Thou Wilt Go Now, Rabbit

THE JOURNALS OF BASTIAN ACETI

Book 2 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, please know that 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*

20 CHAPTER TWENTY: 1988, BASTIAN AT 29/ DIARAH AT 25 (HOME)

Bunny had hung up the phone on the other end, but I couldn't put the receiver down.

I sat on my filthy bed in my filthy room and cradled the handset. I was trembling. Hot, sticky tears ran down my face, and I could feel myself rocking back and forth just a bit. I looked up at Gio, closed my eyes, and smiled weakly.

"She's coming to get me," I said quietly to no one in particular.

The last four years had been hell. Anja had no interest in being anyone's wife, especially mine, so after the giant, over-the-top wedding, we lived together for a short time, staying in my room downstairs. I hid all evidence of Bianca and anything that gave my sexuality, or lack of it, away.

I will give Anja credit—she made an attempt at being a wife. We tried on two occasions to be intimate, both times ending with her crying in the bathroom and with me feeling worthless. She wasn't attracted to me, and being in bed with her almost made me feel as if I was forcing myself on her. Is it truly considered consummation when the wife closes her eyes and won't look or touch her husband during the act? I would think most would answer no.

The only time Anja projected any warmth in my direction was when I told her that she didn't have to live with me any longer and that she could return to her family home. The overwhelming relief that showed on her face broke my heart. But it was clear that even though we were to live apart, we would still have to uphold all pretences and act as a legitimate couple during special outings, parties, and occasions. About once a month, we would attend a dinner party thrown by one of her friends or possibly catch an opera or concert somewhere in town with her family, but for the most part, I never saw her.

I was more alone than I had ever been, even before Bunny came into my life. My father and brothers rarely came downstairs to check on me, which

wasn't surprising, as I assumed that they were still feeling guilty about the whole situation. It wasn't their fault—I didn't make much of an effort to go upstairs to see them, either. Outside of our clinic work together, we avoided one another.

But it was my choice. All of it was my choice. It was my decision to marry Anja, and it was my decision to live a life completely devoid of any human contact. I had no one to blame for the state of my life other than myself.

I later learned that Bunny wrote to me each week, but at the time, I had no idea. I was later informed that when her letters arrived at the house, my father would take them and hide them in Bunny's old room, afraid that, through them, I would learn where she was living and fly off to be with her. He didn't want me to have any temptation to flee Italy.

So, over those four years, Papà kept a metal box in that closet that contained hundreds of envelopes, all from Bunny. When I finally acquired them years later, I learned that I received at least one piece of mail from her every week. It wasn't just letters. She sent me postcards from places she and the kids visited, as well as Christmas and birthday cards each year. A few times, she even sent me drawings from Mikey and Delilah.

I was unaware of any of these until the day I called her.

At no point in my life would anyone describe me as a robust man. I was always on the thin side, just slightly below the average weight for my frame. I was also on the short side at 165 cm. My father was a bit shorter than me, and it was evident that I got my physique from his side of the family. I always hovered right around 60 kg and never put on much muscle mass, either.

Bunny once called me "lanky." I am clearly not very tall, but to someone like her, who never grew much past 155 cm, I suppose I would be considered lanky. One night in San Gimignano, she tossed and turned while sleeping next to me. She woke up with a start and said that sharing a bed with me was like sleeping next to "a bunch of sticks." I probably should have been somewhat insulted by that comment, but I found it hilarious.

However, on that day that I read Bunny's letter and called her, I was about 42 kg. If asked, I would have said that I wasn't actively trying to kill myself, but I don't know. I probably was. By that time, I had sunk into becoming addicted to heroin.

I had facial sores and scabs all over my body and had prematurely aged. I looked as if I could have been 50—maybe even 60—years old. Large patches of my hair had fallen out, and what little was left was stringy. Between barely eating and the drugs, I had just about destroyed my body. I was clearly on death's door, and everyone in my family knew it.

I couldn't remember the last time I had left my room, and I hadn't been to the clinic next door in months. Marta would leave meal trays outside my door three times a day. Sometimes I would eat, sometimes I wouldn't. It had probably been three days since I touched any of the food that she left for me,

so she alerted Gio. (Years later, I learned that when Marta came to check on me that evening, she thought I had already died based on the stench that was seeping through the crack at the bottom of my door.)

After his clinic work and the mounds of paperwork that needed to be completed that evening, Gio came downstairs to look in on me. He knocked for several minutes, and when I didn't answer, he went back upstairs and found the emergency key to my room on the hook in the kitchen. He was able to unlock the door, but it took him a few tries to get it open, as piles of clothes and trash were blocking it. Getting frustrated, he pushed on it with all his might and came stumbling into my room.

It took him a few steps to get his bearings, but when he did, he stood perfectly still and looked around slowly, clearly shocked at the scene before him.

I was barely clinging to life, living in dirty, dangerous conditions, surrounded by garbage. I had given up completely. I felt like shit, so why not live amongst it?

Even in my humble medical opinion, I was mere days away from death, so weak that I couldn't even sit up without assistance. The bed I was lying in was covered in old urine spots and dried-up faeces, as it was difficult for me to walk the steps to reach the restroom. I resorted to wearing diapers most of the time.

Gio hadn't been down to visit me in months, so when he saw how I was living, he became enraged.

"That's it! That's fucking it! No more!" he screamed and ran down the hall and up the stairs to the kitchen.

I caught bits and pieces of him arguing with Papà, and then I could hear him continue running up the stairs to the upper floor of our house. I then felt his heavy footsteps running back down to my room.

Gio entered and set down a large metal box next to me.

"Here. You need to see these."

He opened the box and passed me a handful of envelopes. They were all addressed to me, and they were all from Bunny. I looked over at the box. Inside, there were hundreds of letters.

Hundreds of letters.

She hadn't forgotten me, and if she was still mad, she was able to put her anger aside long enough to keep in touch with me and let me know what was going on in her life.

I was so weak that I couldn't even rip the first envelope open. My nails were also quite long by that point, which didn't help. Gio impatiently grabbed the envelope from my hands, ripped it open, withdrew the letter inside, and passed it to me.

It was dated two years prior. It mentioned Louie. Oh, how happy I was that she contacted him. It also mentioned Bobby, as well as the names of

individuals that I had not heard previously. And it mentioned her children. She had children. Did this mean that she was married?

I opened and read a second letter. At the bottom, under her signature, there was a phone number, and next to it, in parentheses, she wrote: (work).

I looked at the clock. It was almost midnight, my time. That meant it would have been close to 18:00, her time. It was a Thursday night. She wouldn't be at the office. She would be at home with her family.

I told myself not to dial the phone—that I would only be disappointed when she didn't answer. I would have to wait days to talk to her, maybe more. I might have been able to reach her that following Monday, but what if that was no longer her work number? What if she had moved on? Maybe I wasn't going to be able to find her.

Nevertheless, I picked up the receiver of the phone next to my bed and dialled the number to her work line. If it was still her number, maybe it was her voice on the after-hours message. That's all I wanted. I just wanted to hear her voice.

I was utterly shocked when she answered.

I couldn't say anything. I couldn't breathe.

And then I heard her whisper my name. How did she know it was me? How did she know?

I didn't even realize I had started to whimper. I was in a daze.

And then she said the sentence that changed everything.

"I'm coming to get you."

And with that, I wanted to live. I wanted to live so badly.

But then I started to panic, thinking that all the damage might have already been done. I was already dying. Could I possibly be saved? I was so afraid that she would arrive in Italy and there would be nothing left of me. We'd finally see each other again, only to say goodbye.

I had so many thoughts running through my mind. I could hear her speak, but I could say nothing back on the line. I remember that she had to ask me if I heard her, and it took every ounce of effort I had to tell her, "Yes."

And before she hung up, she said she still loved me, and I swear I could hear angels sing.

How could everything—everything—change entirely in the span of two minutes? But it did.

After Gio took the phone receiver away from me and hung it up, I revelled in the joy of that conversation for about 30 seconds. And then reality hit me, and I realized that so much needed to be done.

For weeks, my father had tried to give me an I.V. as I was not eating and was quite dehydrated, but I refused. My organs were in the process of shutting down.

But then? After the phone call?

Then, I couldn't get an I.V. in me fast enough.

"Gio, please, help me. She will be here tomorrow. She cannot see me like this. Please, help me," I pleaded with him.

"Bastian, you need to calm down. Your heart and body are weak. I will help you, but you have already done significant damage to your system. It's going to take a while to get you healthy, and that is only if it can be done at all. Bunny's going to see you in this condition, and there's not much that can be done about that."

I lay back in bed, exhausted and overwhelmed by what Gio had just said. I pleaded again with him, "Please, can you do whatever you can to just keep me alive until tomorrow?"

"I will do my very best to make sure that you are well enough to see her," he said with a small smile.

"Oh, and please find Snickers. He's probably in the house with Papà. She'll want to see him once she gets here," I said weakly, feeling myself dozing off.

My girl was coming home to me. I could finally rest.

I woke up several hours later to find Giovanni sitting in a chair across the room from me, leafing through a magazine. He hadn't left.

He saw me stir and said, "Well, you should be feeling at least a little bit better. You have taken in two bags of I.V. fluids thus far. I inserted a catheter and have been monitoring your levels. You were very dehydrated, Bastian."

"I know. I haven't eaten in days, either."

"I will go next door, as I believe we have some nutritional supplement drinks at the clinic. Are you okay to be on your own for a few minutes?"

Weakly, I nodded my head in the affirmative.

"What time is it?"

Gio glanced at his watch. "It's 5:45. If Bunny was able to catch a flight to Italy last night, she should be here in about ten hours or so," he said and walked out the door.

Ten hours.

I scanned my room. It was an absolute mess.

I tried to get up to start cleaning a bit but realized I couldn't stand on my own. I knew it had been weeks since I could walk more than a few feet unassisted, but now I couldn't even stand? How long had I been lying in that bed?

My leg muscles were so atrophied that they couldn't support me. I grabbed the wall and tried to steady myself when I saw my reflection in the mirror across the room. I didn't recognize who was staring back at me. I was terrifying. In fact, I was far more terrifying at that moment than when I didn't have a nose.

At that moment, Gio had returned from the clinic and walked back in through the doorway. He began to say something and stopped when he saw me out of bed, leaning haphazardly against the wall. He dropped the cans and

ran over to grab me. I fell into his arms, losing all my strength, and he picked me up like a baby and gently put me back onto the bed.

I sheepishly looked at Gio. "It's a bit worse than I thought," I said with a weak, pathetic chuckle.

He didn't smile back.

He covered me up and sat on the bed next to me.

"Okay, Bastian, truth time. You're a physician, but as of right now, you are my patient, and I will speak to you as such.

"You clearly are unaware of how sick you are. The heroin has destroyed you physically. As you well know, all drug use comes with adverse cardiovascular effects, and you have been abusing your body for months. You cannot get out of bed again, and you must be very careful with everything that you do. If you put too much pressure on your heart, it could give out. Do you understand me?"

"But my room is—"

Gio interrupted me.

"It doesn't matter what Bunny thinks of your room if she shows up here and you're dead." He was serious.

"Oh, Lord. Okay. You're right. I'll do everything you say," I said to him. "But can you please help me clean myself up a bit? I am disgusting. I know how bad I smell."

"I will help you, but you must lie there and not move. We need to get you stable. Your numbers are all over the place."

I slowly sipped the supplement drink that Giovanni gave me. Between that and the I.V. fluids, I was freezing and began to shiver, so he piled down comforters on top of me and placed my winter hat on my head. I fell back asleep again, almost immediately.

I slept soundly for hours, so I was quite confused when I was jarred awake by the sounds of Bunny and Gio fighting.

When I was finally clear-headed enough to understand what was happening around me, I realized that Bunny was sitting on my bed, holding me like a baby. I was groggy, so all I could gather was that she was trying to pick me up and put me in the taxi in the driveway to take me away with her.

Gio said that he wanted to help. She said that he could "go fuck himself" and that she didn't want or need anything from him. It took a few minutes of Gio pleading with her, but Bunny finally relented.

"Fine, you piece of shit. You can help me take him to the hotel."

Bunny had an angry face and was breathing hard when Gio left to go up to the courtyard to pay for her taxi. While he was out of the room, Bunny glanced down at me, saw that I was awake and looking at her, and said, "Hi" in a very angry tone, still holding me.

She growled, "You look like shit, you know. You don't smell so hot, either."

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, shook her head, and gave a small chuckle.

She then looked back at me, grabbed my chin with the hand that was not holding me, and said sweetly, "I am really mad at you. But I am very happy to see you. I missed you very much."

I buried my head into the crook of her neck, and she held me tighter.

"Smart move keeping those up there," she said.

I lifted my head a bit, and she gestured with her chin over to the bulletin board above my desk. The two scrolls from Bakken—the ones that spelled out "Bunny" and "Michael" in letters in roller coaster cars—were still hanging exactly where she left them. They were faded a bit, and the corners were curled inwards, but they never moved in the 12 years since she had tacked them up there.

Gio re-entered my room and said, "Okay, my car is in the driveway, and your bag is in the front seat. The rear door is open. You two can sit back there together."

He walked towards Bunny to help her pick me up.

She snapped at him, "I got him!"

Gio put up his hands and backed away.

She did have me. She wrapped me in a blanket and picked me up off the bed with ease. She then carried me up the outside stairs and over to Gio's car and then slid herself into the back seat, still holding me.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Hotel Palazzo Vecchietti. I have a reservation," she mumbled.

He drove us past Il Duomo and to the Piazza della Repubblica. Bunny always said, as a child, that she wanted to stay in one of the "fancy" (meaning five-star) suites at Hotel Palazzo Vecchietti. It was supposed to be gorgeous inside, but I knew it was expensive. I didn't know how she was going to afford it.

Once we arrived, I dozed off yet again, and when I awoke, I saw that Gio had parked in a loading zone area around the corner from the hotel entrance. Bunny and I were still in the car, with her still holding me, and from the car window, I could see the sign for Caffè Gilli.

Bunny looked down at me and said, "I sent Gio inside with my credit card, just to get the room. I bet you 1,000,000 lire that he's going to completely fuck that up."

Bunny was surprised when Gio came back to the car with the key to the room. Although he was not supposed to park there, he pulled the car up in front of the hotel and helped Bunny get out. I could feel her dig her nails into me as she clutched me. It was apparent that she wasn't about to let me go.

I was thankful that no one was in the lobby as we entered. It was fairly late in the afternoon, so most of the guests were out getting dinner, and it was the end of the tourist season, so not all the rooms were filled. The staff

watched, confused, as Bunny carried me past the reception area to a set of stairs just beyond.

I don't think she planned on using the stairs, but our room was on the first floor, and there was no elevator in sight. She got about halfway up the stairs to the landing and had to stop. Gio came over, dropped the key and Bunny's work bag at her feet, and grabbed me from her, moving quickly toward our room.

Bunny picked up the key and bag off the floor and followed closely behind. She then pushed ahead of us so that she could open the door to the room.

We entered, and it was gorgeous. It was very classy, and the décor was beautiful. I could see why Americans enjoyed staying there—it was quintessential Italiano.

Gio was about to put me on the bed when Bunny stopped him.

"Nope!" she yelled at Gio.

She pointed at me. "It's into the bath for you. You reek."

Gio walked into the bathroom and sat on the toilet seat with me on his lap. Bunny filled the tub with warm water and used every vial of shampoo available to make a nice bubble bath. Once the tub was filled, she helped Gio lower me into it. The soap stung my open wounds a bit, but I tolerated it. Bunny then grabbed one of the glasses next to the sink and spent a few minutes using it to run the soapy water over my hair.

"Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"I'm okay," I answered, truthfully.

She stood up and told Gio, "I need you to sit with him for a few minutes so I can go down to reception and properly register us."

Then, she looked directly at me and said, "I will be right back."

I was terrified that she was leaving the room, and I'm sure that it showed. I looked at Gio, and he knew what I was thinking.

He whispered, "She will come back, Bastian. She didn't come all this way to leave you in a hotel bathtub."

She returned 10 minutes later with an extra bathrobe, a pair of socks, two toothbrushes, a tiny tube of toothpaste, and several additional vials of shampoo. She scooted Gio out of the bathroom and spent a few minutes washing my hair and body, taking her time to ensure she was gentle and that I was thoroughly bathed.

She then stopped and dropped the washcloth into the tub. A small, sad smile came across her face.

"I'm going to pretend that you look this horrific because you missed me so much."

I just stared at her and gave her a tiny smile. I was afraid that if I said anything, I would start to cry.

She then startled me by yelling, "Hey, Gio, I need you again," into the

next room. She had no issue bossing my brother around, and I kind of loved watching her take charge.

Gio returned and gave me a gentle smile. "You seem very content."

I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth of that tub. After the initial sting, the soapy water started to feel soothing on the sores covering my body.

She asked Gio to keep an eye on me while she grabbed some towels and left the room, and when she returned, she requested his help getting me out of the bath. Between the two of them, they could do it, even though I was quite slippery.

Bunny had laid two very large towels on the bed, and they set me down delicately on top of them. Bunny then gently swaddled me. When I was thoroughly dry, she unwrapped me and helped me into the clean, white bathrobe and the new, thick socks. I was worried that the open sores would stain the beautiful, pristine white robe I was wearing.

An agitated expression came across her face. She clearly knew what I was thinking and whispered, "It's just a stupid, fucking robe. It's fine."

She propped up pillows behind me and lifted me up so I could get under the covers. Then, for some inexplicable reason, she went over to the television and turned on old cartoons for me. I looked up at Gio, and we both stifled a laugh. I supposed that, as a mom, she did this out of habit.

She looked at Gio and said (in perfect Italian), "Okay, I need some things. Are you still willing to help?"

"Certo."

Bunny took out a sheet of hotel stationery and a pen from the desk drawer. She then sat at the foot of the bed, creating a very long list of items that needed to be retrieved from my room. Even though I was about a metre away from her, I could see what she was writing:

- *two shirts*
- *two pairs of sweats*
- *two pairs of socks*
- *two pairs of underwear*
- *two sweatshirts*
- *a CLEAN winter hat (not the disgusting thing he had on his head when we got here)*
- *any clothes you can find of mine (check the cupboard next to the television for a white laundry basket—my things should be in there, unless he threw them away)*
- *B's passport (should be in the center drawer of his desk)*
- *Snickers in his crate (plus his dog food, two bowls, collar, leash)*
- *sneakers for B (If no sneakers, any comfortable shoes will do.)*
- *any meds or whatever else you think he needs*

She handed the list to him and walked into the bathroom.

"Can I add one more thing?" I asked Gio quietly when Bunny was out of

earshot. "Please get every letter and card that she wrote."

He nodded his head and left.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Bunny shouted at him in English as he was walking out the door. "I'm starving. Can you pick us up something to eat?"

He nodded his head again and walked out the door.

She turned to me and asked, "How much you wanna bet that his car has been towed? He's been out there for, like, an hour."

I just stared at her. She was perfect. She was so happy and healthy and well. Her hair had grown back completely, and it was long and curly. She was still a few pounds overweight, but she was curvy, not fat. She was truly gorgeous, and I'm sure she looked the exact opposite of what I did.

I started to close my eyes. I was truly exhausted. Happy, but exhausted.

I could feel Bunny slide up next to me on the bed. She rested her head lightly against my shoulder and slid her hand into mine. A few minutes later, I heard her give a tiny laugh, so I assumed she was watching the cartoons she had turned on.

I woke up several hours later. Giovanni was back, and I could see that I was hooked up to another I.V. line. I also saw that he had inserted another catheter, and I felt a bit ashamed and embarrassed. I didn't want Bunny to see me like that. I started to panic until I realized that she was fast asleep next to me. She was so adorable, with Snickers curled up inside the robe she was wearing.

Gio was eating some of the snacks he had brought for us, and even though his back was to me as he sat at the desk in the room, I could hear him crunching away on an apple. He glanced up at the mirror in front of him and saw me looking at him in the reflection.

"Hey, how are you feeling?"

Still a bit weak, I answered, "I'm good. I think I'm okay," and gave him a small smile.

"Good. Well, Bunny has not woken up in several hours. I brought her dinner, but she kicked me when I tried to wake her."

"I'm not surprised," I said, feeling myself smiling again.

"If you're okay, I will go home and get some rest. Alessandra must be worried about me by now. But I will stop here first thing tomorrow on my way to the clinic."

He walked over to me, kissed my forehead, and said in a soft voice, "Will you do me a favour? You're doing better, but you're not out of the woods just yet. Take care of yourself tonight. Don't overdo it. Bunny is angry about pretty much everything and still appears to hate us. Could you imagine her wrath if you actually died? It would be Armageddon. So, please, no perishing can occur in this room, agreed?"

I gave a small chuckle and looked up at him. "I'll do my best."

And with that, he walked out the door.

I dozed off several minutes after he left. The bed was so warm with Bunny sleeping next to me.

I woke up a few hours later, only to find myself alone in the hotel room. It was dark, the only light in the room coming from the television. I was immediately terrified and didn't know what to do. I was utterly helpless. Why would Bunny leave me here? Where would she go in the middle of the night?

I was still only wrapped in that robe, and my clothes were lying on a chair on the far side of the room. I wanted to cry but stifled it. I took several deep breaths and began to feel around to see if she had left me a note on the bed to let me know where she had gone.

It was then that I touched a ball of hair down towards my knee. It took some effort, but I lifted my head to check the bottom half of the bed. There was Bunny. I had forgotten that she never slept well and was prone to tossing and turning. So, I really shouldn't have been all that surprised to find her there, lying across the bed in the wrong direction.

I couldn't fall back to sleep after that fit of panic that I gave myself, so I turned on the small light on the nightstand, looked around, and found a large paper bag next to me on the floor. It was filled with the letters Bunny sent. I reached down and grabbed a few off the top of the pile, the only ones I could reach, and began to read.

I soon discovered that I had no point of reference for any of the stories in the letters, so I realized that I needed to open every piece of correspondence and organize them chronologically. Only then could I begin to understand her life.

