairs and set it so I could sleep for two hours. Mikey said that he wasn't tired—he wanted to stay up and read his book using his headlamp. So, I slept for a couple of hours that night and stayed awake the rest of the time to keep an eye on the fire to make sure it didn't go out.

Soon after Fionna woke the next morning, the electricity came back on, and after I relit the pilot light on the furnace, the house started to heat up on its own. Mikey and I cleaned up the living room, carrying the twin mattress and box spring back upstairs.

We were just about to start cleaning up the kitchen when Nora, Fionna's housekeeper, arrived. Nora was an older, Brazilian woman, and we learned that she had been working for the Muehlmeiers for the better part of 20 years, so she was almost like family. It was a small miracle she had shown up at all, given how icy and unsafe the roads still were, but she was worried about her boss.

"No, no, I will do it. I will clean," Nora said.

I was thrilled. I was so tired—all I wanted to do was get home, take a long, hot shower, put on some clean pajamas, and crawl into my own bed.

Mikey and I were getting our coats and backpacks on and were just about to leave when Fionna came over and tried to put a roll of money in my hand.

She said, "Thank you very much for everything you did for us."

I looked down. There had to be $5,000 in that wad of cash.

I took the roll and put it back in her hand, saying, "Thank you, but no thank you. If you only knew half the things Louie has done for my friends and me over the years, you would know that payment from you is the last thing I deserve or expect."

I put both hands around the hand she was holding the money with and said, "I love your son very much. He is one of my best friends."

She gave me a look like she didn't understand. Maybe she didn't. That was

okay.

I found out the next day that Louie was being released from the hospital. He was going to have to rest at home for the next week and not go into the office, but Mr. Jarvis was already taking over, delegating work and responsibilities.

Two weeks later, Louie was well enough to stop by my workplace in Tarrytown. He had never come by to see me at work since I took over Reggie's office, and I was delighted to see him.

"Uh-oh, am I in trouble?" I asked, jokingly.

"Always," Louie said, looking around the office like he had never been there.

"You have been to this office before, right?" I asked.

"Nope. First time. It's quite nice."

He nodded his head slowly, as if he was giving his approval of the space.

"I could work here if I had to."

I laughed and said, "Yeah, right. I could totally see you giving up the view from the 47th floor."

I stopped and looked at him intently.

"So, how are you doing, really?"

"I'm okay. I'm better. I will tell you this, though. I will never be alone in that office again. Yes, I made a bad decision to go down the stairs when the electricity went out. I had no idea that the door would lock behind me and that I would have no way of getting out. And when the lights didn't come back on, and I was trapped in that metal box for 24 hours… It was bad, Dia. It was bad.

"So, the way I deal with it now is that Frank, of course, takes me to work and drops me at the front of the building each day, but each evening, he now is required to come up to the office and retrieve me. I will not try to leave the building alone anymore."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you."

"Dia, do you know what terrifies me? Had you not walked around that floor yelling for me, I would have been trapped in there for days. No one came into the office until the following Wednesday. There is a very real chance that I would have died from the cold or from dehydration or from going insane."

"You are Louie-fucking-Muehlmeier. Someone would have found you. Do you know how many people would have been looking for you had I not found you?" I asked.

"I understand. And you are right, to a certain degree. But I still appreciate you doing what you did. You did not do that as my employee. You did that as my friend, and I do know that," he said.

"Honestly, your mamma got the better end of that deal. Did she tell you about the bed next to the fireplace and the chicken and waffles? Ha! She did alright for herself," I said, smiling.

"Yes, so I heard. She said the three of you had a nice evening, and that

Mikey found my old portable radio and scanned the channels to find a station playing Inner Sanctum mysteries," Louie said.

I laughed and nodded my head. "I have to say, I had a really nice time with her. And honestly, Mikey had a lot of fun that night, too. He even got to stay up as late as he wanted to read his book with that flashlight of his."

Louie didn't laugh. He just stared at me with a small smile on his face.

"So, enough with the chit-chat. You're probably wondering why I am here. There are a couple of things we need to discuss.

"First, Mr. Jarvis came to me to advocate for you. He felt it was unfair that you should have to pay for office supplies with your own money and then get reimbursed weeks later. So, he took it upon himself to get you your own corporate credit card."

As he handed it to me, Louie lowered his voice into a whisper, even though he and I were the only two people in the office.

"Look, if you need to use the card for a personal emergency, go ahead and do it. Just let me know, and we can work out the details. I know you won't be irresponsible with it."

He resumed his normal voice. "Okay, and second, there are some documents that I need you to take to a notary public today. Immediately. Here," he said, passing me a large manila envelope.

"The documents in there are in a specific order, so please do not open the envelope. Give it to the notary and let him deal with it. Do you have your identification with you?" he asked.

I nodded my head yes.

He continued, "This is very important, so I need you to go to the notary public's office as soon as I leave. The address is on the envelope."

"Absolutely. Anything for you," I said.

He looked at me with kind eyes and smiled. "Get a move on, kiddo."

We both left the office together, with me locking the door behind us. He started to walk down the sidewalk in the opposite direction, towards his car, and I ran back and grabbed him from behind.

Hugging him hard, I said, "I am so, so glad that you're okay. I was really worried about you."

I could feel him pat my hands, which were on his stomach at that point. Without turning back to look at me, he pulled away from me and continued walking towards his car, Frank holding the door open. I saw Louie say something to Frank, and Frank gave a little laugh. Frank then gave me a small wave and walked around to the driver's side of the car.

I got to the notary's office about 20 minutes after Louie left. I walked in and told them who I was. The receptionist said, "Yes, we're expecting you."

I was led into an office where a smart-looking older man sat behind an old metal desk, probably from the 1950s. Actually, everything in that office looked like it was from the 1950s, but it was all in pristine condition.

I handed the gentleman the envelope, and he began working on completing the documents. He had me sign in six different places. It took him about 30 minutes to complete everything, and when he was done, he turned to me and handed me an envelope.

"Congratulations, ma'am."

"Excuse me? Congratulations? I don't think you mean me. I was here for my boss," I said.

"I know exactly what you were here for. You are now the proud owner of 1000 North Main Street, Tarrytown."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"Excuse me…what?"

"Mr Muehlmeier has now turned over possession of 1000 North Main Street to you."

I quickly opened the envelope and looked over the documents. Holy cow, it was true. I was signing documents for myself, not for Louie. I didn't know what to say. I just stood in that man's office in complete shock.

"You have yourself a lovely day, now," he said, basically asking me in a polite way to leave.

"Uh, yes…yes, thank you. Thank you." I was in a daze.

I had my own home? I had my own home. I had my own home!

I kept that little gem of a secret to myself for years. I still had Pops "pay rent," but I asked him to put it into a separate bank account for me. A few years later, Pops would come to learn that he had been saving those funds for himself. And by the time he learned what I had been doing, he had a nice chunk of change in that account.

As for Louie, how do you thank someone who buys you and your friends a home? You can't, not really. At the very least, I offered to take the rent from the businesses downstairs and give it to him each month. He said no, that I owned the whole building outright, and that I should keep it. However, for years, I still sent the rent for the two storefronts to him every month anyway.

That sweet, sweet gift came just in time. Bobby's daughter, Delilah, was born shortly thereafter, and we would have to make a lot of changes around the apartments to accommodate a baby. The first few months were doable, but by the time she started crawling, we needed to fit all the cabinets with child safety locks and put a strong baby gate outside of both apartments and at the top of the outside steps, certainly things we couldn't do if we were renters. And, by this point, we had eight people living in those two apartments, with a ninth person (Terri) staying over most nights. Undoubtedly, that wasn't going to fly if we were renting.

As far as Mark, the boys' case worker, was concerned, we still had to keep up the illusion that Duncan had moved out, and that Bobby and Rex were still living in the city and only staying at the apartment two nights a week. We also had to make it seem that Delilah only came to visit sporadically, which wasn't

true, either. She was most definitely there more nights than not.

If anyone in Mark's office had ever found out, we could have all been in some real trouble, and there would have been a chance that the boys would have been taken away from me. So, we had to be consistent in our stories. Things were getting a bit complicated with our living conditions, but we made do.