I glanced over at the clock. It was the middle of the night, and as I started to open the letters, I began to get a bit hungry. I gently woke Bunny up and asked her to get me something to eat. Barely awake, she stumbled out of bed and trudged over to the desk, picked up a banana and a box of crackers, and threw them at me. The banana hit me in the head, but as she was half-asleep, there was really no point in getting mad at her.

She walked back over to the bed, carrying a bottle of juice and a Pellegrino. With both in glass bottles, I was quite thankful that she didn't throw those at me. She fell back onto the bed, stomach first, and pushed the two bottles against my hip. She was snoring again within seconds. I would guarantee that she would have no recollection of that event the following morning.

Two days later, Bunny was still sleeping. Initially, I began to worry, thinking that she may have been seriously ill, but after reading more than half of the four years' worth of her letters, I began to understand why. Working for Louie, going to college full-time, taking care of two "boys" (as she liked to call them), playing in a band, taking care of Pops, her relationship with Rex… I didn't know how she did it all. She was probably perpetually exhausted.

And Rex.

I had absolutely no reason to be, but I was jealous reading about her relationship with him. Her letters never went into much detail about her boyfriend, but the fact that she had one made me seethe a bit. It was the oddest feeling—I was happy she wasn't alone and had someone to give her the love she so clearly deserved, yet I was a bit dejected that it wasn't me. It was crazy—I had pushed her out of my life but still expected to be the centre of hers. It made no sense.

Giovanni let himself into the room that following Monday evening, on his way home from the clinic, and he saw Bunny still lying there. He started to laugh.

"I apologize—this is going to sound revolting and offensive—but it's a good thing that I stop by each day to check on you. You could have been lying next to her dead these past few days, and she wouldn't have even realized it."

We both were laughing when she rolled over and let out a loud, angry grunt to let us know she was annoyed by our folly. She said nothing else, just the grunt, and rolled back over onto her belly. We watched her settle back down and then smiled at each other.

"Would you be willing to get something for me before you head home?" I whispered to Gio. "Could you run over to Giusti 22 and purchase a three-hole punch and a large three-ring binder?"

I motioned toward the large stack of letters to show him what I would use them for.

"Have you read all of these already?" he asked.

"Heavens, no. I'm only about two and a half years in. It took me a full day just to open them all and arrange them in date order," I said as I looked down at the massive pile of unfolded paper.

Gio left and returned shortly with three items instead of two. He purchased two large three-ring binders, as he didn't believe that just one would accommodate all the stationery. It took me a full night to get every piece of correspondence into them. (He was right—I did need them both.)

I started at the beginning, reading each letter and adding small notes in the margins. If she asked me a question, I answered it. If she wondered what I would think about something, I commented on it and told her what I thought. I wanted her to be able to go back and read all the letters someday and know what I was doing at those points in my life. I wanted her to have answers.

The next day, Bunny woke up with a start and yelled, "What day is it?!"

Gio, sitting in the corner, startled her when he replied, "Tuesday."

She glared at him. "Tuesday? *Tuesday*!?!? Shit!"

She ran across the room to her work bag, dug out her wallet, and ran over to the phone. She started dialling numbers frantically.

"Hey, baby! — I know. — I know. — I'm sorry. — You're right, I should have. — Soon. — Soon. — I promise. — Can you—?" was Bunny's end of the conversation. Whoever was on the other end of that line was not pleased with her. I would later learn that it was Mikey.

Bunny listened for a while and finally spoke again.

"Hey, how are you? I'm so sorry. — I'm working on that today. — As soon as possible. — Whatever we can get. At least it's not tourist season. — I will call you as soon as we have an itinerary. — Thank you, Pops. I owe you big time. — Love you!"

And with that, she hung up.

Without turning around, she said sadly, "Most of Tarrytown is not pleased with me at the moment."

"Tarrytown? What is that? Is that the city where you live?" Gio asked.

Still with her back to us, Bunny nodded softly in the affirmative.

"Am—Am I going to Tarrytown with you?" I asked quietly.

She looked over at me with a snap.

"You, my friend, will never be out of my fucking sight again for as long as you live," she said, trying to be sweet, but it came out with an angry tone.

I could tell she was still a bit upset about the phone call. She didn't like to disappoint people, and she was doing exactly that by putting me first.

Bunny picked up the phone again. That time, the call seemed a bit more professional. She spoke quietly and hung up. Within minutes, the phone in our room rang. She picked it up immediately.

"Oh, please don't hate me," was how she answered the line.

I could hear a man's voice on the other end of the phone. He did all the talking. I heard her tell him the name of the hotel and the room number. She thanked him and hung up.

"Well, you're in for a treat," she said to me and walked into the bathroom.

I could hear the water turn on in the shower even though the door wasn't closed. Bunny didn't mind nudity. In that way, I was far more of a prude than she was. And, as she always explained, my father and Gio had seen every part of her during all the various procedures after the attack in England. So, by that point, there was no sense in her being modest.

Gio looked over at me and said, "Well, I was going to leave and head back to the clinic, but if there's a treat coming, I think I'll stay for a bit."

Bunny jumped out of the shower and was dressed just as there was a knock at the door. She turned the knob, and a wonderfully friendly face stood in the doorway.

"Can I come in?" Louie asked in his loud, nasally, jovial tone.

Bunny hugged him tightly around the waist. Louie scanned the room and asked, "So, where's the patient?"

He glanced over at me, and a look of surprise came over his face.

"Wow. Is that really you, Michael? My goodness, you look like absolute

shit!" he said with a giant smile.

He came over to the bed to shake my hand.

"Are you going to be okay to fly? The last thing I want is for someone to die on the company's dime. That would not be good for the annual report."

Bunny laughed immediately, but it took me a minute to understand it was a joke.

Louie then turned to Bunny and said, "Diarah, I am leaving first thing Thursday morning. I have another set of meetings tomorrow, but I want to be out of here by Thursday as it's Fionna's birthday on Friday."

"Diarah? Are you now Diarah?" I asked Bunny.

She walked over to her work bag, rifled through it, and pulled out a passport. She tossed it gently onto my lap.

I opened it and read out loud, "Diarah Theresa Jamesson."

My eyes met hers. "Interesting name. I like it. I like it a lot."

I looked back at her passport and gasped. "We have the same birthday! I love that. And… you're somehow… now… five years older?"

"Yup," she stated, crossing her arms and leaning against the dresser near the door. She seemed a bit proud of herself.

"So, I assume you no longer want me to call you Bunny."

"No, I'd rather you didn't."

"And no more Dolores?" I asked.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Michael?" she barked, scolding me. "It's Diarah. Or Dia. Either would be fine."

"Diarah," I whispered softly. "It's a lovely name."

Louie was watching our exchange. "You've been here since Saturday, and he didn't know you changed your name?"

Bunny said nothing. She hunched her shoulders and gave him a wry smile.

Louie leaned over and asked her in a loud whisper, "So, who's the male model over in the corner?"

Diarah loudly whispered back, "That's Giovanni, Michael's brother. If you think he's good-looking, you should see the gay one."

He walked over to Gio and held out his hand. "I'm Louie. Nice to meet you."

Out of nowhere, Snickers ran up to Louie's ankles, barking ferociously.

"And you must be Snickers!" he exclaimed. "I've heard so much about you, you little rat!"

Glancing up at Diarah, he said, "Speaking of Snickers, I'm starving. Can you join me downstairs for a few minutes to grab something to eat? I believe we have a few items to discuss."

Diarah looked over at Gio. "Could you stay for just a few more minutes?"

Gio closed his eyes, nodded, and said, "Go."

Diarah was halfway out the door before he even responded. He came over and sat next to me on the bed.

"Well, that was quite interesting. You know Bunny's supervisor?" Gio asked. "Where on earth did you meet him?"

"San Gimignano," I replied, giving a tiny smile. "Bunny and I borrowed Papà's car and took a little vacation. It's a long story."

Giovanni smiled at me. "I would venture to guess that you two have quite a few secrets. You know, I used to follow you two when you went to the bowling alley in the middle of the night."

I could feel my eyes widen.

Gio reached for his medical bag, pulled out the cuff, and started taking my blood pressure.

"Tell me, are you concerned about the plane ride to the States?" he asked me.

"No," I replied honestly. "If I die, I'll die with her. I'm okay with that."

Gio started to ask me something else, but Diarah bounded back into the room.

"A car will be here to pick us up at 7:30 Thursday morning! We're going to be able to fly home with Louie on the private jet! No crowded planes and no lines at customs. We get to fly directly into the executive corporate terminal."

She shouted to the ceiling, "Thank you, Lord, and thank you, Louie!"

We watched Bunny walk into the restroom, and Gio leaned over and said, "I have to get back to the clinic, but I really need to speak with you in private tonight."

I nodded my head in agreement, and he left.

Two hours later, Giovanni returned right after finishing his appointments for the day. Diarah immediately went off shopping as soon as he arrived, leaving us to our own devices. Gio brought a wheelchair back from the clinic and wheeled me downstairs to have a nice dinner together. I didn't eat, but it was nice to get out of the room for a bit, as beautiful as it was.

The restaurant and lobby were quite lovely. The food was delicious, the little of it that I did eat, and the ambiance and décor were stunning, but the best part was just being able to interact normally. At that moment, Gio was my brother—not my coworker, doctor, or caretaker. The only time we had spent together over the previous few years was when I was either working in the clinic or sick in bed, strung out on drugs and alcohol. So, it was a positive step in the right direction.

"Bastian, I don't want to put a damper on this lovely reunion you and Bunny are having, but you need to be honest with her. She needs to know how sick you are so that she can get things arranged in New York for you. You are going to need daily medical care for a while, and she needs to know what to be on the lookout for."

I hated hearing him say it, but I knew he was right.

"Okay, I will talk to her tonight. I would appreciate it if you would be

there when I did, in case she has any questions," I said.

"Yes, of course," Gio replied.

We finished dinner and headed back upstairs. Diarah was at the door to our room, doing her best to unlock it without allowing the bags she had with her to fall over. She said that she had to buy "a million presents for a million people."

She didn't exaggerate by much, as she returned with two large duffel bags full of gifts. She told us that she had gone to the Mercato del Porcellino, purchased the bags, and then filled them with trinkets and souvenirs.

She opened one bag, and an overwhelming smell of Italian leather filled the room. Diarah noticed Gio looking surprised by the ridiculous number of items she had acquired.

"What?! Do you know how many men have had to take care of my kids for the past week? The least they deserve is a nice wallet."

The second suitcase was filled with a new wardrobe for me. Everything I had owned was either old and stained or too large to fit me anymore. I was never a fan of sweats, but the suitcase Diarah opened was filled with them, along with t-shirts and tube socks. She even bought me a pair of Converse sneakers she found in an American clothing store down the street. Of course, she knew my shoe size—she was the one who sent me those gorgeous ruby heels years prior. So, in terms of clothing, I had everything I needed to get to the United States.

Giovanni stared at the back of Diarah's head with an unhappy look, waiting for her to finish organizing her purchases. He walked over to her, impatiently grabbed her hands, and guided her from the duffel bags over to the table and chairs against the wall.

"Sit. I need to be honest with you because I don't believe my brother has been."

Diarah quickly glanced over at me with a look of surprise.

Gio sat across from her and continued, "Bunny, Bastian is not just sick. He brought this upon himself. He is a heroin addict. He has destroyed his body over these past few years, and it's not just about him getting off the drugs. He needs to detox. I don't mind saying that I am incredibly worried. He's still so weak, and he's not out of the woods yet. It's not just about getting him back to New York with you. It's also about the days and weeks to follow."

Diarah gave a small frown as she listened to Gio. Then she hastily replied, "Well, if you are worried, then you should come with us."

Gio shook his head no. "I can't do that. I have my practice here. And a wife. I can't just leave all of that. It really isn't a possibility," he said.

"Well, yeah, of course, it is a possibility. He's your brother. I'm not asking for you to stay forever. Ride back on the jet with us, and I will get you an Alitalia ticket home. Stay with us for a few days. Educate me and the boys on

how to take care of Bastian. Bobby will be there, too. I know you two are good friends," she stated, trying to entice him into coming with us.

Thinking for a moment, Gio said, "I don't know. If I do go, I will need to talk to Alessandra immediately. And Papà, too. He will need to take over at the clinic for a few days. The surgeries will need to be rescheduled."

He thought for a moment. "If all of that can be done, then, yes, okay, I think I would like to go with you."

Gio stood up. He walked over to me and pet my head lovingly.

"Okay, I need to go home and talk to Alessandra about this. But I think she will understand."

He turned and left the room, and Diarah returned to organizing her stash from the Mercato del Porcellino. I watched her and silently prayed, thanking God for the amazing gift of having my best friend back in my life.

Over the next few days, I desperately wanted to call her Bunny, primarily out of habit but partly because the name suited her so nicely. But I soon trained myself not to, as I knew it was important to her that she be known by her new identity.

Once we left Italy, I only referred to her as Bunny when I was very tired or very stressed, and I admit that losing that part of her was a bit sad for me.

When she had completed her organizing, she called Louie quickly to ask permission for Gio to fly back with us, and, as expected, he was fine with it. She hung up, bent down to zip up the bags, walked over to the bed, and stood beside me.

"I think it's time we get you into that shower."

"I can't do it, Diarah. I don't think I'm at the point where I can truly stand on my own."

"I'm aware of that, but thank you for thinking that I'm a complete idiot," she replied with a smile. "Come on. I will take a shower with you."

She could see that I was nervous. She touched my cheek so that I would look at her and said, "Hey, I won't let you fall."

Without a hint of modesty, she took off her clothes right in front of me. Then, while I was still sitting on the bed, she helped me get undressed. She then pulled me up into a standing position and slowly guided us into the bathroom, her walking backward. She put her arms underneath mine, so it was almost as if I were using a walker. There was a small step up into the shower, and after a few tries, I could drag each foot up and into the stall.

Diarah set me lightly against the wall so that the flow from the shower head primarily hit the left half of my body. She gently pushed my head under the stream to wet my hair and then began to apply the shampoo. It felt amazing. Her naked body was against mine, and the lather from the shampoo was all over both of us. In all our time together, I had never felt her skin as much as I had at that moment.

I started to get an erection, but it was not from being sexually aroused. It

was just the most wonderful feeling to be skin-to-skin and to have someone touch me in a kind, gentle, familiar way. I grabbed her waist and gently pulled her close to me. We stood in the shower holding each other, and it was glorious.

After several minutes, she pulled away, looked at me, and smiled.

"You okay?" she asked, and I smiled back.

"Hey, you know I'm loving this, but my arms are aching a bit from holding you up, and I want to make sure I get all of the shampoo out of your hair before it gets in your eyes—or worse, *my* eyes."

I gave a small laugh and said, "Okay."

She spent the next several minutes helping me wash, and it felt amazing, but the thing I loved the most was when she took each of my hands and gently washed and massaged the palm and each of my fingers. It was something I had never experienced before.

"That feels incredibly good," I said to her.

"Duncan does this for me almost every night. My health has been pretty good overall and, considering all the broken bones I sustained in London, I think I'm doing fairly well. But my hands and feet still give me a lot of trouble. They hurt so much by the end of the day. So, he will massage my hands for me. I can honestly say that, on some days, it's the thing I look forward to the most," she said.

"I can see why."

"Okay, I think we're done, Dr. Aceti. Wait… you are a doctor now, right?"

I nodded.

"Congratulations. That's so wonderful. I'm sorry I wasn't there to see you graduate, but I'm incredibly proud of you."

She gave me a smile, but her eyes looked sad.

She leaned over and grabbed a towel to help me dry, and then she took the robe that had been on the heating rack and wrapped it around me. Slowly, we made our way back over to the bed in much the same manner that we had gotten to the shower.

As she helped me back under the covers, I whispered, "I would love a pizza."

She scrunched her face and said, "No, I don't think so. Won't that kill you?"

"Probably." I smiled.

She shook her head and gave me a disapproving scowl.

"Please? It'll be fun. It'll be exactly like when you and Bianca ate that pizza in bed in San Gimignano."

"Bianca! Oh, how I miss her. How is Bianca lately?" Diarah asked. She had picked up a hairbrush and stood next to the bed, gently brushing through my wet hair.

"I haven't seen her for a very long time, unfortunately," I sighed, my voice trembling. I felt like crying.

"Would you like to see her tonight?" she asked softly.

"No. Thank you, but no. Bianca would not be pleased with how she looks now. She would like to get her health back before she re-emerges."

Diarah stopped brushing my hair and bent down to kiss me on the temple.

"Okay. I can understand that," she said. "Hopefully, that will be soon."

I watched her walk back into the bathroom, and I could feel my heart beating with joy at the prospect of seeing Bianca again. Like Bunny, I thought she was gone forever.

I could hear Diarah brushing her teeth, and as she did, I turned on the television so she wouldn't hear me and quietly picked up the phone receiver. I secretly ordered two pizzas from room service.

I ended up eating only one small part of one slice, but it was so nice to just eat and cuddle with her and Snickers in bed. It felt so normal.

The day before we left Italy was not a fun, relaxing one. Diarah spent a good portion of it either on the phone or running errands. There were things to take care of that I hadn't even thought about: contacting the vet to retrieve Snickers' records so that the dog could get into the country without having to go through quarantine; asking the boys to set up her bedroom back home to make it easy for me to get around; having Bobby and Rex do a complete grocery shopping to ensure there were certain foods in the house that I could easily eat and digest; ordering medical supplies in the U.S. that I would need after the first few days as Gio would only be allowed to bring a certain amount in with him, etc.

The list was lengthy. In addition, I had Giovanni ask my father if he could go to the bank to withdraw money from my account. Papà helped me set up that bank account when I was 15, and his name was never taken off it. I hadn't talked to him at all since Diarah had arrived, but I assumed he was getting updates via Gio.

Gio returned late that evening, as he had his own fair share of things to take care of. Aside from packing his clothes, he brought two bags full of medical supplies. Luckily, as I was a physician as well, we each were able to bring in a certain number of supplies into the U.S. He also handed me an envelope from my father.

"Papà said that if you need anything, do not hesitate to call him. He also said that he loves you and hopes you find all the happiness in the world in New York. On a side note, he's thrilled that I'm going with you to get you set up. I think he wants to make sure that we know where you will live and that you don't disappear on us forever."

I gave Gio a small, fake smile. I knew my father loved me, but that experience with Anja and Gunnar fractured our family, maybe irrevocably. It would take us a lot of time to heal from that.

I opened the envelope. It was American currency, and in all, there was $20,000. I didn't know exactly how much that was in relation to lire, but I assumed it was a good amount.

Gio stayed with us that last night at the Hotel Palazzo Vecchietti. He again brought me down to the lobby, and instead of grabbing dinner, he had a glass of wine.

"Do you ever think you'll come back home again?" Gio asked.

I looked down at my hands. "I don't want to come back here for a while. I hope that once I'm better, you and Luca and Michele will come to visit me."

I glanced up at him and gave him a small smile. I wondered if Gio knew that I was lying. In reality, I had hoped I would never have to set foot in Italy ever again.

We returned to the room at 22:30, and Diarah and Snickers were already asleep. She had asked the hotel to bring up a cot that night so that Gio could sleep in the bed with me.

At 4:30 the following morning, I could hear Diarah. She was already in the shower, getting ready for the day. She had a full three hours to get everything together, and there were lists and notes all over the room so that she wouldn't forget anything. The items in the medical supply bags were inventoried for customs, and she had a separate folder for our passports as well as Snickers' health records and documents.

By 5:30, Giovanni had already started preparing me for the flight by replacing my I.V. and catheter lines, and Diarah had begun loading items onto the luggage cart. She had taken Snickers out for a long walk through the Piazza della Repubblica and into the Piazza del Duomo that morning, loving that the city centre was virtually empty of people and cars.

She had room service bring up a large breakfast tray of coffee, juice, croissants, butter, and jelly. She also packed an entire bag of snacks for the flight, even though Louie mentioned the jet would be fully stocked. Looking back, I sometimes wonder if Louie truly did have business in Italy that week, or if he just used that as a ruse to help her get me back to the States. Either way, I was grateful.

I often watched Louie and Diarah interact, and he always looked at her with such amazement. Not only did I think that she was quite a source of entertainment for him, but I also believed that she might have been his only true friend. He knew many people through his business connections, and there was never a shortage of individuals who wanted to spend their time with him, but so often it was because it seemed everyone wanted something from him. Diarah truly wanted nothing from him but his time and was pleasantly surprised or even shocked when he did something nice for her. So, no, I wouldn't have been surprised if Louie had come to Italy just for her.

At 7:15, Giovanni loaded me into the wheelchair, and we headed downstairs. At 7:30, like clockwork, the car to pick us up had arrived with

Louie already inside, and the driver loaded our many bags into the back. We rode through a part of the city I had never seen before, into a far back section of the airport, and the car pulled up right next to the plane.

A customs agent then drove up next to us in an airport cart to check everyone's passports and ensure our bags were checked for contraband. Then the driver unloaded our luggage and asked if we needed anything in the cabin with us. Gio ran over and grabbed one of the medical bags, and everything else, except for Snickers and his water bowl, was loaded below.

Before we boarded, Louie pulled Diarah aside and spoke with her privately. When he was done, she kissed him on the cheek and gave him a big hug. I was still sitting in the car at that point, saving my energy for the stairs up and into the plane. To my surprise, the driver came over and picked me up. I had planned to try walking, but he said the insurance barrier wouldn't allow for it. He carried me straight up the stairs, through the main cabin, past the big leather seats, and into a back room that contained a queen-sized bed. He placed me in one of the two chairs in the room and buckled me in. Gio followed right behind.

"Louie told Bunny that you could use his bedroom for this flight. You get to lie in a bed on an international flight," Gio stated, sounding pleased.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, haven't we all?" Diarah said, entering the room behind him, referring to the Medevac flight she took from England back to our home in Firenze after the attack.

She looked over and smiled at me. "You okay?"

"I'm great," I replied and smiled. I meant it.

The captain announced that we would soon be taking off.

Diarah came over, kissed my cheek, and said softly, "I need to go grab a seat in the main cabin. Gio will stay here with you, but I will come back once we reach cruising altitude."

She then put her hand under my chin, raised my head up so I could look at her, and gave me a small peck on the lips.

Keeping her face close to mine, she whispered, "I couldn't be happier that you are coming home with me. I have been waiting a long time for you."

She kissed me once more quickly and left the room.

For the first time in my life, I felt butterflies.

21 CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: 1988, BASTIAN AT 29/DIARAH AT 25 (CLEAN)

For all the worrying that Giovanni did before the plane took off, the ride was completely uneventful.

After the first hour, I felt well enough to sit out in the main cabin and chat with Louie for a bit. He is such an intelligent man, and I thoroughly enjoyed conversing with him about all things, especially opera. I'm not sure if he enjoyed it as much as I do, but his mother had dragged him to The Met for many performances, so he most definitely knew his stuff.

Snickers sat in my lap for a good portion of the flight, which was wonderful, as I had all but ignored the dog that previous year. Marta, our housekeeper, had grown especially attached to him, so he was still getting fed and given a fair amount of attention. However, for me, seeing him made my heart hurt, as he always reminded me of Bunny. So, I was happy that it appeared that Snickers had forgiven me, at least on some level.

I was growing tired, so Giovanni carried me back to the bedroom for the last half of the flight.

"Can you do me a favour, Gio? Can you ask Bunny to come back here for a minute?" I asked.

He left the room, and Diarah came walking in. She stopped in the doorway and tilted her head to one side to try to gauge how I was doing.

"Are you okay? Like, really okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm good. Come over here. Lay with me," I requested.

With a significant amount of effort, I was able to roll myself over onto my side so I could look at her while we talked. She lay down next to me and scootched her body towards me so that our fronts were almost touching. We were nose to nose, and she gave me a small peck.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Can you tell me about your tattoo? The one on your ring finger?" I asked.

"This one?" she asked, holding up her hand.

"Why is it on your ring finger? It's on the same finger that a wedding band

is supposed to go on," I asked.

"Noooo!" she said, incredulously with a hint of sarcasm. "That can't be right? I thought it was supposed to go on *this* finger."

And with that, she flipped me off.

I grabbed her middle finger and shook it playfully, and she gave me a look that showed she was clearly annoyed with me.

"I'm not a fucking idiot, you know. That is, like, the third time this week that you've insulted my intelligence, and that's a lot considering I've been asleep for most of the week."

Sheepishly, I said, "You're right. I apologize. I've been quite touchy and agitated lately. I don't know what I'm saying half the time, and I know I could word things better. And my English is a bit rusty. I'm sorry."

She gently ran her fingers through my hair. "If you want to know about the tattoo, all you have to do is ask. I will tell you anything."

She paused for a moment.

"Okay, so, this is going to sound super-morbid, so bear with me for a minute. Okay?"

She rolled over onto her back.

"So, you know how they place a person's hands when they're lying in a casket?"

I must have made an unpleasant face, and she snapped, "Just listen, okay?! The hands are placed like this, right?"

She modelled the overlaid hand position for me.

"So, when I first got to New York, I was worried about my health. You, your dad, and Gio were my doctors. You took care of me. And when I got to New York, I had no health insurance, so I thought that it really wouldn't be shocking if I just died in my sleep one night from all the brain injuries I had endured.

"I wrote letters to you each week, but I was never sure if they were reaching you. And, if I did die, I was fairly sure that Bobby would have called your family to let you know. And I knew—I knew—that if I had died, you would come to see me once more to say goodbye. So, I just wanted you to know, that last time, how much I loved you, right up until the end."

I just stared in disbelief at her hand. I could feel my eyes start to well up.

"So, I had a tattoo artist draw this on my finger. It just looks like ivy twined around posts, but if you examine it a bit more closely…"

She held her hand up to my face so that I could see it better.

I gasped softly and whispered, "Bastian. It says Bastian."

She nodded her head yes. She then turned her hand so that she could look at it herself. "Yes, it says Bastian."

And then she laughed. "But don't ask Duncan about it. He thinks it's a motivational message in the form of an acronym."

She looked back down at her hand again and then glanced up at me.

I was hooked.

I couldn't believe this perfect creature tattooed her finger just so she could communicate that she loved me from beyond the grave. It was at that moment that she had my heart. Forevermore. And it was absolutely the truth. I never considered leaving her. Ever. She was it.

We held each other and snuggled for a while until I drifted off. I awoke alone in the bed about an hour later when Giovanni entered the room and said that we had begun our descent into New York City, so the pilot needed me to get buckled into a seat.

Diarah popped back into the room, helped get me situated, and then kissed me on the cheek. She whispered, "I love you. I'll see you soon."

I watched her walk out of the room and close the small door behind her. I looked over at Gio and felt tears roll down my cheeks. He seemed both surprised and genuinely concerned.

With my voice quivering, I said softly, "If you hadn't gotten Bunny's letters from Papà, I wouldn't be here right now. Thank you so much for being my friend and advocate and for wanting the best for me."

Gio looked sad. "I'm sorry that I waited so long."

I gave him a small smile through my tears.

For the rest of the flight, Gio had his face pressed up against one of the windows. For all the travelling he had done in his life, he had never been to the United States, and although he came along to help me out, I also knew he would take advantage of being there. I was happy for him.

After an almost perfect landing, the jet taxied up to the private terminal. Glancing out the window, I could see what appeared to be two police officers waiting next to their vehicle on the tarmac.

Gio exclaimed, "My Lord, I think that's Bobby."

Diarah was just walking back into the room and peered out the window, as well.

"Yeah, that's him," Bunny remarked with no affect. "And, oh, goody. You get to meet Rex, too," she said sarcastically, raising her eyebrows.

"Do you not want me to meet him?" I asked.

"No. No, of course, I want you to meet him. Of course, I do. I just wasn't planning on you meeting him right away."

She glanced out the window again.

"Look, I love Rex, but the man has no filter, so if he says something insulting… or inappropriate… or just completely asinine… Please, just take whatever he says with a grain of salt, okay? Please?"

After Diarah's comment, I truly wanted to meet him. Her words didn't discourage me, not in the slightest. If anything, I very much enjoyed talking to people who were brutally honest. It was the sneaky and two-faced ones who most frightened me.

That may have stemmed from my experience with Gunnar. My one and

only conversation with him made me feel like I was conversing with a snake—a cold, slippery being—with me never knowing its true intention. So, no, the comments about Rex didn't dissuade me from wanting to meet him. It was quite the opposite.

Bobby and Rex grabbed the many suitcases and bags that Gio, Diarah, and I had and loaded them onto the luggage cart, which was a great help. Getting through Immigration and Customs was a breeze, as it was just Giovanni and me in the office. Louie and Dia were able to go through an expedited process as they were American citizens. Even Snickers had no issue, thanks to Diarah ensuring all his paperwork was in order.

The only hiccup was when the customs agent saw how much cash I had on me. I said the money would be used for my medical treatments in the States, which wasn't really a lie. I was not out of the woods, not by a long shot, and between how poorly I looked sitting in the wheelchair and the fact that my brother, the doctor, verified that the quality of my health was poor, the issue was resolved relatively quickly.

By the time Gio and I had emerged from customs and were in the small terminal, Louie's driver, Frank, had already loaded up Louie's luggage and had taken him home. Louie had big plans for his mother's birthday celebration that evening—dinner at Le Cirque followed by a late-night performance at Birdland Jazz Club to take in Maynard Ferguson's show.

I was only able to meet and chat with Rex briefly before he had to leave to return the squad car to the station. But Bobby stayed to help us. He picked me up out of the wheelchair with ease and placed me into the back seat of Diarah's Toyota.

Not all the bags fit in the trunk, so Diarah and I had to sit with some bags around our feet and on our laps. Bobby drove us back to Tarrytown, with Gio sitting in the front passenger seat and Diarah and me in the back. It was close to 4:00 p.m., and the rush-hour traffic was terrible, so it took us more than an hour to get "home."

Bobby and Gio talked and joked the entire way back, and Dia, Snickers, and I snuggled in the back seat. It was amazing, and I felt like a teenager. Bobby made a snarky comment about us, and Diarah kicked the back of his seat with a great deal of force.

Tarrytown was lovely. As we drove through the side streets, I thought about how I couldn't wait to regain some strength so Diarah and I could take walks through the downtown area.

We turned a corner and pulled into a parking lot behind a beautiful older building. There was a set of wooden stairs in the back, and Diarah opened the car door and popped out before the vehicle had fully come to a complete stop. She told me she wanted to go up alone first, to say hello to the boys and get them settled, and for me to just wait in the car.

She grabbed Snickers, walked him around the yard for a bit, and then

brought him upstairs to meet everyone. A few minutes later, she came down the stairs alone.

She leaned in Gio's open window and said, "I was able to bribe the boys to stay over at Pops' place tonight in exchange for keeping Snickers over there with them. It's a win-win. So, are we ready to go up?"

Diarah asked Bobby to carry me up the stairs, and although I was a bit embarrassed, I didn't fight her on it. I was feeling better, but I probably wasn't well enough to scale the many steps to their apartments. Diarah walked ahead of Bobby, opening doors for us. We entered a small entryway and then into Apartment B. Diarah's room was immediately to the left, and Bobby gently placed me on the bed. As he left, she closed the front door behind him and locked it.

"Just so you know, I never lock the front door to my place. But tonight, it needs to be just you and me, so I'm going to forbid entry to the many, many people who want to come over here and bother us," she said.

"I want to meet your boys. Let them come over."

"Thanks, but not a chance. I will let Gio pop over later to check on you, but that is it."

She slowly scanned the room. "I'm impressed. They did a really good job of cleaning up the place."

She stopped and stared at me for a long time. She then walked over and lay down, snuggling up next to me on the bed.

She whispered softly in my ear, "Do you know how many times I dreamed about you being here with me?"

I turned my head to look at her, and our eyes met.

"You've been with me every day for the last four years. There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't think about you and wonder how you were or what you were doing. I thought about you every night when I was falling asleep, and you were the first thing I thought of every morning when I woke up."

I should have loved that sentiment, but for some reason, Rex was still on my mind, and the thought of them together boiled my blood.

"So, it wasn't Rex who was first on your mind in the morning? That seems impossible, as he was lying right next to you."

She sat up quickly with a smirk.

"First of all, you colossal jackass, he never slept over here. Ever. I never went to bed with him or woke up with him. You clearly didn't read my letters very well, did you?

"Rex and I never had a relationship. We had sex, but we never had a true relationship. We took care of each other's physical needs for about a year. That was it. Ask any of my friends about any boyfriends I have had over the past four years. Please, do. I would love for you to tell me what they have to say."

I could see that she was getting riled up, and I felt terrible that I did that to her.

"I'm sorry. I should have never said anything. Please lie back down with me. Please. I'm sorry."

"Yes, you are. You *are* sorry. And you're a fucking idiot," she snapped, and she was right.

I should have just been happy with everything I had at that moment. Instead, I was a complete ass for focusing on the one thing that would make her unhappy with me.

Why was I testing her? It was like I wanted to challenge her to see if her feelings for me were true. Of course, they were. Every single one of her actions proved that. So, why was I trying to push her away?

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. It was Giovanni. He jiggled the knob and realized he couldn't get in, as it was still locked, so he elected to speak through the small crack between the door jamb and the door.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but I need a few minutes alone with my brother to set him up for the evening. Is that okay?"

Diarah forcefully opened the door for him and said, "Absolutely."

She still had a bit of anger in her voice. Gio looked at her quizzically but said nothing.

He then sat down beside me on the bed and quietly whispered, "Is everything okay?"

I closed my eyes and nodded sheepishly.

He turned to address her, trying to lighten the mood.

"So, Bunny, how many live here exactly? There must be 20 people over there." Gio motioned towards Apartment A.

"It's Pops' apartment. His real name is Roy, but everyone calls him Pops. Then Bobby and Rex share a room. Bobby sleeps here every night, but Rex only comes into town two nights a week. The rest of the time, he stays in the city. Mikey is, for all intents and purposes, my son, and he calls me Mamma even though he is 33 years old.

"Mikey is Bobby's half-brother. Dominic, who we call Nicky, is Bobby's son, but I am his legal guardian. He also calls me Mamma. Then there is Delilah, who is not here right now but will be tomorrow. She is Bobby's daughter, but she is pretty much my kid, as well. Then, you have my friend, Duncan, who lives here and sometimes sleeps in my room with me. You cannot find a better human being than him. Then there's Terri, who is Pops' girlfriend. I love her to pieces.

"And… I think that's it. I hope you paid attention, as I don't plan on repeating any of that."

"No, you're forgetting someone," Gio said. "What about Jahmir?"

"Ah, Jahmir. Jahmir lives downstairs with Duncan in the studio space. We use it for band practice, and he sleeps in the office area. Jahmir, Duncan, and

I are in a band together," Diarah said.

Still clearly perturbed with me, Diarah started to walk out of the room. She whispered, "I'll be back in a few minutes," without turning to look at me.

As she reached the bedroom door, she narrowly missed Bobby, who entered the apartment at a run. "Dai, Giò! Ho bisogno di una birra!"

"Five more minutes. Almost done," Gio replied in English. He was examining the sores on my face while taking my temperature and blood pressure.

"Okay, your numbers are fairly good, Bastian. Better than I had expected, truth be told. So, can I trust that you will remain stable while I go across the street and have a beer with Bobby?" Gio asked.

He got up off the bed and stood next to me. He was quite still for a moment, not moving, and then he walked over and shut the bedroom door.

He turned and whispered, "Why on earth are there so many people living here? None of these people has a home of their own? This can't be healthy. Not for you. Not for her. I don't know. I just don't feel comfortable having you stay here."

I spoke up immediately. "I think you know that we created this."

Gio looked confused and shook his head softly.

I whispered so that Bunny couldn't hear me.

"You know perfectly well that Bunny's family was horrible to her. From the first day that Bunny stayed with us, she became ours. We made her feel safe—for years, we made her feel safe. And then, cruelly, one day, without any warning, we made her go away. We told her that she was no longer welcome—that she was no longer part of our family.

"Gio, I read her letters. She had no one, no family, so she created her own. She took in all these people because they were just like her.

"They're not going anywhere. They have nowhere to go, so they won't abandon her."

Gio stared at me.

"She'd do anything not to have to be alone again. And it hurts me to my core that she was so desperate for love. How many people did you say were in the other room? At least eight? Maybe 10? Their presence makes her feel safe. They need her, and she needs them."

I took a deep breath and could feel my eyes well up.

"I broke her, you know. All of us. We broke her. We did a horrible thing by cutting her out of our lives, so Bunny only did what she had to do to survive."

I could feel two small streams of tears run down my cheeks.

Before Gio could respond, Diarah barrelled back into the bedroom, grabbed Giovanni's hand, and quickly escorted him to the front door.

"Okay, thanks for your help! He'll be just fine! Have fun with Bobby!"

And with that, she opened the door and pushed him out. As she closed

and locked it behind him, she turned towards me. She looked exhausted.

"Hey, I know it's early, but I'd like for us to get something small to eat and then just go to bed. I promise I will introduce you to everyone tomorrow, but for tonight, let's just get some rest. Okay? Please?

"I'll be right back. Just hang tight."

She returned several minutes later with a tray of raw vegetables, fruit, crackers, and cheese. I wasn't hungry, but she wanted me to eat just a little. I couldn't do it. My system couldn't handle it. She then offered me one of the nutritional drinks in the medical bag that Gio left. At that moment, even those sounded repulsive. I just couldn't eat anything.

Mistakenly, I was under the impression that I had been dealing well with the withdrawal symptoms. I assumed that I had been operating on adrenaline and endorphins from the time Bunny arrived in Italy, so I fooled myself into thinking my body could tolerate it all.

But that wasn't the case.

I later learned that during that week at the hotel, Gio had given me pharmacological treatments to help me detox. So, I did feel some discomfort, but it was quite tolerable.

But at that moment, I was on my own. I had no medicinal crutch, and I was in agony. On one hand, my body felt like it was on fire, but on the other, I was cold and shivering, nauseous and irritable. I felt like I was losing control of reality, and I hated myself for the years of abuse I had inflicted upon my body.

I was livid with Bunny at that moment. I ridiculously convinced myself that had she done a better job of letting me know she still cared, I wouldn't have gotten strung out all the time. I was delirious. I was enraged, but as hard as I tried, I couldn't keep my eyes open. I felt like I was spiralling down a dark hole.

I woke up with a start in the middle of the night. The only light was coming from the hallway, so the room was quite dark. I sat up a bit and focused my eyes.

A very large man was standing in the doorway.

Was I hallucinating?

He was shifting back and forth very quickly and breathing hard. It was terrifying. I had to be tripping.

I couldn't quite discern what he looked like, as the light was from behind him. All I could see was a giant shadow that took up the entirety of the doorway.

My Lord, some deranged man broke into Diarah's home. I tried to move slowly to wake her, but she was always a heavy sleeper. She didn't stir.

The figure took one step into the room and stopped at the foot of the bed. I was paralyzed with fear. He seemed to be holding something in his arms. And then I heard him take a deep breath.

In a soft, squeaky voice, he quietly whispered, "Are you my new Papà?!?"

He let out a tiny giggle.

The figure came around to my side of the bed, and I recoiled a bit. I saw his face in the shadow, and it appeared as if he had a huge smile. He was a gentle giant. In his arms, there was a stack of children's books. He had so many, and it appeared that several were about to fall.

Diarah had a small desk next to her bed, and the large man came and sat down in the desk chair next to me. I was shocked that the tiny chair could support the weight of him.

Still whispering, he explained, "Mamma said that you're gonna be our new Papà. Mamma said that your name is Michael, just like my name is Michael."

I looked at him and gave a small smile.

"Yes, you are right. My name is Michael, and I will be staying here for a while. Is that okay with you?"

With big eyes, he nodded his head violently in the affirmative.

"So, Michael," I continued, "are you supposed to be over here right now? I thought you were sleeping next door."

The smile immediately disappeared from Michael's face.

He whispered, "You're not gonna tell Mamma, are you?"

I softly shook my head no, and he blew a small stream of air from his mouth, seeming quite relieved.

"Papà, can you read me a book? I brought some with me," he said, shuffling through the pile on his lap.

"Sure," I replied. "But could you please get me a glass of water first?"

Michael got up quickly, dropping all the books on his lap to the floor. He rushed out of the room, making far more noise than he needed to. I quickly glanced over at Diarah, but she was still fast asleep. I was starting to understand that if you were going to live in such close quarters, as they had been, one would need to become more of a deep sleeper. Light sleepers would not survive long in that apartment.

Michael ran back into the room, his heavy footsteps shaking the floor. He plopped back down in the chair, water from the glass sloshing everywhere. He handed the glass to me, getting a portion of my shirt and the comforter on the bed wet.

I thanked him and took a drink, Michael watching my every move with excitement. I put the glass on the desk next to me, and Michael picked up the books off the floor, one at a time, and laid them on my torso. A few slid off and hit Diarah in the head. Still, she did not stir. I was nothing but impressed.

I picked up several books and said, "Okay, I think I have enough energy to read one or two. Which two are your favourite?"

"Only *two*?!?" he cried, far too loudly. He scoffed, looked down at his pile, and pushed all the books off me except two. The rest mainly landed on Diarah. Still, she did not move. I was in awe.

The first book was *Possum Magic*, and the other was *Eight Silly Monkeys*. Michael picked up *Eight Silly Monkeys* and put it next to my face, nodding his head yes.

"This one first?" I asked.

He smiled.

I started to read it to him, and he got visibly upset.

"No!" he whined. "You have to *sing* it!"

"Okay. Let me try again," I said and cleared my throat. "*Eight silly monkeys, sitting on a bed…*" I sang.

He sat up straight and nodded. "Yes. Better." His eyes were glued to the pictures.

I finished half-reading, half-singing the book, and when I went to put it down, he gasped in horror as if I had murdered a puppy.

"What?!? Are you okay?" I was terrified that I had done something to hurt him.

"You can't read it just once!!" He glared at me like I was an idiot. "Again!"

He looked back at the book, and his angry expression was replaced with a huge smile.

Over the next hour, I heard the word "Again!" 15 more times, for a grand total of 17 readings of *Eight Little Monkeys*. We hadn't even gotten to the first reading of *Possum Magic*.

"Um, Michael, I'm getting a bit tired. Could I please read the other book to you tomorrow?"

He threw his head back and cried out as if he were in terrible pain. Diarah started to stir.

"Oh, great, *now* you wake up," I thought to myself. "Where were you an hour ago?"

She opened her eyes and saw the books all over the bed. Then, she scanned the room for Michael.

"God damn it, Mikey! I told you that you could not come in here tonight! Get your books and get back over to Pops!"

He was standing in the corner of the room, trying to hide.

"NOW, Mikey!" she growled.

He quickly grabbed almost all his books, threw the door open, and power-walked back over to Pops' apartment. He never bothered to shut either apartment's door, so I could hear the commotion he caused on the other side of the building. It sounded as if he had stepped on Dominic, who was sleeping on the floor.

Diarah scooted herself out of bed and closed the apartment door. She glared at me with an angry expression, but all I could do was give her a small smile. My Bunny from long ago had returned, completely dishevelled, pieces of her hair sticking out unflatteringly from her bun. She was a gorgeous mess.

"What on earth is the matter with you?! You don't read books to him in

the middle of the night! You should know that!"

"I'm sorry, but he—"

Bunny put her hand up in a stop motion and closed her eyes. She shook her head no, walked back over to the bed, and climbed back in with me.

Once she was under the covers, she snuggled up next to me, closed her eyes, and growled, "If you turn this house into *Lord of the Flies*, I will murder you. It took me years to get everyone on board with the rules. You come along, and in one day, it's pandemonium."

She opened her eyes, looked at me, and said, "I'm dead serious. I will murder you."

She snuggled into her pillow and began to fall back asleep.

I could feel myself smiling as I closed my eyes. As I drifted off, I thought, "I couldn't love this place more."