The Prom was doing well, and after the dance studio moved out downstairs, we made that our practice area. By that point, none of us were students at BMCC, so we really couldn't justify using the music rooms each night. No one informed the night security guards of this, so they just kept letting us in. But that was unfair, and we didn't like taking advantage of their kindness.

The dance studio was perfect for our needs. The previous tenants had spent quite a bit soundproofing the walls, so we could play our music without bothering too many people, providing we kept the sound at a reasonable level. In addition, because we had the extra space, John and Jahmir moved up to Tarrytown.

There was an office area in the dance studio, so we spent some time converting it into a half-bedroom, half-office for the guys. We couldn't really make it a full bedroom in there, as the building code did not allow it, so we kept it an office with a desk and bookshelves and just added bunk beds to one wall. There was a small kitchenette next to a maintenance closet with a utility shower stall for mops and such, so the boys just used it as a regular shower.

It was truly perfect. The Prom was all together, and it was lovely.

For the first time in a long while, I was truly, truly happy.

18 CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: 1987, DIARAH AT 24 (RUSH)

My nineteenth year was all-consuming with four things: 1) finishing up my graduation requirement for Fordham, 2) applying to a master's program at NYU, 3) the boys, and 4) all things Delilah.

When she was around, she kind of made it so that everyone and everything else came second. But she was a delight. She looked a lot like me, which is not surprising, as I looked like I could have been related to Bobby and Mikey. She was a strong, chunky (in a good way) girl and was very rough-and-tumble.

We all showered Delilah with attention, but out of all of us, she preferred to be with Mikey, and he catered to her every whim. If any one of us were holding her, he would come up and say, "My baby!" and take her away. He had no issues feeding her or changing her diaper, and he would help with bath time and keeping track of her. And I would love it when he would sit with her and listen intently whenever any of us would read Delilah a story.

They were best friends, even more so than Mikey and Nicky, who were also incredibly close. In a weird way, they almost reminded me of Michael and me, and at least once a day, I would see them together and think of my early years with him. I had him wrapped around my finger much in the same way that Delilah had with Mikey.

Mikey matured so much during those first couple of years with Delilah. He was incredibly responsible, and it was so lovely to be able to pass her off to him when she was acting up or needed to be rocked to sleep before bedtime. I'll be honest—I was initially somewhat dreading the arrival of Delilah, afraid to think about all the extra work, time, and money she was going to cost us, but I really had nothing to worry about. It all turned out fine.

Delilah's mother, Priscilla, was essentially not involved in her daughter's life. Priscilla lived with her mother, Linda, so it was agreed upon in court that Delilah was to spend half of each week with them. But we quickly discovered that neither Priscilla nor Linda wanted much of anything to do with the child. What Linda did want was the money she received from the state for Delilah's care. So, we came up with a plan that worked for all of us.

Our weekly schedule was that Bobby would pick up Delilah from the state-run day care each Wednesday. On Wednesday evening, Bobby would bring her to Tarrytown, and we would keep her until he brought her back to the city on Monday morning. This way, if Delilah's case manager wanted to see her with her mother, that could be arranged anywhere from Monday morning to Wednesday afternoon.

Linda was more than happy to agree to this arrangement for several reasons: 1) Bobby agreed that any state funds for Delilah's care should be directed to Linda; 2) Bobby would also give Linda an additional amount of money each week in exchange for those extra days we kept her; and 3) having the baby only two and a half days each week meant that Linda barely had to take care of her.

I know what you're thinking, and you're right—I'm not a big fan of mothers, having had a bad experience with my own. But my immense displeasure with Priscilla was not unfounded.

I'll give you an example: On Monday mornings, I would pack Delilah's bag with food, several changes of clothing, and a huge stack of diapers and wipes so that Linda never needed to keep any provisions readily available. In addition, Bobby would take a bag full of food, snacks, diapers, and wipes to the childcare center for Delilah each week, and he would also give the center a $20.00 bill.

The childcare workers knew to take the money to purchase anything extra for the baby, as we assumed that the only time Delilah was eating during those three days each week with Linda was when she was at the center. We highly doubted Delilah was fed anything while in Linda's care, as according to the childcare workers, she was completely ravenous each Tuesday and Wednesday morning.