The following morning, both doors were open, and everyone, including Snickers, wafted back and forth between the two apartments. I learned that Diarah did most of the cooking in her kitchen, but once the boys had their food, they often went over to Pops' place to eat. He had big, overstuffed couches and a large TV set.

Dia told me that having a table that could seat them all would take up half the apartment, so the only times they ate together were Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. She had several folding tables in the attic, so it was quite the chore to get them down and set them up.

That morning, Mikey was helping with breakfast by manning the waffle iron, his specialty. Diarah made eggs, fried potatoes, and sausage. Gio and Bobby had walked to the farmer's market that morning and purchased an assortment of fruit, which Gio offered to cut up for everyone. No one took him up on it.

In a disgusted tone, he looked at me and mumbled, "Barbari," meaning "Barbarians." I smiled.

We finished breakfast, and Diarah asked the boys to help by doing the dishes. They begrudgingly agreed. She then said that she needed to head to the office to quickly retrieve the week's worth of assignments Mr. Jarvis had faxed to her, so she jumped in the shower and got ready to go in record time. She asked Bobby and Gio both to stay put and watch the kids and me until she returned. Then, she walked over, bent down, and kissed me on the forehead.

"I will be right back."

I grabbed her arm.

"I want to come with you," I pleaded desperately.

She knelt in front of me.

"Soon, you will be able to come everywhere with me. You'll go everywhere I go. But right now, I am just running to the office. I will be back in 30 minutes. Stay here and rest. And, if you get bored, you can read more

books with Mikey."

Mikey overheard and came running into the living room carrying his books with sopping-wet, soapy hands.

"No! Finish those dishes first. Then, books," she said.

His demeanour indicated that he was a bit upset and dejected, and I could hear him mumble something under his breath.

Diarah heard, as well, and replied, "Mikey, if you have an issue with that, Papà and I will read *zero* books to you today. Got it?"

He ran back into the kitchen and continued to wash dishes with Nicky.

"I'll be right back."

And with that, she walked out the door. I watched her go and thought about how she just referred to me as "Papà." I glanced over at the boys, who had their backs to me, and smiled.

Pops had hip troubles, so he often used a cane to get around, but after his last hip replacement surgery, he required the use of a walker for a short time. So, Diarah borrowed it from him, and that was what I used for the first few weeks I was home. All the apartment floors were carpeted, so using the walker was probably more difficult than if I just tried to get around on my own. But no one was agreeing with my assessment of the situation, so I was stuck with the damn walker. At least the extra exercise of lifting it up and down as I walked was beneficial.

After the boys were done cleaning up breakfast, Gio came in and said, "Okay, to the bed. Let me look at you."

He grabbed my elbow to help steady me, and I slowly walked the walker into the bedroom. I sat on the edge of the bed, and Gio knelt on the floor.

He grabbed my wrist to check my pulse and remarked, "You're doing well. This has been a lot. Had I been in your condition, I don't know if I would have been able to adjust to everything the way you have in such a short amount of time."

"I love being here," was my reply. "I am tired, but that is all."

I didn't tell him about the withdrawals. There was no reason to. There was nothing he could do about them except to give me drugs to combat the symptoms, and the last thing I was about to do was to put more chemicals into my body. I wanted all medications out of my system.

Gio helped me swing my legs up onto the bed, and then asked the boys to go over to Pops' place so I could get some rest. They fully obliged and ran over to the other apartment.

As Gio was leaving the room, he turned and said, "Try to sleep. Your body needs it."

It felt like I had closed my eyes for just a few minutes and was starting to doze off when the door to the apartment slammed open. I was jolted awake and looked over, but I didn't see anyone in the doorway. I heard some rustling around and thought that it might have been Snickers.

I sat up just a bit and saw a small tuft of hair peeking up just beyond the bottom of the bed. Diarah had a small toy chest next to the bed frame, which I assumed she had put there so Snickers could climb onto the mattress. But I realized quickly that was not its sole purpose.

To my surprise, a young female child had climbed up. She stood on the bed near my feet and just stared at me. My Lord, she looked just like how I remembered Bunny. This child was a bit younger, though. She was probably two, possibly three, years old.

Diarah walked through the apartment door several seconds after her.

"Ah, I see she's found you."

She then spoke to the little girl. "Delilah, this is Papà. Can you say hi to Papà?"

Delilah looked confused and pointed toward the apartment next door.

"No, Delilah, this is Papà." Diarah pointed at me. "Papà." She then pointed in the direction of the other apartment. "Pops. Pops." Diarah pointed back at me. "Papà. Papà."

Delilah pointed at me. "Bapà." Then she pointed at the wall. "Bops."

"Exactly!" said Diarah. "Good girl!"

She leaned over and kissed Delilah on the forehead, and Delilah clapped her hands, clearly proud of herself.

"Go say hello," Dia whispered in her ear.

Delilah was still standing on the bed and walked unsteadily towards me. When she was next to me, she dropped down to her knees and whispered, "Hi, Bapà!"

She then put her head on my chest, and I felt a gentle burst of warmth come over me. I put my hand on her back and patted her gently.

"Hello, sweet girl," I whispered back. I sat up a bit and kissed the top of her head.

Diarah was leaning against the door jamb, watching us, smiling.

"I think I've just become your second favorite girl."

She walked over to us, gave us both a kiss, and left the room. Delilah stayed on my chest for a bit, and I could see she was dozing off. I lifted her off me and put her head on the pillow next to me. I lay on my side, wrapping my arm around her and patting her gently on the back. She was asleep within minutes, and I dozed off shortly thereafter.

The next few days, I vacillated between doing pretty well and experiencing several fairly severe lows. With all my medical training, I had no idea what to expect coming off the drugs. I falsely believed that I would have a severe withdrawal spike for a couple of days, with a slow, gradual decline in severity and symptoms following. That was not the case. I was all over the place.

Oddly enough, being around the kids helped, as they were great distractions. Mikey wanted my attention all the time, and Nicky was just happy hanging out, letting Mikey hog the spotlight. Delilah wanted to be

constantly held, but my arms were not strong enough to support her for long periods. She would get quite incensed when I would have to pass her off to Diarah or Mikey. I enjoyed that, though. I did love that she preferred me to anyone else, just as Bunny had almost 20 years before.

When I felt particularly miserable, Pops would come over and just sit with me and watch TV. He wasn't much of a conversationalist, so it was nice not to have to force any pleasantries. But as bad as the withdrawals were, I was still thankful to be alive and improving.

We had been in the U.S. for 10 days when Gio came into the apartment to make his announcement. Diarah was changing the sheets on the bed, a chore she had done every single morning, as she was concerned that I still had open sores that were oozing. In reality, Gio had given me a complete physical several days before, and although I still had some sores on my body, none of them were open. Still, I wasn't going to complain. It was lovely sleeping in a bed with clean sheets every night.

"I'm going to be leaving tomorrow," Gio announced.

I was sitting in the desk chair. Diarah, still putting the new fitted sheet on the mattress, said, "Bye!" obnoxiously without turning around. Gio looked stunned.

"Just joking," she said, turning to smile at him. "What time are you leaving?"

"I fly out tomorrow morning. Bobby would like to know if he can borrow your car."

She climbed off the bed and gave him a side hug.

"I cannot believe I'm going to say this out loud, but I really will miss you. I couldn't have gotten Bastian here without you, and for that, I will always be grateful to you. You are welcome here any time. I truly mean that."

She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek, and then she turned back around to continue making the bed. Gio glanced over at me with a confused look on his face, and without Dia noticing, he silently mouthed, "Wow!"

I smiled at him.

Still struggling with the fitted sheet, Dia said, "Did you show your brother your new trick?"

I looked at Gio and stood up from the chair on my own. No walker or cane was required, and I didn't need the aid of the furniture to steady myself. He seemed pleased.

"One step closer to normality," I stated in Italian.

He nodded his head in agreement.

I continued, "Gio, would you do me a favour? Would you ask Bobby and Rex what they are doing this evening? I think I would like for the men to go to dinner tonight. My treat."

Without leaving the room, Gio leaned out the door of the one apartment and yelled across the hall to the other, asking Bobby and Rex if they were

interested in being treated to dinner. At that same moment, Jahmir and Duncan walked into the apartment.

Duncan said, sarcastically, "Hey, thanks for not inviting us."

"Everyone is invited," I replied.

Rex then yelled something from the other room that I couldn't hear. I shook my head at Diarah to indicate that I didn't understand.

Diarah looked at me and said, "James is here. He dropped Rex off after their softball game and stuck around to watch the Yanks with Pops. So, I guess he's going, too. Rex is Bobby's supervisor, and James is Rex's supervisor. He's the captain."

"I suppose I need to call and ask Louie if he would like to join us," I suggested.

Diarah laughed a big, hearty laugh.

"That is sweet of you, but Louie is a multi-millionaire and head of a large company. I doubt if he would want to come to Tarrytown to have drinks with the boys."

"Still, I would like to invite him. He certainly doesn't have to join us, but I would like him to know that he is welcome," I said.

She glanced up at me and replied, quite sarcastically, "Sure, you go right ahead. Go give Louis Muehlmeier a call and invite him to the pub. This should be interesting."

I called Louie, and to Diarah's shock and amazement, he agreed to join us. She gave me a look that was half incredulous, half jealous.

It was Gio, Bobby, Rex, James, Duncan, Jahmir, Louie, Frank, and me for dinner that night. John was usually out touring and rarely in town, but he was back in the city that night, so he joined us, as well, which was lovely.

We all sat at the same long table, but once the hard liquor came out, Louie, Frank, and I retired to a smaller table next to the fireplace. Lou and Frank shared a nice bottle of wine while I nursed a club soda, and we had fascinating discussions about art, history, and literature. For a mere driver, Frank was not an uneducated man, and he was very capable of keeping up his end of the conversation.

After a few hours, I was exhausted and wanted to return to Diarah. I motioned for the waitress, and when she came over, she mentioned that Dia had been calling the pub every 30 minutes or so just to check on me. I loved that. For all those months in my room with no one caring if I was alive or dead, I now had someone who was consistently looking out for me.

I took the money out of my wallet to pay the bill, but Louie insisted on getting it.

He said, with all sincerity, "I'm more than happy to pay. I honestly cannot remember the last time I went out for a night with the guys. It probably hasn't been since college."

This was coming from the man that Diarah believed wouldn't want to

join us. I suppose she didn't know Louie as well as she thought, and I took some satisfaction in knowing that I made the right call.

The three of us left the restaurant through the back door, and Frank held my arm as we walked to the parking lot. Frank drove me home, even though the apartment was only across the street, and helped me climb the stairs. Diarah met me at the door with a big kiss.

"The kids are already in bed. Here's your walker. Head to the bathroom, and I'll be right in. I just want to say hello to Louie."

She returned a few minutes later. "Well, I hear you all had a lovely time tonight."

"We did," I said with a small smile as I struggled to untie my shoes.

"I also heard that your brother is going to be flying home with a colossal hangover. I do not envy him."

Diarah helped me out of my clothes, and she got undressed, as well. She still didn't think I was strong enough to shower alone. In reality, I had hoped I would *never* be strong enough to shower on my own. I loved being with her, holding her, being skin-to-skin. And she still washed my hair for me and gave me hand massages every time. It was positively glorious.

Dia was right. Waking Giovanni up the following morning was not pleasant, and we were all thankful that Bobby was the one responsible for him, as he was not in the best of moods. According to Bobby, Gio made it to his flight on time, and when he arrived in Italy, he did call me. The funny part was that he ended up at Papà's house. He was still so sick, disoriented, and exhausted from his trip that he told the taxi driver the address to Papà's house instead of his own.

His wife, Alessandra, had to drive across town to retrieve him, but according to Gio, she was very happy to see him. I was pleased to hear that. Giovanni was a good man, but I could imagine that being married to him could be challenging. Gio liked a good party, and I'm sure that more than once, Alessandra had to care for him after a night of drinking and antics.

By mid-October, I had been with Diarah and her family for over a month. Each day, I could feel myself getting stronger, and I would add one additional exercise to my regimen. I could easily get up and down the stairs on my own, and I had worked up to taking a 4-kilometer walk with Diarah and the kids each day in the late afternoon. At that point in the season, it was a bit chilly but not cold, and the leaves were changing.

Years prior, when I was married to Anja, I would go out for my daily run. It was not easy. I would cover about 15 kilometres of hilly Tuscan countryside, and I would be exhausted by the time I ran up that last serious incline to the house. I was in the best shape of my life.

So, it was still a bit shocking for me to see how much I had deteriorated when I looked in the mirror. I was better, much better, but I was still a bit sickly. Three years prior, I was at the pinnacle of health. But, with Diarah's

help, I was just happy that I had put on some weight and could walk those 4 kilometres without any significant issues.

That week, Louie had stopped by. He rarely came to Tarrytown, and when he did, he almost always called ahead from the car phone to let us know. But that morning, there was no announcement.

He frightened me when he knocked on the outer door, as the house was quiet—Diarah was at work, the boys were at school, and Delilah was down for a nap, as was Roy, who was next door. But once I saw it was Louie, I was thrilled to have him as my visitor.

Without even saying hello to me, Louie got right to the point. "You're a physician, correct?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Tell me, would you be willing to visually examine someone without letting them know you're a doctor?" he asked.

"No, probably not. May I ask what this is regarding?" I replied.

He looked dejected.

"My mother—her name's Fionna—she hates going to the doctor. I cannot remember the last time she went for herself. Me, as a child? She was very good about taking me to my annual check-up and would always have the doctor make a house call if I were ever sick. But for herself? No. Never."

"So, you believe she's ill? Is she exhibiting any symptoms?" I asked.

"She has a nagging cough—it seems that she has had that for months—and frequent headaches. All she wants to do is lie down. And her breathing can be quite shallow at times, too, especially in the morning."

He paused for a moment.

"Look, all I'm asking is that you just go and sit with her for a bit. She wants to meet you anyway. I could just say that I had an appointment here in Tarrytown this morning, ran into you, and offered to bring you by the house. She knows Diarah well. They've gone through a traumatic experience together, as my mother likes to refer to it," Louie said with a smile.

In reality, I had no desire to leave the sanctuary of the apartment that day—it was my safe haven—but I also knew that Louie was the sole reason I was in the U.S. with Diarah. She used the company credit card he gave her to buy her plane ticket to Italy and pay for that stunning hotel room. He allowed her to take a whole week off, without advance notice, to get me. And he flew his jet there to help bring me back. I essentially owed him my life. Anything he ever asked or wanted of me, I was happily going to comply.

"Okay. Sure. I would be happy to do that. Diarah adores your mother, so I've been looking forward to meeting her. If I have any medical opinion, I will tell you both. However, I will need to bring Delilah with me, as no one is here to watch her. Will that be an issue?" I asked.

"Not at all," Louie said.

It took a few minutes for me to pack up Delilah's things. She was still

napping, so Frank carried her down to the car, and Louie brought her bag so I could concentrate on getting myself down the stairs safely.

As I got into the vehicle, I saw Frank strapping the still-sleeping Delilah into an already installed car seat.

"A car seat?! Why on earth would you have a car seat?" I asked, quite happily surprised.

"My sister has a couple of kids. I keep the seat in the trunk, just in case," Louie replied.

It took us just over an hour to get to the city, and I was very much looking forward to seeing this hidden neighbourhood in the middle of Manhattan that Diarah had told me all about.

Dia was right.

Driving up the alley, one would never know that the end of that street was a camouflaged gate. I was hoping that I would get to see that underground parking area. I got my wish.

Delilah had awoken when the car stopped and appeared to be a bit dazed and confused. She saw me and smiled.

Then, she saw Louie and said softly, "Rouie."

"Good morning, Miss Delilah," Louie replied professionally, as if greeting a client.

Delilah held out her hand, and Louie shook it vigorously. She squealed with delight.

I got Delilah out of her car seat and asked if there was someplace that I could change her. Louie showed me to the closest bathroom. I cleaned her up and put her in one of her nicest outfits. When we were done, Louie led me over to the elevator. Yes, the elevator. The house was amazing.

We reached the second floor and walked down the hallway to our right. At one end was a large, beautifully carved wooden door that was cracked just a bit. Louie quietly eased the door open and stuck his head into the room.

"Hey, Ma! You awake? You've got some visitors."

"No! No, Louis. Not today. I'm not feeling up to it—" Fionna said.

Before she could finish her sentence, Delilah had climbed up onto the small step stool that I assumed Fionna must have used to get herself out of bed each morning, as her bed was quite high, and she was not a tall woman.

Delilah placed her nose mere inches from Fionna's face so that they were almost eye to eye. Then, Delilah gave her signature smile—closing her eyes tight, scrunching her nose, and showing just about all her teeth. She even gave a little snort, which Fionna seemed amused by.

"Well, if there was any reason to get out of bed, that was it!"

And with that, Fionna got up. She shooed us all out of her room so that she could get dressed.

As we were leaving her bedroom, I leaned over and whispered to Louie, "Do you smell anything unusual?"

"Don't tell me the damn cat peed again!" Louie was agitated.

"No, no. Nothing like that. It is an organic smell, but not acrid," I said, trying not to get the cat into any trouble.

As we headed towards the elevator, Louie admitted, "I'll be honest. We Muehlmeiers have never had stellar olfactory systems. Something has to be fairly rancid for any of us to pick up on it."

"That's very helpful information," I thought to myself.

We headed downstairs to see the housekeeper setting up tea for us in the sitting room. I asked Louie if it would be okay if we had our tea in the garden.

"Nora, this is my friend Michael and his daughter Delilah. Michael would like to sit outside and have tea. Would it be possible for you to move this to the garden?"

Louie turned to me and said, "I could have Frank take Delilah to the playground across the street. Would you like that?"

"Actually, if it's okay with you, I'd like to keep her here. I think Delilah would be a good distraction for your mother, and it will give me time to observe her."

"Good thinking," Louie said. "Clearly, that is why they gave you the medical degree, not me."

I continued, "In addition, I have something I would like Frank to do for me. Could I speak with him for a moment?"

Fionna finally emerged and was not happy to see that she would have to drink tea outside when it was not the warmest of days, so I intervened.

"Miss Fionna, I have a health condition, and it's best for me if I get as much fresh air as possible. Would you mind terribly if we sat outside? Just for a bit? I apologize greatly for any inconvenience."

Her demeanour changed immediately.

"Yes, yes, of course."

Trying to lighten the mood, Louie said, "Hey, Ma, guess what? Michael here is an operaphile."

Fionna spoke as she walked towards her chair.

"Pardon me if I don't appear overly excited to hear that. My son has told me plenty of times that someone enjoyed opera when, in reality, they had only seen one or two performances."

She got herself situated comfortably in the beautiful, overstuffed seat and looked directly at me. "Okay, Michael, let's test your mettle. What is your favorite opera?"

"Hmm, that is a difficult question. I do love the operas of Verdi and Puccini, but if I mentioned any of those, you would consider me an imposter, as most of their work is too well-known. But if I told you what my favourite opera is, you might judge me, as it was not written by an Italian composer."

She laughed. "Oh, let me guess. You like *Don Giovanni*?"

"No, it's not Mozart."

"Stravinsky?" she asked.

"No." I smiled.

She tried once more. "Bizet?"

"No, but I do love *Carmen*. It's one of my favourites," I replied.

"Alright. I give up."

"*Fidelio*."

She looked at me incredulously.

"*Fidelio*?" she questioned, almost confused. "I will admit that I have never heard anyone say that *Fidelio* was their favorite opera. I'm fascinated as to why. Please, do tell."

"It's a story of love and freedom, two things I so desperately wanted, especially in my youth."

I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. I swallowed hard and looked down.

Trying to fill the awkward silence, she asked, "Do you want to know what mine is?"

I blinked the tears away, looked up, and replied, "It's *La Traviata*."

"How on earth did you know that?"

"You have a poster of it in the downstairs bathroom. I saw it when I was changing Delilah," I said.

Fionna smiled and sat back in her chair, seeming pleased with my answers. I wasn't entirely sure, but I believed I passed her opera litmus test.

Frank walked into the room and covertly motioned to let me know he was there.

"I'm sorry. Will you excuse me for a moment?" I walked over and spoke to him.

"Frank, would you be so kind as to ask a contractor to come over to the house, preferably one who specializes in mould? He will need to check the rafters directly above Mrs. Muehlmeier's room, as I am fairly certain that something within the walls is causing Fionna's illness."

"I can get someone over here immediately," Frank said, leaving quickly.

Louie, Fionna, Delilah, and I sat outside for over an hour, laughing and talking. I was incredibly proud of Delilah, as she was happy to sit and play independently. She didn't give us an ounce of trouble. Fionna was looking better, so I decided to ask her for one additional favour.

"Miss Fionna, I hate to be a bother, but could I trouble you for one last request? There are some excellent places to eat in Tarrytown, but I haven't found a single Thai restaurant within walking distance. It's my favourite. Would you be interested in joining me for lunch right now?" I asked.

"I don't know. I haven't been feeling well lately. I don't want to go too far from the house," she said, looking concerned.

"Come on, Ma. It's just one meal. You haven't been out in weeks," Louie encouraged her.

She thought for a moment.

"Okay. Okay. You boys win. One meal," Fionna begrudgingly agreed.

I was thrilled to hear that she was going to venture outside of her home. Getting Fionna out of the house for a bit meant the contractor could thoroughly inspect what was behind those walls in her room. I would have bet handsomely that it was black mould making her sick.

Frank returned to the house just as we were getting ready to leave.

He pulled me aside and said, "Someone will be here in 15 minutes. I've instructed Nora to let them in and show them to Mrs. Muehlmeier's room."

"Excellent. Thank you, Frank," I replied.

On our way to lunch, we received a call in the car. Louie answered the phone, and I could immediately hear yelling on the other end. He didn't look concerned or upset, though. He glanced over at me and rolled his eyes.

"It's your wife," he whispered to me.

Louie spoke into the phone, "Yes, they are with me. — No, they won't be home for a bit. We're getting Thai food."

The yelling on the other end of the phone got louder, and Louie pulled the receiver away from his ear. Everyone in the car could hear yelling, but none of us could make out what was being said. Louie looked at me and shook his head, smiling. Once it got quiet on the other end of the line, he returned the receiver to his ear.

"I will call you when we are on our way back to Tarrytown."

And with that, Louie hung up without saying goodbye.

"Is she upset with me because I left without telling her?" I asked.

"No, she is upset because you get to spend the afternoon with *her*," Louie said as he pointed to his mother. "Our going out for Thai food didn't help, either, truth be told. If I were you, I would bring her back something. I'm fairly sure she likes the Mango Shrimp," Louie said with a smile.

Our lunch date was wonderful. Again, Delilah was very well-behaved, other than the few times I caught her not using her spoon and shoving fistfuls of rice into her mouth. Both the meal and the company were excellent.

After we were done eating and the dishes were being cleared away, I leaned over and asked Fionna, "How are you doing? You appear to be feeling at least a little bit better now."

"Actually, I am. I'm feeling better. Much better. My headache has waned a bit. Thank you for asking," she said.

"I'm very happy to hear that."

I looked over at Delilah, who had rice stuck to her face, hair, and clothing.

"Would you excuse me for a moment? I need to clean up Delilah a bit," I said while picking up the baby and the diaper bag.

Once Delilah was more presentable, we headed back towards the table. I noticed Frank by the front door to the restaurant, and he motioned to me.

He said, "I thought you'd like to know that I just told Louie that they

can't return to the house at this time. There are several large areas of black mold they've located, and the workers are going to have to do a more thorough search this evening. They advise that no one is in the residence while the mold-infested areas are removed. Also, an air filtration system will need to run overnight. They'll have to be outta the house at least for tonight, possibly two."

I thanked Frank and looked over at the table where we had been sitting and could see that Louie was explaining to his mother about the mould. She was not happy.

But I was. I was sure that within a few weeks, Fionna would start to improve. I was hoping that by Christmas, she would start feeling like herself again.

When I returned to the table with a much more presentable version of Delilah, Louie told me that he had booked two rooms for himself and his mother at The Plaza for at least that night. However, there was an issue. Louie had an important event to attend that evening and was worried about leaving his mother alone at the hotel. She didn't like sleeping away from home.

I could see Fionna becoming visibly upset.

"Miss Fionna, I apologize in advance if this seems inappropriate, but if you would rather not be alone tonight, Delilah and I could also stay at the hotel. We could get a room near yours and—,"

Fionna interrupted, "Yes. Yes, please."

Once we left the restaurant and were back in the car, Louie called Diarah to let her know that Delilah and I would be staying at the hotel to keep his mother company. I couldn't quite hear her side of the conversation, but Louie hung up the phone in record time.

He turned to me. "I'm terribly sorry, but Diarah is getting in the car and bringing the boys with her to the city. She said there is no way you get to stay at The Plaza without her."

I laughed. "That's wonderful. Is that going to be alright with you, Miss Fionna?"

"That will be fine," Fionna replied flatly. She was still not pleased with the situation.

Diarah drove to the city in under an hour. I wish I could have seen her pull up to the valet parking area at the incredibly classy hotel in her old, rundown vehicle with two loud boys in tow.

Louie got his mother a three-bedroom suite so everyone (except him, of course) would be staying together in one of the hotel's nicest rooms.

Diarah brought pyjamas and changes of clothing for all of us, including the baby and me, and we all snuggled together on the couches in the central room to watch TV. It was one big sleepover, and I believe Fionna surprised herself by having a lot of fun that night. We ordered room service and watched movies. There was a 40-year age difference between Dia and Fionna,

but you wouldn't have known it as they seemed to be good friends.

That night, Diarah slept in the same bed as Fionna just in case she needed assistance. Nicky and Delilah slept with me, and Mikey was in heaven as he had a giant, king-size bed all to himself.

Surprisingly, the workers removed the mould and finished the repairs to Fionna's room in just one day, so she only had to stay one night at the hotel and not two. She is the only person I have ever known who would have been uncomfortable spending an additional night at The Plaza, probably the nicest hotel in the city.

Louie was very kind and tried to compensate me for my time, but I told him that paying for the room service bill for all of us was more than thanks enough. However, two days later, one of the interns from his office showed up at the apartment with a beautifully wrapped box for me. The card attached read:

> *Dr. Aceti—*
> *Fionna is doing much better, thanks to you. Thought you deserved to have your own medical bag for any other 'patients' that require your services.*
> *–Louie*

Inside was a beautiful, monogrammed leather medical bag. I was shocked that the initials read "B.A." and not "M.A.," which meant that Louie knew my given name, not just what Diarah called me. It was gorgeous—truly the nicest medical bag I had ever seen—and it was full of supplies, just about everything I would need for a basic home visit with a patient.

I had assumed that the situation with Fionna was an isolated event, but it was not. Fionna talked me up quite a bit to her friends and told them how I was able to "magically" diagnose her symptoms and deduce what the issue was without any kind of exam. After that, I regularly received phone calls from acquaintances and associates of hers, at least once a week. I always explained to them that I was not licensed to practice in the U.S., but they didn't seem to care.

At first, I turned them down, too afraid to venture out on my own. But Diarah made me call them back. She said that if I scheduled my appointments in the morning so she wouldn't miss her afternoon classes, she would come with me, acting as my assistant. I alerted the patients that I would be bringing a "scribe" with me. However, Diarah mostly just sat somewhere in the background, taking notes. It looked legitimate enough. The guise worked, and I don't believe any of those patients were the wiser.

However, I knew I would never have been able to do that without Diarah. The only way I had ever been able to overcome my anxiety and fear was with her support. I wouldn't have said that I was fearless when I was with her, but somehow, she gave me strength I didn't have on my own.

After a few months, I was nothing but surprised that my services were in high demand, and there seemed to be plenty of older, more affluent New Yorkers who didn't want to bother going into a doctor's office. Most just wanted anonymity. Some wanted a consultation before heading in to see their own general practitioners so that they could be armed with information. And others, the truly eccentric ones, just found it overwhelming to get dressed and head out into public to see their regular physicians.

I was lucky that all my patients were incredibly kind. This helped tremendously with my personal development, as it was during that period that I not only learned to (somewhat) trust people but also began to enjoy being around them. I honestly never thought that day would come.

My private patients always paid me in cash, and I was making enough money for me to pay for Delilah's private preschool tuition. I would have loved to have stayed home with her, but Diarah felt that it was good for me to have something of my own outside of the house.

The following week, it was "our" birthday, but it didn't matter much as it was Halloween. Initially, I thought Dia would surprise me with something amazing planned, especially as we had never celebrated my birthday together. But she didn't.

I wasn't hurt by this. It was clear to me that I was part of the family now, and her family always celebrated Halloween together. I knew she would make it up to me later, and, of course, she did.

That afternoon, Diarah bribed Bobby and Pops with a case of Schlitz if they would be willing to sit on the front stoop and hand out candy, something they gladly took her up on. This was mostly because they could multitask—they could give out candy *and* listen to the Giants game on Pops' shortwave radio simultaneously. It was a win-win.

We left the house with Delilah in her stroller, and the boys took turns pushing her along. As we walked, I watched the other children in their store-bought costumes and was amazed by the quality of the outfits Delilah, Mikey, and Nicky had on. Diarah outdid herself each year. She made most of their costumes herself, and there was always a theme.

For their first Halloween at the place in Tarrytown, Diarah only had Nicky, and he dressed up as a cowboy. The year after that, Mikey was there, and Delilah was just a baby, so the boys were butterflies, and Delilah was a little larva. The year before I arrived, the kids were all Hershey's Kisses. And that first year I was with them, they were characters from The Wizard of Oz, with Nicky as the Scarecrow, Mikey as the Cowardly Lion, and Delilah as Dorothy. Somehow, I got roped into participating and took the role of the Tin Man. But my favourite part of the night was witnessing how Dia handled the issue with a big "kid" like Mikey going door-to-door.

The day before Halloween, Diarah would go to all the homes in the neighbourhood and put a small bag of candy in their mailboxes with a note

attached that said:

> *Tomorrow, a very large man will come to your door in costume. He's developmentally disabled and doesn't understand that he's not supposed to go trick-or-treating. So, if you would be so kind, could you please give him this bag of candy?*
> *Thank you so much for your understanding!*

With the note, she would include her name and phone number in case anyone had questions. The first year, she received quite a few calls from people asking whether he would be aggressive or if it was safe to have him around the other children. But according to Dia, my first Halloween with them was going to be the third time Mikey had gone trick-or-treating around the neighbourhood, and it seemed that just about everyone knew who he was. In fact, whole families sometimes came to their door just to see him, say hello, and give him his little bag of candy.

Diarah loved those kids so much that she was going to make sure they had every opportunity to participate in whatever they wanted. She was (and still is) such an amazing parent, and I'm so proud of her for that.

As fun and lively as Halloween was, the Monday after was quite the opposite. It was a typical November day—cold, dreary, and cloudy. It was one of those spooky days when the house let out odd groans each time the wind blew. Dead leaves would whip up against the windows every few minutes, and the sound would scare me half to death. And it was the first time I was home all alone in the apartment. Pops was out with Terri, and Delilah was at preschool. No one was there, and my mind was racing.

Most people love having time to themselves. Unfortunately, I seldom do well when I am on my own. Everything in my life in Tarrytown was falling into place so beautifully, but as it was my nature, I felt an overwhelming need to self-sabotage. I had no idea why it was happening. I was so happy, but for my whole life, I dealt with this debilitating depression and anxiety, and I just *knew* that my perfect little world and everything in it was all going to slip away.

I was having a severe panic attack and couldn't find the air. Frantic, I called Diarah at work. She had just arrived at the office after dropping Delilah off at school, and I told her that she needed to get home immediately. I said that it was an emergency, and, to me, it was.

She was back home within minutes, but in that short time, I had devolved into a complete mess. I could feel it. I was sitting on the floor, propped up against the wall. I was so dizzy—the room was spinning.

I could hear Diarah running up the outside steps. She burst through the door to our apartment and found me on the carpet, slumped over, breathing heavily. Pops was just coming up the stairs and through the front door with Terri, and they both looked into our apartment and saw me on the ground with Dia standing over me.

"Is everything okay?" Pops asked, knowing that it clearly wasn't.

"Yeah, Pops! All is good!" Diarah said, trying to sound somewhat positive.

Terri and Pops quietly entered their apartment and closed their door to give us privacy. Dia followed suit and closed ours. She then fell to her knees beside me and grabbed my hand with both of hers.

"Okay, you need to tell me what is going on here," Diarah said, sounding half-worried, half-angry.

"I… We…" I stammered.

Diarah was getting impatient. "What?! Just tell me! What?!"

"I… I want to get married," I whispered.

Diarah looked at me with her mouth ajar for a few moments and then plopped back against the wall. She glared at me, not saying a word.

"What. The. Fuck. Michael. I thought you were fucking dying," she growled, disgusted with me.

"I know you don't understand, but I can't live like this anymore."

I took a few deep breaths to try to calm myself, as I felt as if I was going to pass out. Diarah was also breathing hard, but hers was due to the anger that she was desperately trying to keep at bay. But it was palpable. She looked at me as if I were insane. I certainly felt it.

I continued again, a bit more slowly.

"I can't have any more uncertainty. I'm afraid all the time. I just feel like I could lose it all in an instant. Bunny, I have no legal connection to you. I have no legal connection to the kids. I'm sorry. I know you have no desire to get married, and I've only been here a short time. You probably haven't even really forgiven me for everything yet. But I'm sorry—I need some security," I said.

I stopped and took a few more deep breaths, trying not to cry.

"Diarah, I'm only here on a tourist visa. My passport is almost 10 years old. I know you don't remember, but I got it when you were in hospital in England. It was December. Next month is December. It's about to expire. I have a little over a month, and then I will have to go back to Italy."

I started to cry. I looked up and saw her staring at me with a scowl.

"Ugh. Alright. Get up, you big baby. Go grab your passport."

She stood up and then forcefully pulled me up by my arm. She then walked out our front door and cracked the door to Apartment A.

"Hey, Pops, I hate to pull this on you at the last minute, but can you and Terri do me a big favor and take care of the boys for me tonight? I need you to get Mikey off the bus and pick up Nicky from school."

"Yeah, I guess."

"If you do, I'll bring you home another case of Schlitz," Diarah said.

"We haven't finished the case from Halloween, but I'm not one to turn down free beer."

She thanked him and started to close the door.

Before it was completely shut, Pops yelled, "Hey, if you want me to get us dinner, you better give me some money before you go!"

She quickly walked back into our room, grabbed a $50 bill off the top of the dresser, and walked back to the other apartment. I could see through the crack in the door that Pops was in his recliner. She placed the money in his hand, gave him a small kiss on the top of his head, and thanked Terri profusely. Then we were off.

"You do have your passport, correct?" she asked as we were walking down the stairs. I nodded my head sheepishly. I had no idea where we were going, but we picked up Delilah at her school on our way, so we weren't going too far.

We drove into the city and arrived at the courthouse. As we walked into the building, Diarah asked the security guard where the Immigration Office was.

"What are we doing? Are we doing this now?" I asked, a bit frantic.

"Damn straight, we are. Listen, I have zero desire to get married, but I love you, and you're right. If you're going to stay in the country with us, it's probably a good idea to establish some kind of legal connection here. So, if this is what you need to feel safe, then let's do it. Let's start the process to get married and keep you here."

I gave her a small smile, feeling sorrow that I was essentially forcing her into marriage. Memories started flooding back of my being coerced into my marriage to Anja, and I quietly hated myself for doing the same to her.

The three of us took the elevator up to the sixth floor. Diarah told me to sit with Delilah in the lobby area and went over to speak with a receptionist about what paperwork would be required. According to her, I needed to apply for a K-1 visa. It seemed as if the process was going to be fairly easy, as I had a trade and wouldn't need any financial assistance. However, I would need a medical exam.

This worried me, as I didn't think my health was at a point where I could pass any kind of physical. I looked around and saw a bank of payphones at the end of the hallway. I decided that my best bet was to call Gio back in Italy.

I picked up Delilah, walked down to the phones, and got out the international calling card my father had given me years prior. It was about 6:00 p.m., Italian time, and my father and Gio should have been finishing up for the day. Sure enough, they were.

Gio answered the line. It was the first time I had spoken to him since he left New York, and he was surprised to hear from me. I think he wanted to chat for a bit and hear about my health and my life, but I told him I was in a hurry and needed his help.

I explained the situation and asked him if he or Papà knew of any Italian

physicians in New York who could give me a medical exam immediately. Surprisingly, my brother did know of someone. He gave me the name of the clinic and said he would call the office to see if his friend was there and to let them know we would be arriving. As soon as Diarah returned with the paperwork, we were off.

Leaving the courthouse, we asked a police officer if he knew of the clinic and where we should go. Luckily, the office was close by.

Upon our arrival, we saw that the medical office was a free clinic for immigrants and the poor, and the waiting room was overflowing with patients. The queue just to check in with the receptionist was out the door. Diarah looked at the sheer number of individuals waiting and shook her head.

We were about to go back outside to find the end of the queue when I heard a male voice call my name. I turned and saw a gentleman in a lab coat coming towards me. He introduced himself as Matteo. I was thoroughly impressed that he knew who I was—until I saw the fax my brother had sent him, with a photocopy of my passport on it.

I was thrilled that Matteo spoke Italian fluently. I later learned that he was a friend of a friend of Alessandra, my brother's wife. He was clearly quite busy, so he quickly opened a door next to the receptionist's desk, ushered us inside and down the back hallway, and motioned for us to enter one of the exam rooms.

"I don't have much time, so what can I do for you today, Bastian?" Matteo asked me. It surprised me a bit to hear my given name.

"I need to get a medical exam in order to apply for a K-1 visa," I replied.

"Oh, congratulations! Is this your fiancée and daughter?" he asked, pointing to my girls.

"Yes, this is Diarah, and the little princess is Delilah," I said.

Matteo kept glancing over at Dia, a bit quizzically.

"I feel like I've seen you before. You look a little bit like this drummer from this band I saw at The Palladium a few months ago. I forgot the name of it."

"The Prom?" she asked.

"No way! That was you? You're pretty good—for a girl," Matteo said, laughing.

Dia didn't return the laugh. She just cocked her head, pursed her lips, and stared at him.

Matteo looked back at me quickly, eyes wide. He took a deep breath.

"Okay, so I honestly do not have the time to do a full exam—you saw the waiting room—but your brother told me that you're a surgeon in Italy, so unless you have any major health issues you would like to disclose, I'm just going to sign off on this."

I lied and shook my head no.

Matteo grabbed a rubber stamp, stamped the sheet, and scribbled his

signature. He handed me back the signed piece of paper and motioned for us to head towards the door. We knew he needed to get back to his patients, so he quickly shook my hand and waved to Diarah and Delilah.

We were on our way out of his office when I stopped and told Dia I would meet her in the lobby. I turned around and saw Matteo talking to a patient in the hallway. I walked up behind him and touched him gently on his sleeve.

"Hey, Matteo, do you need any help here at the clinic?" I asked. He turned around quickly.

"Yeah, man, we do, but unfortunately, we can't afford to hire anyone else. We're barely surviving as it is," he said.

"What if I were to come here a couple of days per week as an intern? You wouldn't have to pay me. I just want the experience," I replied.

"Seriously? Wow, man."

Matteo grabbed one of his business cards out of the breast pocket of his lab coat and started to write something on the back of it.

"Here's my home number. Give me a call around 21:00 tonight, okay? We'll discuss specifics."

I nodded yes, and he patted me hard on the shoulder and walked away.

Diarah and Delilah were waiting impatiently outside, so I grabbed the baby, and we rushed back to the courthouse to submit the documents. We reached the office, but the receptionist asked us to wait to talk to an immigration official to schedule the visa interviews. We were the only three people sitting in that very large waiting room, which made me a bit nervous and uncomfortable.

An agent finally came out into the lobby area and told us they had a cancellation and that we could do our interviews right then.

Diarah looked thrilled. I was terrified.

I hadn't prepared. What if they asked me something I couldn't answer?

Diarah stood up quickly. "Great! Let's get this done!"

And with that, she picked up Delilah and started following the agent.

"Uh—could I take Delilah?" I asked.

A sad expression came over Diarah's face. She passed the baby to me, hugged us both, and whispered, "It's okay. It'll all be okay. I promise."

I got up and followed behind Dia.

The agent stopped us and said, "No, sir, you will be going with Agent Blackwell."

She pointed to a large man with a crew cut who looked like he could compete in a Strongman competition.

Diarah whispered, "It's all going to be just fine. Okay? We're good."

She kissed me lightly on the lips and gave Delilah a playful bite on the cheek. The baby squealed with joy. As she walked through the doorway, Dia looked back at me and blew me three kisses in quick succession.

There was a long hallway with a row of bright fluorescent lights that gave me a small headache. Diarah was directed into a room down the hall to the right, and I was led into one immediately to the left. It was exactly like one of the interrogation rooms from the police dramas Diarah and I watched on television, and I immediately became twice as nervous.

Agent Blackwell closed the door behind me. No one else was in the room, so I sat down in a chair at the table and put Delilah in my lap. She was getting a bit fussy, so I pulled out one of the sippy cups from her bag. I crossed my legs underneath her for stability and rocked her back and forth while she drank.

My mind was going a mile a minute, and I was experiencing sensory overload. Everything in the room was either metal or concrete, making it feel 10 degrees cooler than it actually was. I was visibly shaking. And there was a one-way mirror, which alone made me feel like I had done something wrong. The only saving grace at that moment was having Delilah with me, and she kept me somewhat calm and sane.

I had waited in that room for close to an hour. The space was a bit too bright and too quiet for my liking, with the only noise being the buzz from the fluorescent lights above. I wrapped Delilah in her soft blanket and handed her a toy bear, which she immediately put over her eyes. She fell asleep like that, and I chuckled to myself.

It was then that I realized I hadn't had anything to eat that day. I was famished. I poked around in the baby's bag to see if I could locate any snacks and was happy to find a couple of packs of crackers. I opened one of them and started to eat, which was the same moment that the two immigration officials walked into the room.

The crackers were dry, and I started to cough just as the officers introduced themselves. I searched the room for something to drink and came up empty-handed. One of the officials ran out and returned quickly with a paper cone filled with water. I greedily gulped it down and apologized profusely. Thankfully, even with all the commotion, Delilah did not wake.

I was worried, as I knew I had not made a good first impression. The officers seemed very serious, and even though my English skills were fairly good, I was stumbling over words. I had never been very adept at making small talk in any language, so the first few minutes of our conversation were awkward, to say the least.

After the initial questions (my name, my birthdate, my country of origin, etc.), the two began asking about my relationship with Diarah. I told them I had met her when she was four years old, and they looked at me suspiciously. So, I pulled out my wallet, which contained my favourite picture of Diarah and me. It was the photo from the first day she was with us—the one Gio had taken as I held her while she napped on my shoulder. The demeanour of the officials changed, and they both seemed quite interested in our story.

I told them almost all the good things about us over the years: riding the bike to bowling, me teaching her the piano, drums, and guitar, our trip around Italy, our dancing, the nightly heart-to-hearts at Piazzale Michelangelo, playing in my family's pool and jumping on the trampoline, and our friends, the Kuhmalos.

Of course, I left out all of the bad moments: how broken Bunny would be when she showed up each summer after spending months with her mother, how we had to buy her clothes and shoes (as her parents wouldn't), how her mother chopped off her hair and dressed her like a boy because she was feeling threatened by Bunny growing into a woman, and, of course, about England, the attack, and everything she had to endure.

And I, of course, left out the part about Gunnar. Instead, I just told the officials that I had fallen in love with (literally) the girl next door and that Diarah and I had lost touch for a while. It wasn't true, but it was the best way I knew how to put a good spin on a very bad situation.

I referred to Diarah as "Bunny" several times during the conversation, which felt very normal but confused the officers. But how could I have referred to her as anything other than Bunny?

Delilah woke up halfway through our conversation and began to speak to me in Italian, which the officers seemed to enjoy. They didn't need to know that Diarah and Bobby had been teaching her well before I arrived.