And every Wednesday when Bobby picked up Delilah, her bag would be filled only with the baby's dirty clothing. There were no snacks, no diapers, and no wipes anywhere in that bag. So, to be prepared, Bobby had to bring a bag for Delilah to work with him each Wednesday, so that he would have supplies for the train ride back to Tarrytown.

I would also notice that on many Wednesdays, Delilah would return to us in the same outfit I would put her in on Monday. The only time it seemed her outfit would change was if she messed it or got it dirty somehow at daycare. Linda certainly never changed the baby's clothing. And, funny enough, the clothing that did come back in Delilah's bag was usually pieces that were old, stained, and tattered, not the beautiful, clean outfits I would put in the bag each week.

So, Linda would not only keep all the money from the state and from Bobby for Delilah, but she would also not purchase any food, diapers, or clothing for her, either. That was all on us, so it was a bit frustrating. But it was fine, as we got to keep Delilah for five nights and four days, which was all we really wanted. It was a good trade-off as far as I was concerned.

I will be honest—I had a hard time with the whole situation, as it was, to me, very reminiscent of my own mother and my time with the Aceti family. My mother was just like Priscilla, completely ignoring her daughter and essentially denying her of basic necessities, and all of us were like the Aceti family, making sure Delilah had everything she needed, at least when she was with us. I still hadn't met either Priscilla or Linda, and for a long time, I was hoping I never would.

But I was very lucky that year, in that I really had nothing to complain about. Yes, the whole situation with Delilah's mother and grandmother was mildly irritating, but that was all. The band was doing well, and we were getting a ton of gigs. We were almost becoming big fish in a small pond. No one was beating down the door to offer us any recording contracts, but many college students our age knew who we were or had at least heard of us.

Pops, Rex, and I had gone in together to purchase an old Toyota hatchback for all of us to use, mostly for food shopping and doctor appointments. However, one night, the four members of The Prom, Jahmir, John, Duncan, and I, took the car and drove out to Yonkers to get some White Castle burgers after rehearsal.

On the way out of town, one of our songs came on the radio on Fordham Marymount's radio station. All four of us screamed simultaneously when we heard it, and I had to pull over on the side of the highway, as my eyes welled up with tears of joy. It was an amazing moment, and within days, we heard our music pop up all over the place, not only on college stations but on independent stations, as well.

We were riding the biggest high for days, but three weeks later, it was all done.

John was offered a recording contract. Not The Prom. Just John.

We all knew he was the most talented of our group, but it did sting a bit that the agent only wanted him, not the rest of us. I think out of the three of us, I was the most devastated. It was not because of the recording contract—I honestly couldn't have cared less about that—but because our time as a group was done.

Jahmir, however, was determined to keep us together and felt that we should keep going. So, The Prom continued to live, even without John. And Jahmir came up with a great idea.

Duncan, Jahmir, and I were going to be the main members of the band, but we were going to allow other musicians to come in and play with us for a year. We were going to help lift up other musicians in the area, ones that the recording agencies never gave a chance.

So, every year, The Prom would have its guest leader of the band, the replacement for John. For one year, we would help rising artists get their music out there to the masses. We would help develop their sound, and we would only play the songs that we all agreed to perform. It was kind of crazy—The Prom

never got its own recording contract, but the several artists we helped got contracts fairly quickly. Still, it was a great time.

In the meantime, I continued writing lyrics on my own, with Duncan composing the music. I started always carrying a personal dictation tape recorder with me, and soon, I was just handing tapes over to him instead of notebooks. This was a gamechanger for me, as I was able to get down the specifics of a song the moment it came into my head.

Before, I had to fight to hold on to songs in my brain. With that recorder, I could set them free almost immediately. In fact, most of the songs Duncan and I wrote during that period were developed while I was at work. I learned in one of my classes that both cryptology and playing music require using both sides of one's brain, so maybe that's why all those songs crawled out while I was in Reggie's office.

Other than that, life was blissfully uneventful. I was still working for Louie. (Let's face it—I would never stop working for Louie. I knew a good thing when I had it.) And I was chugging right along on my path towards graduation. By that spring, I would have my bachelor's degree in hand and would be starting my master's degree soon after. At that point, I couldn't imagine anything disrupting my life and my plans. I had organized my life well, and everything was on track.