By the time I gave them my statement and answered their questions, I had been talking to them for almost two full hours. The officials thanked me for my time, handed me my paperwork, and directed me back towards the waiting room.

Delilah and I re-entered the lobby and saw Diarah sitting alone. It was apparent that she was quite worried. She got up quickly, ran over to me, and hugged the two of us.

"Oh, my goodness, are you okay?" she asked, almost crying.

"Yeah, we're good."

Diarah recoiled back a bit and gave me a confused look. Her manner quickly changed, and she got a bit testy.

"You're good? *You're good?!* You've been in there for almost three hours! I talked to my people for 20 minutes, and you were in there for three hours!"

"I'm not understanding. Are you mad or worried?" I asked.

"Yes!" she growled, grabbing Delilah from me.

She turned to face no one in particular and yelled at the ceiling, "You know, if you want to deny his K-1, that probably wouldn't be a bad idea!!"

"I already have it," I said.

She turned towards me quickly, her eyes wide with surprise.

"NO. WAY! Really? Let me see."

I opened the folder with the paperwork in it to give to her. She grabbed the pages with her free hand and quickly examined the documents inside.

When she was finished scanning them, she looked up and leaned into me, still holding Delilah. She hugged me and gave me a big, passionate kiss. I gave a snorty laugh, and Diarah pulled away from me. She then realized that I was laughing as the baby was trying to kiss me, too.

Dia kissed Delilah and said lovingly, "No, no. He's all mine right now."

And she gave me another long, deep kiss.

The receptionist came out and handed me my passport along with some additional paperwork. We were done.

She looked up at me and said, "Wow. Okay. Should we go celebrate?"

I replied, "Please don't be mad, but I just really want to go home. But before we do, I have to get something to eat around here. I feel like I'm going to faint. Can we take a minute and get a knish from the cart at the corner?"

I knew all about knishes, as Diarah had Bobby bring some home from the city at least once a week. So, we bought two hot dogs, two large sodas, and six knishes from the cart, and we ate our dinner on the walk back to the car. I bought two extra knishes for the boys but was still so hungry that I ended up eating them on the way.

The drive home was so lovely. Delilah sang to herself softly in the back seat of the car, but Dia and I were quiet. We held hands most of the way home, and every few minutes, we would just look at each other and smile. But we didn't talk. There was no need to.

It was the perfect afternoon, but everything changed once we arrived home.

We pulled into our little parking lot behind our house and saw Bobby waiting for us. It was clear that he was not happy. Dia had completely forgotten that Bobby was supposed to have Delilah at her grandmother Linda's apartment by 4:00 that day, and it was already 5:30.

Delilah hadn't been to Linda's in weeks, and it didn't seem like much of an issue. But because Bobby didn't drop off Delilah, Linda was not getting those extra funds from him, and it was clear she was running low on cash.

In addition, Bobby said that Priscilla called, something she rarely did, as most of the communication happened between him and Linda. Priscilla mentioned that there was a party that she needed to bring the baby to that evening.

I thought that was so odd. What kind of party do you need to bring a baby to, especially at night?

But I didn't want to think about it too much. I hated it when Delilah was away and worried the entire time.

According to Bobby, when he and Delilah arrived at Linda and Priscilla's walk-up in the city that evening, Priscilla answered the door. She looked worse than ever, and it was evident that she was using again. Her newest boyfriend, Todd, came to the door with her, and he worried Bobby right from the start. There was something disturbing about the way he grabbed

Delilah and slammed the door in Bobby's face. It was as if he were going to punish the baby for Bobby being late.

The next morning, which was Saturday, Bobby got a call from Linda saying that he needed to get Delilah immediately. Linda told him that Priscilla dropped the baby off early that morning and that Delilah was screaming, crying, and kicking anyone who got near her.

Bobby grabbed the keys to the car and ran out the door. He was back just before dinner, and when he walked in the door with her, Delilah looked at me with big tears in her eyes and softly said, "Papà."

I took her from Bobby and walked over to the rocking chair. She was shaking so hard that she could barely breathe. I just held her and talked to her to try to calm her down. Diarah got a sippy cup for her and was bringing it to me, but when she got close, Delilah started kicking and screaming violently.

In a very calm, soothing voice, Dia said gently, "Okay. Okay, Delilah. I'm moving back. I just wanted to give Papà your drink."

Dia, with a big, fake smile on her face, said in that same calm tone, "I'm going to go over and talk to Bobby to find out what the fuck happened."

She returned a few minutes later and said that Bobby told her that he had to stop the car several times on the way home just to hold Delilah, as she was so upset. He said there were no drinks in her bag, no clean clothes, and no diapers, so he couldn't feed or change her.

After almost an hour, Delilah finally calmed a bit.

I looked at her and whispered to Diarah, "She's almost asleep. I'm going to change her before I put her down."

I went over to the dresser we used as Delilah's changing table. Even as sleepy as she was, the baby fought me as I removed her outfit. I gasped as I removed her little shirt. Her skin had bruising all over, from her neck to her torso to her arms. I removed her little sweatpants, and then I saw it.

There was a tiny bit of blood running down her leg.

I carefully opened her diaper and couldn't believe what I saw. I screamed for Diarah.

She ran in with a terrified look on her face.

"Shut the door. Shut the door," I said quietly.

Delilah started to fuss, so I quieted her down first. And then I opened her diaper again and showed Dia. She covered her mouth and breathed hard several times. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I'm gonna kill them. I'm gonna fucking kill them!" She started to cry. "Michael, please tell me that isn't what I think it is."

I started to tear up.

"I think someone sexually abused this baby," I whispered, barely able to get the words out.

Delilah started to cry because she saw that we were getting upset. Diarah

picked her up and walked her back and forth in the room, trying to console her. I told Dia to watch her for a minute while I called the police.

"No! No! Please, do not do that," she pleaded. "That is the worst thing you could do."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

Dia was visibly scared.

"Michael, you don't know these people. If we tell the police, there will be an investigation, and the people that Priscilla associates with will hurt us. They are evil. If they can do this to a baby, they would have no issue doing something equally as bad to one of the boys.

"Priscilla knows where we live. They could get Nicky coming out of school or Mikey when he gets off the bus. No. I'm sorry, but I can't let that happen. I don't know what we should do, but we are definitely *not* calling the police."

Just then, Roy came into our apartment and said there was a call from Fionna. She was the go-between for arranging the consultations with her friends. Roy passed the phone to me and left.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself before speaking to her.

"Fionna, I'm so sorry, but I am dealing with something right now. Can I call you back later?"

"No, you cannot," Fionna said. "You can tell me right now what it is. I'd like to help."

"I don't know." I started to cry. "I don't know who to talk to about it. I can't explain over the phone."

"Then come see me right now," she said. "But first, is this concerning Diarah?"

"No, it's not," I whimpered.

"Okay, good. Then, I will see you soon. Do you need Frank to go get you?"

"I think I can take the train into the city, but I don't know where to go from there. Could he please pick me up at Grand Central?"

"Yes, of course. Call when you get in."

I grabbed my passport and wallet off the dresser. As I was leaving, I told Diarah that I needed to do something and ran out of the house. I slammed the door shut behind me before she could respond. I knew that was very unlike me, and I'm sure she was worried.

I honestly don't even remember how I got to the city. I remember running to the station in Tarrytown, but the time between that and arriving in the city was a bit of a blur.

I was surprised that it was nighttime as the train pulled into the station, as the sky was still light the last time I looked out the window. I walked over to the large bank of payphones and dug a quarter out of my pocket to call Fionna, but when she answered, she said that Frank was already in the loading

zone waiting for me. I walked out of the station and saw him immediately.

Frank was so kind and polite, and he tried his best to engage me in conversation on the ride over, but I was just out of sorts. I couldn't converse with him, and I felt bad. I sat in the back seat in silence.

When we arrived at Fionna's, Frank just pulled up in front of the house. Fionna was waiting for me at the front door. I ran up the steps and started to cry again. Fionna came over, put her arm around me, and led me inside the house to the sitting room.

I sobbed, "I don't know why I'm here. I don't know why I'm bothering you. I know this is highly inappropriate. I'm so sorry."

"Never mind that. Just come in. We're friends, right? Just two friends talking," she said.

"But Louie—," I started to say.

"Uh-uh. This doesn't involve Louis. I won't tell him if you don't want me to," she said. "Come. I had Nora make us some finger sandwiches before she left. I know it's a little late for tea and sandwiches, but I'm not one for eating a heavy dinner."

Indeed, the spread on the table was beautiful. It looked like something the Queen would have for her own high tea.

I sat down and sheepishly glanced up at Fionna.

"Thank you. I don't think you realize how much I appreciate this."

"Come on. Spill it," she gently demanded as she picked up the teapot and poured us both a cup of tea.

I told her what had happened. I told her everything. She sat there silently, not moving a muscle.

When I finished, I said, "I feel like I am supposed to do something, but I don't know what. I'm at a loss. What should I do?"

She quietly poured herself another cup of tea and put a couple of finger sandwiches on a plate.

"Can I be completely frank with you?" she asked.

"That is why I am here. I would love to hear your perspective on this," I said, trying to steady my breath.

"You need to get rid of that mother once and for all," she stated, with no affect.

"I don't think I understand. How do I do that?"

She got up and headed across the room and into the next. I could see her walk over to her beautiful antique secretary desk by the window. She opened one of the small drawers and took out a roll of cash. She then walked back over to me and put the money in my hand.

"Make Priscilla come to your house the next time she wants the baby. When she arrives, you tell her that Diarah took Delilah for a walk and won't return for a while. Then, give her this money. Tell her and that snake of a boyfriend that they should go get some dinner and that you would like to pay

for it," Fionna said.

I stared at the large roll of $20 bills in my hand. "If I give her this much money, she will not use it for dinner."

"And that is my point, my dear," she remarked, looking down, stirring her cup of tea.

"You don't understand. She will spend this entire amount on drugs. I don't like to admit this, but I know it all too well."

Fionna had a slight smirk on her face. I knew what she was thinking, and I could feel myself recoiling.

"I can't. Priscilla could get hurt. I don't like her one bit, but she is Delilah's mother," I whispered to Fionna.

"I disagree wholeheartedly. Diarah is Delilah's mother. Priscilla was just a womb. She was merely a surrogate," Fionna stated so calmly that it scared me. "You wanted to know what I would do in your situation. *This* is what I would do."

I closed my eyes for a moment and thought about what she said. I did want Priscilla and her boyfriend gone, but I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I had no answers and felt completely inept. I was disgusted with myself. I promised Diarah I would take care of her and the kids. We weren't even married yet, and I was already failing her.

"I can't take this money from you," I whispered to Fionna, conflicted.

"Oh, darling, that money is not for you. Be sure to give it to Priscilla for me, with my best regards."

Fionna looked away and took a long sip of her tea. She was a small woman, probably weighing no more than a hundred pounds soaking wet, but she appeared to be quite fierce at that moment.

I stood up, walked over to the still-seated Fionna, and bent down. I gave her a small peck on the cheek and knelt in front of her.

"You know, I never knew my mother. She took her own life when I was two. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I believe you are the closest thing I have ever had to a mother figure."

Fionna gave a gentle smile.

"I appreciate you very much," I said.

She looked at me kindly and patted me gently on the head.

"Maybe your mother put me in your path so I could take over for her."

I kissed her again on the cheek, stood up, and walked out the door. As I headed towards the gate, I thought about what I was going to do.

I was a physician. I took an oath to protect human life. I didn't want anyone to get hurt. And I knew Priscilla would use the money to buy drugs. Of course, she would. But was there another way out of this situation?

Allowing your two-year-old daughter to be harmed in exchange for drugs was about the lowest form of humanity. But if we had kept the baby from Priscilla, she would have taken Bobby and Diarah to court, and we would

have lost Delilah forever. It would have been a death sentence for that little girl.

I looked down at the large roll of bills in my hand. I didn't need to take her money—I had money of my own. However, I realized that Fionna didn't want me to give Priscilla anything that could be traced back to me. I still had most of the $20,000 I had come into the country with, but customs had documented the serial numbers on the bills. I couldn't spend my own money. The cash that Fionna gave me would never be tracked back to Diarah or me.

I was deep in thought, wandering aimlessly around the city, when I suddenly realized I didn't know where I was. I had no idea how to get back to the station, so I flagged down the first taxi I saw. I didn't realize it was already 21:00, and I didn't arrive back home until close to 22:00.

Diarah was sitting outside on the steps, holding the cordless phone, waiting for me. I could tell she was worried and had been crying, but she appeared quite relieved when I pulled up in the taxi. She didn't stand when I walked towards her, so I climbed two steps up and sat one step above her to put my arms around her and hold her.

I asked about Delilah. She said that Mikey had been rocking her in Pops' chair for hours, as that was the only way she would sleep. Without turning to look at me, she asked if I was okay. I told her no, but that I was going to be.

I told her I loved her so much and that I would never leave her and the kids. I would always be there to help her take care of the children. Having my K-1 in hand meant I could make that a reality.

Over the next week, I kept track of Delilah's healing. The first few days, I couldn't tell if she was going to need surgery, as much of the surrounding area was red, irritated, and swollen. By day four, I could examine Delilah a bit more closely, but only with Diarah holding her while she was sedated. It was as bad as I thought. Some vaginal wounds had begun to heal, but they would have to be monitored to see if any reconstructive surgery would be needed down the line.

I also needed to get some blood tests done for Delilah to see if she had contracted any sexually transmitted diseases and, if so, treat those as soon as possible. We needed to take her to see a doctor. At that moment, I realized I had never contacted Matteo at the clinic. I searched for his business card, found his number, and called him immediately. He was with patients, so I told the nurse that there was a child who needed to be treated. The nurse paged Matteo, who got on the line and told me to bring her in.

We needed to take the train into the city, as Delilah could not tolerate sitting in her car seat for an entire hour. She could stand or lie down, but sitting too long was an issue. She thought she was pretty special as we let her half-sit/half-lay in Pops' recliner while she ate or watched TV. She loved that, as Pops let virtually no one sit in his chair.

Pops didn't understand what had happened to Delilah and didn't want to

know the specifics. All he knew was that Delilah was pretty much allowed to do whatever she wanted over those few days if it meant keeping her comfortable.

Dia, Delilah, and I left to walk down to the train station, and on our way out, Pops yelled down to us that he would get Mikey off the bus and pick Nicky up from school, as he had the car. Thank God for Pops.

We arrived in the city and got to the clinic around 10:00 that morning. Matteo allowed me to take one of the exam rooms, and I searched for what I needed. Diarah bribed Delilah with a lollipop, and I was able to get a decent blood draw, even with her squirming a bit. Matteo entered the room and gave me the necessary forms to request lab work, and he was shocked when he saw the tests being run on Delilah.

"Wait… Are these tests for your wife or the baby?" he asked.

If the situation hadn't been so horrible, I might have taken a bit of pleasure in Matteo calling Dia my wife.

"It's for the baby," I said.

"Wait, wait, wait. This is *not* okay with me. I have to report this," Matteo insisted.

"You can't," Diarah spoke up. "I'm sorry, but you just can't."

She explained what had happened to Delilah.

"They know where we live. We have two other children, and a man in his 60s with health issues lives with us. If we report this, something even worse will happen to those we love or to us. Please, please, trust me on this. These are not good people."

Matteo leaned against the cabinets in the exam room, blowing a long breath out through his mouth, looking frustrated.

"I'm supposed to—," Matteo was interrupted.

"We know you're supposed to report it. We know," Dia said.

Matteo breathed hard and thought.

"Let's see what the labs show. But if you don't want this to get reported, you need to change the baby's date of birth on those forms."

I quickly glanced down at what I was writing. Matteo was right. I couldn't believe that I had written Delilah's actual birthdate. What was I thinking?

When we had finished, Delilah and Dia walked to the lobby, and I waited in the exam room to talk to Matteo and thank him. A few minutes later, I heard yelling coming from the hallway and poked my head out to see what was transpiring. A young man with lesions all over his body, much like the ones I had during my days of addiction, was yelling at Matteo. I overheard Matteo quietly trying to tell him that the clinic was not able to treat HIV-positive patients.

The young man appeared to be both mad and sad simultaneously, and I heard him say, "I have nowhere else to go, man!"

Before I realized what I was doing, I had walked up and asked Matteo if

I could assist. I introduced myself to the young man, whose name I learned was Jimmy, and told him that although I was a doctor in Italy and not licensed to practice in the country, I would happily provide him with as much help as I could.

Matteo excused us from the conversation and forcefully pulled me aside.

"He has AIDS, man. Full-blown AIDS. You want to treat him? You have a wife and kids at home. You sure about this?" Matteo asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I think I am," I said. "Can I borrow an exam room?"

Matteo breathed hard and gave me a scowl. He spoke to me for the first time in Italian, "Okay, man, but you're playing with fire."

I turned to Jimmy and said, "Hey, give me a few minutes, okay? I need to prepare. Can you go back out to the waiting room for a bit?"

"Yeah, man, sure," Jimmy replied, looking both sheepish and confused, almost shocked that someone was willing to help him.

Matteo got me set up with a room at the end of the hall. It wasn't an exam room but more of a kitchen/break area. However, the main benefit of that space was that it had a door that led outside, so Jimmy could enter from the back alley without having to wait in the waiting room with the other patients.

"If you need any supplies, there is a closet next door. Just do me a favour and stay at your end of the hall. Don't let him mingle with the other patients, please. I appreciate what you are doing, but I could get into huge trouble allowing you to do this. You need to realize that this could cause us a lot of issues down the road, so please, proceed with caution," Matteo said.

He walked out the door and moved a cart into the hallway, next to the supply closet door.

"This is to keep your patients at your end of the hall," he explained. "Oh, and you are still working pro bono, correct?"

"Yes, I am," I said, looking around my new workspace.

And with that, he left.

I walked around the building and back through the front door to get Jimmy when I saw Diarah and Delilah standing off to the side, waiting for me.

I walked over to Dia and said quietly, "Matteo needs some help today. I'm going to stay for a while. Is that okay?"

Diarah gave a big grin. She said sweetly, "Good for you. I think that's great. There's a lot of people here who need your help."

She then kissed me on the cheek and put her forehead against mine.

"Hey, I'm so proud of you. I really am. Are you gonna be okay getting home on your own?"

I softly nodded and then gave her a kiss.

"Thank you for letting me do this. I love you so much."

I turned to Delilah. "And I love you, too."

For the first time since the incident, she smiled a big smile for me. I was

thrilled. I gave her a bunch of kisses on the neck, which she loved, and she squealed with delight.

Dia turned to her and asked, "McDonald's?" and Delilah echoed, "Ma Donnas!"

Dia gave me another kiss, and my girls walked out the door.

I looked over at Jimmy. "You ready?" I asked.

Jimmy was my first patient at the free clinic, and soon, almost all my patients there were either HIV-positive or had AIDS. I realized that what we were doing at the clinic was unusual, as our patient numbers skyrocketed overnight. There were not many doctors who wanted to treat this population, and most of the medical establishment shunned them. Certainly, no other clinic was offering them free health care. However, no matter what, Matteo and I believed that they were still entitled to help and services.

Being from Italy, I was embarrassed to admit that I had no idea that there were first-world countries that didn't offer state health care. It was a bizarre concept to me, as I have always believed it is an inalienable right. But as for my new country, as wonderful as it was, the United States had a lot of basic, fundamental systemic issues that needed to be addressed.

There was still a lot to be learned about HIV and AIDS at that time, so just to be extra careful, on the days I worked at the clinic, I wouldn't let the kids come and hug me when I got home until I had showered. Diarah would put a garbage bag in the entryway/mudroom for me to put my work clothes into, and I would strip down to my underwear, being careful not to touch anything around me. I would walk directly into the bathroom and take a long shower, making sure to wash the day off me. Only when I was re-dressed would Dia let the children come over to me. Delilah hated that routine, as she always demanded my attention as soon as I got home, but soon, everyone was on board with it.

I initially agreed to go to the clinic only twice a week, but soon, my patient numbers grew so much that I needed to go more often. I took my time with each individual, ensuring I heard them and their concerns. Some were doing quite well, but others were on death's door. It broke my heart, as many of them reminded me of myself and my life in Italy, all alone in my room downstairs, slowly dying. I didn't want them to go through what I went through. If they had no other form of support, and many of them didn't, I wanted to be the one person who would listen and advocate for them.

It was a Saturday, just a few days before Thanksgiving, and Diarah had taken the kids to go food shopping. She could have gone by herself, but I was looking forward to a few minutes to myself, which was very unlike me. I wasn't even worried that no one was home next door, either. Rex, Bobby, and Pops all went to a demolition derby at a fair in a neighbouring county. I have to admit that when Diarah had first explained to me what a demolition derby was, I thought she was joking. I had never heard of such a thing.

The house was quiet, so the sudden knock at the door startled me. I pushed the exterior door open and realized that although I had never previously seen the people standing before me, I knew exactly who they were. I prayed to God that Diarah would not arrive home with the kids in those next few minutes. There was no way I was going to let Delilah anywhere near her mother and her troglodyte of a lover.

I put on a big, fake smile and conjured up the thickest Italian accent I could muster.

"Hellooo! I-a not speak-a da Engleesh. I am Michele, frrriend of Dia. Dia no-a here right-a now."

Todd whispered under his breath to Priscilla, "Fucking immigrant. Why do we let these pieces of shit into our country?"

Without looking at Todd, Priscilla put up her hand in the stop position and spoke slowly but very loudly to me.

"I want my baby! Where is Delilah?"

"Delilah! Oh, what-a bella!"

"I want my daughter, you freak!" she screamed at me.

"Oh-a, no! She no-a here-a. She-a with-a Dia. Soon-a! She here-a soon-a!"

I couldn't believe what I was doing—I sounded like a complete idiot—but they were buying it.

"Wait-a, wait-a! Aspetti!"

I went to the bedroom to grab the money Fionna gave me to give to them.

"Here-a. Take-a dis money. Go! Go, eat! Mangia! Eat! Come-a back-a soon! Okay? Okay?"

I held out the roll of bills to them in the palm of my hand. This was ridiculous and humiliating, but there was nothing I wouldn't do for that baby.

I attempted to give the money to Priscilla, but Todd snatched it out of my hand before she could grab it.

He took the rubber band off the roll, quickly counted it, and whispered to her, "This fucker gave us $1,000. What a fucking idiot."

Todd straightened out the bills and smacked me on the head with them with a snap.

"Hey, Paco, make sure the baby is here when we get back. Got it, pendejo?"

"Sì, comprendo," I said with a dumb smile. As they descended the back stairs, I realized that I hated that man with every fibre of my being.

They took off in their car, peeling out onto the main street and through the town. I sat down on the bench in the mudroom and prayed, "Please, Lord, please, protect that little girl."

Diarah and the kids pulled up about three minutes after Priscilla and Todd left. I ran down to the car as fast as I could and told Dia what had just transpired. I then helped her get the groceries out of the car and told her I

would help the boys put everything away, but she needed to take Delilah far from our house for a few hours. I stayed with the baby downstairs near the car as she ran upstairs to restock the diaper bag. Within 30 seconds, she emerged from the building and ran down the stairs towards the car.

She stopped, kissed me, and said, "Thank you for loving these kids as much as I do. You are such a good man. How about right after Thanksgiving, we go into the city and get married at City Hall?"

I smiled and nodded softly, and she kissed me once more.

"I will call you in a couple of hours to see if the coast is clear."

And with that, she and Delilah got in the car and took off.

After that day, Dia and Delilah never had to leave the house in fear again. Delilah's mother and her cohorts would never cause her daughter any more harm.

It turned out that neither Priscilla nor Todd were caught by the police with a large amount of illegal substances, as I believe that was what Fionna had anticipated. No, what happened was far more gruesome.

The information we were given from the detectives was that Priscilla and Todd did go to buy crack that day, but when they went to split it after the purchase, Todd didn't believe that Priscilla gave him half. He thought he was being cheated and became enraged, and he beat Priscilla to within an inch of her life with his bare hands. Instead of calling for an ambulance, Todd stole her half of the drugs and left her alone on the floor with broken bones and a severe head wound while he and his friends shot up in the next room. She was lying on that floor in a pool of her own blood for hours before anyone called for help.

Priscilla was in the Intensive Care Unit for weeks, but the doctors held out no hope for her. So, seventeen days later, Linda chose to remove her daughter's life support. As for Todd, the penal system handled his punishment and future accommodations. We wouldn't have to worry about him for a very long time.

After that, Linda stopped bothering Bobby to have time with the baby and was just happy that she was still getting the monthly checks from the state for Delilah's care. She had no desire to spend time with her granddaughter. In fact, Bobby took Delilah to see Linda only once more, as she herself died of a drug overdose several months after her daughter's death.

And to this day, no one other than myself and Fionna ever knew how Priscilla and Todd got that money. Todd told the police that a Mexican who couldn't speak any English gave him the cash that day, but he could not explain why the gentleman did so. When the detectives came to interview us about the situation, I lied and said I had never seen them. In addition, they could clearly see that I a) could speak English quite well, and b) was not Mexican.

After Linda died, no one put pressure on the police to find that elusive

Mexican, and we were not bothered again.

In retrospect, I have always been a bit disturbed by my behaviour that day and how I showed no emotion regarding the situation. One person lost their life, and another learned they would spend the rest of theirs in prison, and it never bothered me. Even today, I feel nothing. I have never experienced guilt or sorrow regarding it. Instead, I have always felt joyous that we saved that beautiful baby from more physical and mental anguish and trauma.

The Wednesday after Thanksgiving, I brought Delilah into the city, and we met Fionna for lunch at her home. I told her the whole tale, and she sat and listened without saying a word.

"Delilah is safe because of you," I stated as I finished the story.

"No, I disagree. Delilah is safe because she has a lot of people who love and care for her," Fionna replied. "She's a lucky little girl."

"No, it's me. I'm truly the lucky one," I said.

I drank my tea and grabbed a couple of the cucumber sandwiches Nora had laid out for us. I looked up at Fionna.

"I don't want to put you on the spot, but Diarah and I are getting married tomorrow at City Hall. It's nothing special, but the kids will be there. Would you like to join us?" I asked.

She smiled and said, "I would love to be there. Thank you for inviting me. Is my son invited, as well?"

"Of course, he is. I'm sure Dia has already asked him," I said. "We are scheduled for 11:00 a.m."

"We will be there."

The next day, we had assumed that it would be the two of us, the kids, and Fionna. We doubted that Louie would be able to make it with his busy schedule and all, but we were wrong.

When we arrived at City Hall, a group of people was waiting for us. Duncan, Jahmir, Bobby, Roy, Terri, Rex, Louie, Mr. Jarvis, Frank, and Mark, the boys' social worker, were also there. But what was amazing was that John made it, too. Diarah called him to let him know, and somehow, he was able to magically rearrange his busy schedule to be there.

It was lovely to see everyone, and I started to choke up when I saw how they all took time out of their busy lives to be there for us. It was at that moment that I had an epiphany. I looked around and understood who our "family" was. Neither Diarah nor I had any blood relatives there, but we were surrounded by the people who loved us the most. And I felt so blessed.

The "ceremony," if you can call it that, lasted all of five minutes, and the clerk who presided over it was less than enthusiastic. It didn't matter. It was perfect.

Afterward, we asked everyone if they wanted to join us for lunch, and Louie said he knew of a good place we could all go. Little did Diarah and I know that Louie had something planned all along.

Diarah, the kids, and I rode with Louie and Fionna in his car. It felt like we were driving in circles around the city for a bit, and that was because we were. Louie was stalling.

When we finally stopped, we pulled up in front of The Four Seasons, one of the nicest restaurants in the city. We got out of the car, and the maître d' immediately escorted us into the restaurant to a private room in the back. We were shocked to see that everyone else had arrived before us.

The room was stunning. A long table was decorated beautifully with gorgeous flowers and exquisite china. Appetizers had been set out, and champagne was being poured. A small wedding cake was off to one side. We had a lovely meal with all our friends, and the day, honestly, couldn't have been more perfect.

As the festivities were winding down, we asked Bobby and Rex to take the kids home for us. After we said our goodbyes and thanked Louie profusely, Diarah whispered to me, "We have one more stop, right?"

We walked for blocks, me in my borrowed blazer from Roy, of all people, and her in her second-hand, off-white, tea-length wedding dress and small veil. It was cold, and the sun was starting to go down, but we didn't mind. We arrived at a place called The Body is a Temple Tattoo Parlor and walked down the stairs to the door. The place was empty except for the gentleman sitting, reading a magazine.

Dia pushed the door open and said, "Hello, Jeremy!"

"It's nice to see you again, DJ! So, this must be Bass-tee-an."

"Yup, this is Bass-tee-an," she said with a sweet smile. "We need you to help us out. Someone needs a matching ring on his hand."

She leaned over and whispered, "Are you still up for this?"

"Absolutely," I whispered back.

"So, do you have a sketch, or do you want me to free-style it?" Jeremy asked.

I retrieved my wallet from my breast pocket, opened it, and pulled out a drawing.

"What about this?"

Jeremy and Dia both examined it. It showed the outline of my hand that I had drawn. On my ring finger was a very similar design to what she had, but instead, with Dia's name within the vines. Around my wrist, I wanted a bracelet tattooed with two intertwined vines. Each vine was to include tiny letters, one with the names Michael and Delilah, and the other with Dominic and Bunny. I was a bit worried that Dia might not like that I included the name "Bunny" on it, and that I would have to fight her to keep it. But that didn't happen.

She looked up from the drawing and said, "I love it. I do," and handed the paper to Jeremy.

I wasn't sure if he would be able to pull it off, as the lettering would have

to be tiny. I am small-boned and have a small wrist, but I was hoping it would be possible.

"Have a seat, my friend," Jeremy said as he started to get his tools ready.

"Okay, I'm going to tell you exactly what I told DJ here several years ago. Getting a tattoo on a finger hurts. As your bride here knows, fingers do not have a lot of fat or muscle on them, and there are a ton of nerves, as well. Just want to prepare you for what's to come."

"I understand. Thank you for the warning," I said, but I had not anticipated how painful it would be.

I kept my eyes closed the entire time, trying to keep my mind focused away from the agony I was in. When Jeremy announced he was finished, I opened my eyes, and two large streams of tears fell from them. It took me a moment to focus, but when I finally could, I realized that Dia was right—he did excellent work.

It was different from Diarah's. Vastly different. I thought I wanted something that looked close to hers, but after I saw Jeremy's work, I realized that what I had was perfect.

We thanked Jeremy and paid him, and after we left, we continued walking through the city. We caught a taxi several blocks up Broadway and took it to The Plaza.

Our honeymoon consisted of exactly one night away, as we couldn't afford anything more. We also knew it would have been unfair to ask Bobby and Rex to watch the boys and Delilah again for more than a night, as they had done such a great job three months prior, when they took care of everyone and everything for an entire week while Diarah was in Italy to get me.

Bobby had the car and was able to drop off our bags at the hotel several hours earlier, so everything was waiting in our room when we arrived. And it was lovely. It was only a single room, not the gorgeous three-bedroom suite we had with Fionna, but it was still quite beautiful.

But I will be honest—at that moment, I really couldn't enjoy any of it.

I was dreading going to our room. It was going to be the first night Diarah and I would be alone together in three months, and we were married. I was terrified about fulfilling my duties as a husband. I wasn't a very sexual person to begin with, and my experience with Anja was so profoundly horrible that I honestly had no desire to have sex with anyone.

I loved Diarah with all my heart, but I was afraid that one night with me would either vastly change our relationship or kill any passion that she had for me—or both. So, I dealt with it by avoiding her. I would stay locked in the bathroom for long periods or go down the hall to get ice, taking 30 minutes to do so. Diarah never got upset. I would have been incredibly disappointed had the roles been reversed, but she seemed okay.

I returned to the room after getting ice for the second time in two hours.

She had taken a shower and was sitting on the bed dressed in a soft t-shirt and pyjama pants. Even so, I wouldn't look at her. I probably would have passed out if I had walked in to see her in a sexy negligée.

I brought the second bucket of ice over to the sink and, as I set it down, she sang from behind me, "I have a present for you!"

I turned around to see three big boxes on the bench at the bottom of the bed. All three were wrapped beautifully.

"I didn't get you anything," I said sheepishly.

"It's okay. These are kinda for both of us," she said with a sweet smile.

I untied the bow and lifted the lid off the first box. It was a large case. I opened it, and it was filled with makeup, much of the same items we purchased at that beauty-supply store in San Gimignano. I glanced up at her and gave a small laugh.

"This is for both of us?" I asked.

"In a way, yes," she said. "I'd like to see Bianca again, please. It's been a very long time."

I looked at the other two presents, and Diarah motioned for me to open them. One box contained several smaller boxes. I opened one of them, and inside was a beautiful wig, similar to one I had in Florence. There were four wigs in total.

"Which one should Bianca wear tonight?" I asked, smiling.

"Whichever one she wants," Dia said, looking at me lovingly.

I opened the third present, and the box contained a beautiful nightgown and a matching silk robe. They were both a pale shade of periwinkle, my favourite colour.

I looked up at her. I just stared at her for a minute, and I could feel my heart beating out of my chest. It amazed me that no matter how hard I tried to be the perfect husband for Anja, she was repulsed by me. It was quite the opposite with Bunny. I could be exactly who I wanted with Diarah, and she adored me. She was my soul mate—of that, I was sure.

She got up off the bed, stood next to me, and rubbed my back gently in circular motions. "Don't be mad, but I didn't have time to get you any heels. You're going to have to wing it tonight," she said with a small smile, scanning the boxes on the bench.

I grabbed her waist and pushed her down on the bed in a playful way. We just hugged and kissed and snuggled for a few minutes.

We were looking in each other's eyes when Dia said, "Go get her. Go get our girl."

I went to the bathroom and took a quick shower. I had shaved that morning, but I wanted to be completely clean-shaven for my make-up base. When I finished, I blow-dried my hair and put it up in a tight bun. It had been years since I had done this, and I felt a combination of trepidation and excitement.

I sat down at the desk, opened the makeup case, and started to work on my face. I was getting progressively irritated with myself, as I couldn't exactly remember how to apply any of it correctly. It was just all wrong. I wanted to cry.

Sensing my frustration, Diarah came up behind me and leaned over my shoulder to hand me a jar of cold cream.

"Instead of getting pissed off, why don't you wash it all off and start again?"

She leaned down, kissed my neck, and gently whispered in my ear, "We've got all night. There's no rush."

She then stood up, looked at me in the mirror, and said in an excited tone, "Plus, they're showing *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* on TV! So, please, take your time."

Dia leaned over and kissed my neck again, this time with a bit more nuzzling. She worked her way up and ended with a small bite on my earlobe. She then walked back to the bed and started watching TV again while opening up a package of cookies. I looked over, and one of the bags Bobby dropped off was filled with snacks. Of course, it was. I smiled.

I took Dia's advice, washed my face, and started again. I was a bit calmer that time and not in as much of a rush. It slowly started coming back to me, and after about an hour, I was somewhat pleased with the finished product. It wasn't perfect, but it was good.

I grabbed the long, black wig out of one of the boxes and put it on. Bianca was back. It sounds ridiculous, but I was so delighted to see her. I just stared at myself in the mirror for a few minutes, feeling ridiculously happy. It took a great amount of effort for me to hold back a giggle. I was giddy.

Diarah walked up behind me and stared at me in the mirror. She had tears in her eyes and the most beautiful smile.

"Hello, Bianca. So nice to see you again. You look gorgeous, as always."

I stood up and faced Diarah. Something happened, and I was no longer Scared Michael but Strong Bianca. I grabbed Dia by the waist and walked her backward over to the bed, which was filled with cookie crumbs that scratched my back and dug into my skin. I rolled us over, and I was on top of her, kissing her more passionately than I had ever kissed anyone in my life.

And with that, Bianca took over. I was able to be with Diarah that night as a man should be with his wife on their wedding night. I made love to Diarah as a man, not as Bianca, but I needed to be Bianca to get me there. I didn't understand it, but clearly Dia did. Dia always seemed to know what I needed.

After that first night, I no longer needed Bianca to get aroused to have sex with my wife. But I will tell you that she did enhance our love life. Quite a bit, actually. Bianca showed up several times a month, but her appearances were always short-lived, as seeing her seemed to spur something in Diarah.

Within seconds, she would kick our kids out of the apartment and send them over to Pops' place for a few minutes.

And, yes, a few minutes was all that was required.

22 CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: 1989, BASTIAN AT 30/DIARAH AT 26 (SOMEBODY)

Diarah and I arrived home from our night at The Plaza at 9:00 the next morning.

We were away from our children for exactly 18 hours, but in that short amount of time, all hell had broken loose.

Upon walking through the door, we learned that Snickers had defecated all over the kitchen floor during the night because the boys forgot to walk him. So, Bobby woke them up at 7:30 to have them clean it. For about an hour, neither child would do it. Finally, Bobby had had enough and forced the boys into the kitchen. The smell of the dog's diarrhoea was so overwhelming for Mikey that he ended up vomiting all over the floor and himself. He then had a tantrum with a great deal of screaming and crying, which was when we walked in.

I worked on getting Mikey into the shower, and Diarah focused on cleaning the kitchen. She instructed Bobby and Nicky to take the dog on a nice, long walk, something they probably hadn't done in a while. It took Diarah over an hour to get that kitchen smelling like something other than shit or vomit.

She took a quick shower, and when she emerged from the steamy bathroom, she screamed to no one in particular, "We're all going out for breakfast!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not cooking in there," she whispered to me as she slipped on a t-shirt and jeans. "After what I've seen, I'm probably never cooking in there again."

As we were all heading down the sidewalk towards the diner, I gently grabbed her wrist and pulled her to a stop.

I put my arms around her and whispered, "Hey, last night was lovely. It was just perfect. So, I know you're probably not going to want to hear this, but I just don't think we can go away overnight, just the two of us. At least not for a while. One of us has to be with the kids. But I promise, I will do

everything in my power to ensure that we have some time for just the two of us."

"I hate you for saying it, but I think you're right." A big frown came across her face.

"I love you very, very much," I said.

She looked at me sweetly, but the moment was short-lived.

She glanced over my shoulder and noticed that no one was watching Delilah, who was rapidly heading towards the street. Diarah ran and swooped her up just as she was stepping off the curb, and the baby laughed. Dia kissed her and then glanced over at me.

Still holding Delilah, she was a good 20 feet away from me when she screamed, "I love you, too!" and laughed. People enjoying their coffee at the café's outside tables looked at us quizzically.

The month of December was crazy. Between all the extra work that Diarah had to get done by the end of the year for Louie, plus her finals for her four courses, she was stretched to her limit. I was needed at the clinic almost every day, as the cold and flu season had started, and the HIV-positive men and women needed extra care, especially the ones with low CD4 cell counts. They were at increased risk of flu complications as they already had compromised immune systems.

I was still making house calls to Fionna's friends, but only on Tuesdays and Saturdays, as those were the only days I could fit the appointments into my schedule.

At this point, Pops' girlfriend, Terri, lost her job at the café. She was having trouble being on her feet all day long, and the hours were inconsistent. When she told us, Diarah inappropriately said, "Oh, thank the Lord!" which, in other words, meant that she was hoping to entice Terri into taking care of the boys after school each day.

Once Dia explained our predicament, what would be required, and how much we were willing to pay, Terri was happy to do it. She also helped by doing some light housework for us and even threw in a few loads of laundry each week in addition to helping the boys with their homework and after-school activities. However, even with the additional help, it was still becoming too much for Diarah. It wasn't so much the schedule as the fact that she was constantly worried about making ends meet.

Just a few days before Christmas, I could see that Dia was overloaded. I learned quickly that when things got overwhelming or if she just needed a moment to herself, she would retreat down to the basement under the guise of doing laundry. I saw her head down the stairs and decided to follow her, something I rarely did.

"Hey, what's going on?" I asked.

She looked up, and I could see that she had been crying.

She said, "What's going on? Let's see. I have the amazing gift of not

having to pay rent each month, but I still don't have enough money for everything. Bobby and Rex contribute a bit, and I get a little money from the state for Mikey, but it's not enough, and I won't take money from Pops anymore. He helps out so much with the kids.

"Between food and clothes and insurance and paying Terri and the electric bill for both places and everything else, I can just barely do it. I'm still only working part-time.

"And I'm so sad that Christmas is coming up, and I don't have any money to buy presents for the kids."

She broke down and started to sob. She rubbed her eyes, and the black from her mascara smeared across her face.

"Two years ago, Christmas was an absolute disaster. I didn't have any money to buy them anything. Louie always gives me a Christmas bonus, but that year, I had to use those funds to pay bills. So, the boys, Pops, and I sat at home, and although Pops and I tried to make that day fun for the kids, there was almost nothing under the tree, so it sucked for all of us. I cried and cried for days after. This year is going to be the same. I fucking hate this."

I realized at that moment that I hadn't told her about the $20,000 I brought into the country with me. How was I going to tell her? I had kept it a secret for months. Why did I keep it a secret? I couldn't even remember.

I reluctantly confessed. "Dia, I have money."

She stopped crying and looked up at me, confused. "How is that possible?"

"I worked for a couple of years with my father and Gio at the clinic. Anja spent most of what I made, but I always set aside a small amount each month to put in my savings account, the one I had from childhood."

"Do you have enough money to loan to me so I can get the kids presents?"

"I have plenty, more than enough for me to *give* to you to get the kids whatever you want. I have almost $20,000 upstairs."

Hearing that, Dia seemed both pissed and relieved at the same time.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

She looked away and shook her head, trying to wrap her head around what I had just said.

She gave a small, silent chuckle and said, "I should have figured it out. You never ask me for any cash. Not even for the train to get you into the city or for meals on the days when you have clinic duty when I forget to pack you a lunch. I didn't know how you paid for it all. And I knew all that money couldn't have come just from your private clients. Almost all of that goes to paying for Delilah's school."

She thought for a moment and got angry.

"You motherfucker! Do you know how many times I had to borrow money from people this past month?! Do you know how many bills I was

late paying?!" she yelled at me.

"I'm…sorry?" I said, cringing.

"Yeah, you *are* sorry, you piece of shit."

I felt terrible. The last thing I wanted was for her to be mad at me.

When she saw that I was getting upset, she calmed down a bit, took a deep breath, and said, "Look, baby, we only have each other. It's you and me against the world. So, we cannot keep secrets from each other. I think I've been super-cool about you working every day in the city pro bono, but I do that because you love it. However, you have to know that it's a financial drain on us. It takes you away from helping us here. So, if you have something you can contribute, please do."

"I'm sorry. I wanted to save that money to get you something you really wanted. Maybe a vacation somewhere?" I said, cringing a bit.

Diarah laughed sarcastically.

"*A vacation? Really?* Do you know what I want? What I really want, more than anything? I want to pay our bills on time. I want to not have our electricity shut off.

"I'm doing the best I can, and you have been an enormous help. Please don't think I don't appreciate you. But do you know how sad and miserable I've been because I truly thought that we wouldn't have any Christmas presents to open this year?

"It's your first Christmas with us. Our first Christmas as a family. And I have been sick knowing that we weren't going to be able to get you anything."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," I said, grabbing her by the waist. I pulled her close to me and kissed her on the forehead. She was breathing hard, still fighting back tears.

"I'll tell you what—I am going to be responsible for making sure we all have Christmas presents this year. I will take the boys out to the shops in Tarrytown tomorrow and will personally buy presents on Delilah's behalf. Does that sound good? Are we okay?"

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and nodded her head softly.

"Thank you. I'm sorry I yelled." She looked both tired and sad.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the money." I smiled at her. "But you know what? I love that sometimes you need me, too. I like being needed."

She buried her head in my chest, and I kissed the top of her head. We were going to be fine.

Christmas ended up being lovely that year. The boys did their own shopping, and although Diarah probably would have liked to have seen a bit more clothing in the gift boxes, she was pleasantly surprised by how well they chose presents for everyone. Both Bobby and Rex had to work and would have to open their gifts later, but Pops, Terri, Jahmir, and Duncan joined us, and they seemed very pleased with what they received.