But, that year, I learned quickly that you can go ahead and plan all you want. None of it will matter if the Good Lord has other interesting ideas in store for you.

19 CHAPTER NINETEEN: 1988, DIARAH AT 25 (ONE CARESS)

Everything can change in an instant.

I knew that to be true. But I wasn't quite expecting it on that warm day on the first of September.

On the first Thursday of each month, Louie would ask me to come to the main offices in the city to attend the monthly staff meeting. A lot of the information during those meetings didn't really pertain to me, but he felt that it was important that the rest of the staff was reminded that I still worked for the company and that I was still part of the team. However, in reality, the only person I communicated with regularly was Mr. Jarvis.

After the incident in the stairwell two years prior, the office hierarchy had changed quite a bit, with Mr. Jarvis taking on many of the day-to-day issues. This meant that Louie was doing a bit more in client relations, spending a lot of time traveling overseas. It was basically the same thing he had been doing when I met him in San Gimignano six years earlier.

As I exited the elevator on the 47th floor each month, I would walk over to the mail slot on the wall near the receptionist's desk and deposit my four monthly cards, letters, or postcards to Michael, as it was the only place I would remember to send them.

I didn't go into the office on Fridays, as Reggie was there, and I was still responsible for any work calls that came in on Saturdays. However, I didn't have class on Fridays either, so I would use that time to go to the coffee shop in Tarrytown, down the street from our house, to do homework and write my weekly letter to Bastian. By that point, though, almost none of the letters were about me. Mikey, Nicky, and Delilah were usually the main topics with the band, Bobby, Rex, and Pops thrown in here and there.

I would always bring my work bag with me anytime I went into the city. In reality, I brought my work bag wherever I went. It was my new, more professional version of the backpack I used to always have on me. And, like that backpack, I also kept quite a bit of cash on me, even though I always had the corporate card in case of emergencies.

I tried going places without that work bag but just never felt completely safe unless it was on my person. And there were plenty of moments when I was very happy that I had it with me. A couple of times, I had been caught in the city on nights when the weather turned bad, and the trains were so delayed that I couldn't catch one home, so aside from cash, I always had a light change of clothing with me.

And my passport was always in that bag, as well. I did have my NY state driver's license, but I just liked having that passport on me. Yes, I had a lot of people counting on me at home, but I always liked the idea that I could run off to a foreign country at a moment's notice if I needed to. I guess it was just the way I dealt with the trauma of my childhood—fleeing to Europe each summer was the only thing that kept me sane. I liked knowing that I didn't have to rely on anyone else to do that ever again.

The meeting lasted much longer than usual, for some reason. There was a lot in terms of news and announcements, so the discussion, which usually ended around 4:45 p.m., was still going strong at 5:30 p.m. Some people who needed to leave for other obligations did so, but Mr. Jarvis asked all who could stay would stay. So, I sat there until the meeting adjourned just before 6:00 p.m., with only about half of the office personnel still there.

I no longer had a desk in the building, but once the meeting ended, I walked over to my old cubicle. An intern from NYU had taken my old spot. I didn't know her, but she had NYU everything all over the walls and around her computer, so she either attended that university or was able to get a lot of free swag from there.

I needed to use the phone to call home and let them know I was running late, and I was just about to pick up the receiver when the phone rang. I watched it ring twice, not wanting to answer someone else's phone line. But something, somewhere deep inside, was telling me to pick up the receiver.

I didn't answer in the proper manner with the trained spiel I was taught for the office. Instead, I quietly said, "Hello?"

I didn't hear anyone on the other end.

I repeated "Hello?" a bit more forcefully. I only heard breathing on the other end of the line.

For some reason that I cannot explain, I whispered, "Michael?"

I heard him weeping softly on the other end. Oh, my God, it was him. It was Michael.

I said in almost a half-yell, "Michael? Michael? Is that you? Are you okay?"

He didn't reply, and I continued to hear whimpering on the other end of the line.

"Michael, stay right there. I'm coming to get you. Do not move. Do you hear me? I'm heading to the airport right now. Do you understand? Don't move, Michael. I'm coming to get you. Do you hear me?"

I heard nothing on the other end.

"Michael, do you hear me?!?" I yelled into the receiver.

"Yes," was all he said. He sounded like a wounded animal.

"I will be there as soon as I can. I will be there soon," I kept repeating.

"Okay." He spoke so softly that I could barely hear him on the other end of the line.

"I'm leaving now. I'm going to hang up the phone now, but I'm leaving to go to the airport right this second."

"Okay."

"Michael?" I whispered. "I still love you with all my heart."

And I did. Hearing his voice was everything. He said nothing. I could only hear him softly crying on the other end.

"I'll be there very soon."

And with that, I hung up the phone, ran to the elevator, and pushed the down button a hundred times.

There were only a few people still in the building, so the elevator arrived quickly, but I was positively frantic to get out of there. I was alone in the elevator, and when it opened into the lobby, I leapt out and sprinted towards the main glass doors, waving goodbye to Hassan, the security guard who helped me rescue Louie two years prior.

I got down to the station below and grabbed the first subway out to the airport. I sat in that subway car trying to calm my breathing.

For a split second, I thought I had dreamed the whole thing. There was no way that Michael had called. It made no sense.

I just happened to be at the office, right at that desk, when he called?

No. It just wasn't possible.

I mean, that first year, I did sign each letter with the name Bunny. And with that phone number. To that desk, as I had no phone of my own.

So, he was looking at letters that were four years old?

No, that couldn't be correct. It sounded insane.

For a moment, I thought about turning around and getting on the subway back to the city, and then a train to Tarrytown. But, again, something inside of me told me to head to JFK. And so, I did.

At Howard Beach, I transferred to a shuttle bus, got to the airport, and ran to the International Arrivals Building. I headed straight for Alitalia. No one was at the counter, as their next flight wasn't for hours. One lone agent stood at the desk, deep in thought.

I ran up to her and yelled, "I need a ticket to Italy tonight! It's an emergency!"

The poor woman jumped a foot. I scared her half to death.

She looked at me, saw how desperate I was, and then started typing away on her computer.

"There is a flight tonight at 9:40 p.m. to Rome."

"I need to get to Florence. Are there any flights there?"

"I can get you a connecting flight to Florence. You will arrive at 4:25 p.m., local time."

"Okay. I'll take it." I handed her my corporate card.

"It will be $1,133.00. Do you have any bags to check?"

"No, I don't."

I almost passed out when I heard the amount. It was going to take me years to pay Louie back all the money. I knew he had said I could use the card in case of an emergency, but I was pretty sure this wasn't what he had in mind.

I didn't care. I would deal with the repercussions later.

I got my ticket and started to head towards the gates. And then I remembered that I never called home. Oh, God, I was supposed to be home hours ago.

I called, and Duncan answered it on the first ring.

"Hey, where are you? I have a date with Billy tonight. You were supposed to be here."

I completely forgot about his date. I felt like the world's worst friend for what I was about to do.

"Duncan, if you do me this huge, huge favor, I will owe you forever more. Please, please, I need you to come through for me."

"What? What's going on?"

He sounded excited and curious. I was pretty fucking boring normally. Everything in my life revolved around everyone in those apartments upstairs. So, he was quite interested to hear what was so important to me.

"Well, you're not going to believe this, but I'm going to Italy. I'm going to go get Michael. I'm bringing him home."

He gasped.

"NO. WAY! Are you telling me that that man really exists? I'll be honest—John, Jahmir, and I totally thought that you made him up just so we would leave you alone about not dating. We kind of thought you were a lesbo! Ha!"

My voice became serious.

"Duncan, please, please, please watch the kids for me this weekend. I promise you, I will give you whatever you want when I get back home. I promise."

"Okay, okay! Don't get your panties in a wad. I'll watch the boys and Delilah. But I'm going to need some money to get us pizzas for the next few days because you know I am not cooking."

"There is a can of Ajax in the bathroom. If you pull off the lid, there is a baggie with about $1,000 cash in it. Use whatever you need."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me! We are all getting our own individual pizzas tonight, then!" He sounded excited.

"I will call you from Florence. I will bring him home as quickly as I can. Hey, Duncan? Thank you. Thank you so much. I owe you big time."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go get your man," he said and hung up.

I kissed the dirty phone receiver and thought to myself, "Duncan, I love you so much!"

I was going to call Michael to give him my flight information, but I decided against it. I was afraid Papà or someone else would answer the phone, and I really didn't want to talk to anyone else there. I didn't want to talk to Michael, either. What were we going to say to each other?

I started to walk towards the airport security checkpoint and got through it in record time, mostly because I was traveling internationally without any bags.

I still had almost two hours to go before the flight took off. I was starving, but I was not going to get anything to eat in the terminal. No, for $1,133, they could feed me on the plane.

And I should have probably been a bit more concerned about leaving the boys and Delilah behind for a few days, but I wasn't. I had so many emotions running through me that I really had no idea what I was thinking or feeling. My brain was on autopilot.

I walked to the gate and sat in a chair with my head down, my eyes closed, and my arms wrapped around my work bag. It was hours before the flight, so there was virtually no one waiting at my gate, but without looking up, I could feel someone sit down next to me. I thought to myself that this person was the rudest individual on the planet. There were plenty of chairs around me, but some creep had to come and sit right next to me.

I kept my eyes closed. Then, I felt this person start to blow in my ear.

"Excuse me!" I started to say when I opened my eyes.

It was Rex. He was in his full uniform, and he looked really good. It had been a long time since I had seen him dressed like a cop. He always left his uniform in the barracks or at the dry cleaners downtown.

"What on earth—?" I started to say.

"Duncan told Pops what you were doing, and Pops called the station and told the dispatcher to radio me. He said that you were at the airport and were flying to Italy. I just had to come see it for myself." He smiled.

I nodded my head slowly, indicating that he was correct.

I paused for a moment. "Yup. Hopefully, I will be bringing him back with me."

He raised his eyebrows. "I can't imagine you coming back without him. I don't see that as a scenario."

I stared at him with a small smile. "You're right. You're absolutely right."

Rex put his arm around me and pulled me in for a side hug.

"I hope you get everything you wish for," he said. "Honestly, I do. And I hope to God this is all worth it, as my father is making me use some of my vacation days to help him with the kids."

"I'm so sorry I—,"

Rex interrupted me by putting up his hand in a stop position.

"You don't have to say a thing. You don't have to apologize, and you don't

have to thank me. I have owed you for quite a while.

"My dad was pretty mad at me after the whole gambling debacle. I didn't think he was ever going to forgive me. But he is really happy now. He likes living with you and the kids. I think it keeps him young. And he's thrilled to have found Terri."

He thought for a moment. "Yeah, I owe you. I do. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I'm happy to watch the kids for you."

Rex sat with me until I had to board. What a gift that was. So many of my friends hated their ex. I adored mine. It probably had a lot to do with the fact that we were still living under the same roof. But we could have avoided each other, I guess. I just think we really liked each other, and something like a girlfriend wasn't going to come between us.

And I thought about that on the whole flight over. If it had been so easy for Rex and me to be friends after he was in another relationship, then it would have been just as easy for me to be friends with Michael if he had met someone. I couldn't wait to tell him that, to shove it in his face.

But I was going to be wrong about that whole situation.

I was soon going to learn how things went down, and I was going to forgive my friend a hundred times over.

The Bunny Trail trilogy
continues with the second book in the series,
Thou Wilt Go Now, Rabbit

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DJ Tombe is the pseudonym of the writer and editor who compiled, edited, and published *The Bunny Trail* series from the original journals written by their late Papà, Bastian.

Although they are not the original author of the journals, DJ prepared them for publication while preserving their father's original voice and style. Over time, each journal will be made available to share Bastian's story with a wider audience.

The series is based on Bastian's firsthand writings, with many names changed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy of family members and others who did not wish to be identified.

The Bunny Trail is the first in the three-book series. The second is *Thou Wilt Go Now, Rabbit*, with the final instalment being *I Go with Thee*.

DJ continues to oversee the publication of all three journals.

For more information, please visit bunnytrail.info or email DJ at authordjtombe@gmail.com.