I was given the task of making the Christmas meal, but our oven was on

the fritz, so I had to prepare most of it over at Pops' place. I made sea bass filets and shrimp with a butter and cream sauce, lemon risotto, steamed vegetables, garlic bread, and salad, with a Panettone for dessert, the same meal my father made for my brothers and me every year on Christmas Day when we were children.

After lunch, Pops and Terri went to her son's house for the afternoon. I took advantage of the empty apartment and went next door intending to call my father. It was Christmas, after all, and I hadn't spoken to him since I left home with Bunny. I thought he deserved to know about Diarah and me getting married. But for some reason, I decided against it.

Why was I still so angry with him? At some point, I had to let go of all of the hate. I had everything I wanted. Actually, I probably had more, much more, than what I wanted. Why was I still so mad and afraid to talk to him?

New Year's Eve came quickly, and we stayed close to home, just eating and snuggling in our new pyjamas that we all got for Christmas from Diarah. Pops and Terri would go to one of the local bars for the evening but would always be home in time to watch the ball drop on TV with us. Duncan and Jahmir were usually off celebrating with friends in the city, and, of course, Rex had to work.

I often wondered whether Rex was truly required to work every holiday or if he chose to. I remembered how miserable Christmas and New Year's were for me, being all alone, and I imagined that time of year could be a bit lonely for him without having a significant other. Dia said that Rex had a girlfriend for a bit after he broke it off with her, but she said that Kathy didn't stick around long enough for me to meet her.

As for the rest of us, we all congregated in our living room/Nicky and Mikey's bedroom. Bobby would help the boys get the extra twin mattresses from up in the attic and place them on the floor near the television. There were tons of pillows and blankets everywhere, and we would watch movies and eat snacks until the wee hours. The next morning, Diarah would wake everyone up with the aroma of made-to-order crepes and bacon. It was so simple yet magical.

By January 2nd, everything returned to normal. The kids went back to school, and Diarah was off to work first thing. It was that way for about a week. Nothing to report.

I had a couple of days to myself before I had to be back at the clinic, so I called Fionna up one morning and asked her if she would like some company for lunch.

I took the train out to the city and walked to the designated meeting place, but I could see that Frank and the car were already there waiting for me. He opened the back door, and I was surprised to see Fionna sitting inside.

"I think it would be a good day to have an early lunch at the Carnegie Deli. What do you think?" Fionna asked, without even saying hello.

"Good afternoon, Miss Fionna!" I said as I climbed into the seat next to her. "Yes, sure! The Carnegie Deli sounds lovely. I've never been."

"You've never been to the Carnegie Deli?!?" she asked incredulously. "Well, you must! It's an institution."

The deli reminded me a bit of an Italian trattoria, a family-owned place with lots of little tables. There was one trattoria back home in Italy that Michele and I would frequent when he came into town for a meeting or to see Papà. It was at the bottom of Via Bolognese--a little hole-in-the-wall, but the food was quite good.

Fionna surprised me after lunch with tickets to the 2:00 p.m. showing of *Cats* at the Winter Garden Theater. It was my very first Broadway musical. It was outstanding, and the music was positively mesmerizing. I believe she enjoyed taking me there, as well. So many of her friends had seen every play, opera, and performance in Manhattan. I, too, loved music and art and the theatre but had been to few live performances. She said it was an absolute gift to watch me enjoy the theatre as much as she did.

At that point, everything was going so well. My home life was happy. I loved being married. I adored the kids and being a father. My health was good and getting better. And I enjoyed my work at the clinic. But by mid-March, Diarah was not doing well. She was sick with some kind of flu and had no energy to either work or go to school.

It was midterms, and she had several large assignments due and an exam to prepare for. Other than eating and studying, Diarah spent most of her time sleeping. She hated not being able to give 100% to her studies, and I believed the "flu" she had was really the stress she was putting on herself.

The one saving grace, however, was that Louie always gave her several days off from work (paid, of course) at midterms and finals. In addition, he told her at the start that she would have to pay him back for any classes in which she didn't earn at least a grade of C. He probably wouldn't have made her adhere to that rule, as he knew very well that she was devoted to her studies. But again, she put that pressure on herself, not only because she didn't want to have to pay him back but also because she didn't want to let Louie down.

It was only the second semester of Dia's master's program at NYU, and she wanted to make sure she would be able to graduate on time the following year. I was so impressed that Diarah had started college at 16. It amazed me that she arrived in New York only a month after her birthday and immediately started her studies.

I wasn't surprised, though. At four years old, she was spending her summer with a bunch of strangers and seemed very comfortable with the arrangement. She was just an overall very strong person. Graduating from Fordham in four years, even with everything else she had on her plate, was probably a breeze for her.

So, one could imagine that Diarah was not about to let something like the flu get in the way of her plans. She was determined. That was until she fainted on her way to one of her classes.

From what could be pieced together from several different witnesses, Dia was walking near Washington Square Park, got dizzy, and ended up collapsing to the ground. The park was filled with people, and several of them immediately called 911 for help. By the time the ambulance arrived, she was already coming around, but she had hit her head fairly hard on the way down. The smart individuals in that crowd would not let her get up until the medics were there.

Dia was brought to the medical centre on campus, where they ran a few tests. I was working at the free clinic that day and received a phone call from a nurse at the hospital who told me what had happened. She said Diarah was fine but would need someone to help her get home. I called Pops to let him and Terri know what happened and asked if Terri could watch the children for a bit longer that evening.

I told Matteo that I had a family emergency, left the clinic immediately, and got the first taxi to the medical centre. By the time I found Dia, she was sitting alone in the large waiting room. I rushed over to her. She had a small bandage on the left side of her head, but other than that, she appeared to be uninjured. Her brow was furrowed, and she sat very still, just staring at a point on the floor on the opposite side of the lobby. I walked up slowly to her and sat in the seat beside her.

"Hey," I said softly and gently took her hand. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

She didn't respond. She seemed a bit stunned.

She slowly held up the piece of wrinkled paper, and I gingerly took it from her hand and scanned it. It was the result of her blood test. It showed elevated levels of human chorionic gonadotropin. I gasped.

"You're pregnant?!" I whispered excitedly.

I got up off the chair I was seated in and knelt in front of her, as she wouldn't look at me. She said nothing, and I quickly lost my smile. Her eyes began to fill up with tears. I couldn't tell what she was feeling—if she was happy or sad. She finally looked down at me sitting below her on the floor.

I asked, "Are you happy?"

"I'm terrified," she whispered. She gasped and breathed hard in and out, trying to stifle tears.

"Michael, how are we going to do it? We're barely hanging on as it is now. I'm hardly able to work, get my schoolwork done, and take care of the kids. I'm barely able to do it. And what about my body? It has taken me 10 years just to feel somewhat healthy again. Will I really be able to handle the extra weight and stress of being pregnant? And my hips? I will never be able to deliver a baby. I will crack into a hundred pieces."

"Whoa. Okay, you need to stop. First, you need to remember that I'm a trained physician. Do you think I would let anything happen to you? And, as for everything else, we'll figure it out. I'll get another job. I will do more. We'll be fine. You'll be fine."

As I said the words, I could also feel myself growing a bit more stressed about the whole situation, but I did my best not to let Dia know.

"You love your job at the clinic. I don't want that to be taken from you," she whispered softly, still seeming to be in a bit of a daze.

"I'll find something else I love to do. It'll be okay. We're going to be fine," I replied, more trying to convince myself than her.

She stared at me and took a deep breath.

"I love you," she said quietly, and a sudden look of realization came across her face. She covered her mouth and said through her fingers, "Oh, my God, we're going to have a baby."

She leaned down and put her forehead gently against mine. I stood up, pulled her up to me, and hugged her tight for a while.

After a few minutes, she pulled away and said, "I'm really hungry. I would love a steak, and I know where I want to go."

And that's how I knew for sure that Dia was pregnant. The woman who seldom ate meat was asking for a steak. I didn't need any blood test to show her HCG levels. Her body was craving large amounts of iron and protein. That was proof enough for me.

Dia and I took the subway to the financial district and walked to a place called Delmonico's. From the outside, I could gather that it was going to be both very nice and very expensive.

As we approached the front door to the restaurant, I said, "I'm pretty sure we don't have enough money to eat here."

"I have $500 on me right now. I want a steak, and I want to celebrate," she said. "Louie raves about this place. I want to eat here."

As soon as we entered, we both realized that we were severely underdressed. Of course, we were. If Louie frequented that establishment, there was probably nothing in either of our wardrobes that would be nice enough to wear there.

Dia went up to the podium and asked the maître d' if any tables were available. There clearly were, but she was testing the waters to see if he would allow us in, both of us dressed in jeans and boots. For a moment, it wasn't looking good, but I then noticed one of my patients from the free clinic walking towards us. I couldn't remember his name, but I certainly remembered his face.

He walked up and said to the maître d', "Please seat this couple in my section."

He worked there. How serendipitous for us.

We were seated in a far back corner by the kitchen, but neither of us cared.

The maître d' unhappily handed us our menus and turned and walked away without saying a word.

"I work for one of the richest men in the city, and you are a physician and surgeon. It doesn't matter. We're dressed like the proletariat," Diarah said, happily scanning the menu.

Our waiter came to the table.

"Dr. Aceti! How lovely to see you. And this must be your wife."

He turned to face Dia.

"Hi, yes, I'm Diarah. Nice to meet you." She held out her hand for him to take it. "And you are…?"

Grabbing her hand, he said with a bow, "I'm Alexander, at your service."

Alex! Yes, his name was Alex.

"I will give you some time to look over the menu. Is there anything I can get you to drink?"

"I'll tell you what, Alexander—we're going to be your easiest table today. Just bring us two Delmonico steaks with the whipped potatoes and the purple Brussels sprouts on the side. And please bring us a couple of bottles of sparkling water. Oh, and we're going to have one Baked Alaska, two spoons."

And with that, she shut her menu and handed it back to him.

As I handed my menu to Alex, I said, "I guess I'm having a steak. Thank you very much."

As Alex walked away, Diarah whispered, "You didn't want a steak?"

"Actually, no, I didn't. But I didn't want to correct you because, at that moment, it felt very much like Bunny had come out to visit," I said, smiling.

"Bunny?" she asked. "Was it because I was obnoxious and controlling?"

She smiled big.

"Kind of, yeah," I said, smiling back at her.

I just stared at her for a moment. She was very much Diarah, a strong, proud mother and wife, but there were moments when the little girl who gave me so much trouble would emerge. It wasn't often, not at all, but I enjoyed seeing her the few times I did get a glimpse of her.

I realized that it was the first time we had a meal together, just the two of us. Neither of us was cutting up another person's chicken or wiping Delilah's mouth and hands or being interrupted by someone talking over us. It was just us. Dia was obviously thinking the same thing.

"Yeah, don't get too comfortable with this, sweetheart. The only other way we'll be able to enjoy a wonderful lunch like this is if I pass out in the park again."

I don't like to admit this, as I am a Florentine who has had many delicious steaks in his life, but that fillet at Delmonico's may have been the best I had ever eaten.

And, for the first time in my life, I stole the dessert plate away from Diarah. I had never tried Baked Alaska before that day, and it was

outstanding. I thought of Mikey and his horrible habit of licking his dessert plate after eating something truly delicious. I had always believed it was quite disgusting and discouraged him from doing so. However, at that moment, I almost considered it myself.

I picked up our bill and was shocked by the amount, even given how amazing the food was. I then pushed the bill towards Diarah, who glanced at it, pulled money out of her bag, and left it all on the small tray on the table.

As she started to get up, she said with a smile, "Look around, sweetheart, as this will be the first and last time we ever eat here."

Alex came over. "I hope everything was to your liking."

"Alexander, thank you for everything," I said as I put one hand on his shoulder. "The service was impeccable. You did an outstanding job today."

He smiled but seemed a bit sad. I didn't understand why until we were leaving the restaurant. As we walked out the door, Diarah told me that she left him a $100 tip. I stopped on the sidewalk.

"Why on earth did you do that? We don't have that kind of money to give away," I snapped, somewhat agitated at how two hours prior she was so worried about how we were going to survive financially with a baby on the way.

She closed her eyes and spoke.

"Did you see that table behind us? The other table, the one with the six businessmen? Alex started to serve them, but I overheard one of them call the maître d' over and say they didn't want 'a fag' waiting on them. The maître d' gave the table to another waiter. Assholes. So, yes, I gave Alex the tip he should have gotten from them."

She opened her eyes and looked right at me. She had a sad expression.

"I'm sorry. That was stupid. You're right—we don't have the money to do that. I was just so furious."

She was walking away from me, and I gently grabbed her wrist. I pulled her back to me and hugged her tightly right there in the middle of the sidewalk. It was freezing out, and we were probably blocking people trying to pass us, but at that moment, I didn't care much about either.

"Come on, I want to show you something," I whispered to her.

She glanced at her watch and looked a bit worried.

"It's okay. I called Pops before. Terri is going to watch the kids for a bit," I said.

We took the subway back to the free clinic and walked around to the back. Even as cold as it was, several men were sitting on the pallets in the alley.

"Hey, Doc! The receptionist told us you weren't coming back today," one of my patients, Antonio, said. The rest also seemed to be a bit surprised to see me.

"Yeah, she wasn't wrong. I wasn't going to, but I was able to get everything done that I needed to. Come on in, Antonio," I said. "Oh, and

this is my wife, Diarah."

Antonio was about to offer his hand but quickly pulled it back, thinking that she wouldn't want to touch the hand of a man who had AIDS. So, Diarah held out her hand. Antonio just stood there. Diarah had an impatient expression on her face and waved her hand vigorously to show she was waiting for him to take it. He laughed and then shook it.

"Nice to meet you, Antonio," she said.

Dia sat in the corner as I talked to Antonio first and then a few other patients. She was quiet and just watched me work. After I saw the fourth and final patient for the day, I grabbed the bag that I had left in the office and started closing everything up.

I opened up the interior door and yelled down the hallway, "Have a nice evening, Matteo!"

"Hey, man, I didn't know you were here! I thought you had a family emergency," Matteo said, popping his head out of his office. He walked down the hallway to talk to me.

"Yeah, I did. Diarah passed out in Washington Square," I said.

"No way, man! Is she okay?" Matteo seemed genuinely concerned.

"Yes, she'll be fine."

"Oh, so she's pregnant then?" Matteo asked with a huge smile.

How on earth did he know that?

"Um, yeah, but we don't want to tell anyone yet," I said quietly.

"Okay. Okay, man. Your secret's safe with me. But that's great, man. Congrats," he replied softly and gave me a light pat on my shoulder.

It was dark out by the time we left. We exited through the exterior door to my exam room, and I locked the clinic's back door behind me. I grabbed Diarah's hand and smiled at her. We walked out to the street and towards the subway.

"You can't leave that job," she said.

"I love you so much for saying that, but I'm going to have to. It doesn't pay anything. But I'm so glad that you finally got to see what I do here. I'm not going to lie—I do love it—but I need to find other work. Even if I were a janitor in a hospital, at least it would pay something. I wish I could practice in the States, but it would take me years to get licensed here," I said, getting a little perturbed.

Dia let go of my hand, turned around, and started walking in the opposite direction. For a moment, I thought she was mad at me.

"Where are you going?"

"To the Pan-Am Building. To see my patron saint," she said.

She stopped in her tracks.

"Wait. There's a payphone up ahead. It's getting late. I had better call Mr. Jarvis to see if Louie's still in the building."

Dia knew Mr. Jarvis' number by heart, and of course, Mr. Jarvis was still

there and answered. Louie was just heading out of the building but got on the line with Dia. All I caught of her conversation with Louie was "Hey! — At the free clinic. — Okay."

"Louie will pick us up in 15 minutes," she said as she hung up the receiver.

We walked back to the entrance of the free clinic and waited. It was cold, so Diarah snuggled up to me for warmth. I was carrying both her school bag and my work bag, so I was cold and uncomfortable, but Louie got to us within ten minutes. We climbed into his car, which was nice and warm.

"I'm on my way to an important event, so you have my attention for exactly five minutes starting… now. Go."

Louie was never one to mince words.

Diarah didn't hesitate.

"I'm pregnant, but please don't tell anyone. You're the first person we've told. As you know, Michael has been working pro bono at the free clinic for months because he doesn't have his medical license here. He needs to either get a paying job somewhere, probably as a janitor, or keep his current job but get paid for it.

"So, first, do you know of anyone who would be willing to sponsor his work at the clinic so he doesn't have to quit, and second, do you know of anyone who can help expedite the process for Michael to get that medical license?"

"What exactly is the process?" Louie asked.

Diarah looked over at me.

"I believe I need to pass the medical licensing exams, get certified as a foreign medical graduate, and be evaluated to see if I need to fulfill a residency. I am assuming that I won't need to, as I was a plastic surgeon in Italy, but I'm not going to second-guess the medical establishment here."

"So, what I'm hearing is that, basically, you just need to pass the licensing exams. It sounds like the other two can be finessed a bit, providing you have someone here to vouch for you. Do you?"

"Here? Yes. Matteo. He is the physician I work with at the free clinic."

Louie took his journal from the breast pocket of his suit, ripped a page out of it, scribbled something quickly, and handed it to me.

"Here is the name and number of a good friend of mine. He is a plastic surgeon on the Upper West Side. I gave you his home and work numbers. Give him a call. Tell him I sent you. He'll help you find where you can take those exams you need. In the meantime, I'll ask around to see how you can bypass the residency. What kind of plastic surgery did you do?"

"Mostly facial reconstructive surgery for children. My family and I worked with the Catholic church to bring children from all over the world to our practice to get free medical care."

"Are you kidding me? Do you have any photos and testimonials?"

"Plenty. But they're back in Italy."

"Get them here. I'm assuming those testimonials will be worth their weight in gold. I'm sorry, kids, but this is where I must say farewell. Time to schmooze. These elbows aren't going to rub themselves."

He then turned to his driver and said, "Hey, Frank, drop them off at the next block!"

I shook Louie's hand, and Diarah leaned over to give Louie a kiss on the cheek as she thanked him.

As we opened the door to get out, he cheerfully said, "Congratulations to you both. I'm going to tell Ma the good news, but other than that, mum's the word!"

We were standing on the sidewalk, watching the car drive away, when Diarah turned to me and said, "You do know that if this child is a boy, we are going to have to name him Louie. And if it's a girl, Louise."

I shook my head no and smiled at her.

On the train ride back to Tarrytown, we rode in silence, with Dia's head on my shoulder. She was quiet for such a long time, I thought she had fallen asleep. She sat up with a start, which startled me.

She looked at me intently.

"I know this is going to sound insane, but we need to get married in a church. I know we're legally married, but you know that we can't have this baby unless we have a church wedding."

"So, are you saying we need to fly back to Italy?" I asked.

I knew we were both thinking the same thing: Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci, where we went with the Kuhmalos for that amazing pipe organ concert.

She said quietly with a big smile, "Yeah! Can we?"

"Just the two of us? No one else needs to know," I said.

She looked sad. "You don't want your family there?"

"If I can't have my family members from here at that wedding, then no, I don't want my family members from there to attend, either."

"Do we have enough money to fly everyone out there and still have our wedding in the church?" she asked, cringing.

"No. I'm sorry, baby. We just don't. It's impossible. We're barely making it, and there will be another mouth to feed soon enough. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I said, a bit mad at myself that I couldn't make her one wish come true.

Dia nodded her head to indicate she understood and turned away from me.

"Okay," she said softly. Dia stared out the window of the train for the rest of the trip.

I felt horrible. It was so unfair. I had this huge, expensive wedding with Anja for a union that was a complete and utter farce. All I wanted was to give Dia the humble, little wedding she had dreamed of since she was a child.

We walked back from the train station in the snow. It was kind of lovely, as there were no cars or people around. It wasn't that late, probably 7:00 p.m. or so, but it felt like we had the whole town to ourselves. The quiet was almost deafening.

Things were vastly different once we walked through the door of our home, however.

Poor Terri looked like she had just about had it.

"These boys have been arguing for 20 minutes about what toppings we should get on the pizza," Terri said as soon as we walked in.

Dia put on a big, fake smile. "Great! I have a fantastic way to solve that!"

She grabbed Terri by the arm and kissed her on the cheek.

"Terri, I owe you big time. I will make it up to you, I promise. Please go have a lovely evening with Roy."

She led her to the door and opened it for her. Terri waved to the kids.

Dia shut the door and turned around.

"As for you three, I will now make you grilled cheese and tomato soup."

All three started to whine.

"Sorry, but that's what you get for giving Miss Terri a hard time."

"But we wanted pizza!" came from two additional whining voices from behind the couch. Duncan and Jahmir popped their heads up. They were sprawled out on the floor, playing Battleship with the boys.

I walked up to Dia and gently grabbed her from behind. I whispered in her ear, "Go ahead, baby. Go downstairs and practice with Duncan and Jahmir. Order some pizzas for yourselves. I'll make the kids dinner."

She turned around. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Very sure."

Within seconds, Dia, Jahmir, and Duncan were running out the door, heading downstairs.

"Okay, bambini, who wants to help me in the kitchen?"

At that moment, Pops came into our apartment and said that there was a phone call for me. I grabbed a bag of chips and three Yoo-Hoos and gave them to the kids to hold them over. They all cheered.

"Do. Not. Tell. Your. Mother. Understand?" I barked playfully.

They all smiled and watched TV as they shovelled chips into their mouths.

I picked up the cordless phone that was lying on the table in Pops' apartment and said, "Pronto! Shoot! Sorry! Hello?"

"Michael, it's Louie. Hey, the event ended early tonight. Everyone wanted to get home before this storm got much worse. So, I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk. I've been thinking about what Diarah asked about before. I may have some ideas, but I'd like to bounce them off you first. Do you have time to meet me for a beer right now?"

"I would love to, Louie, but Diarah is at band practice with the boys downstairs, and I told her I would get the kids dinner."

"We'll pick up some dinner, won't we, Frank? How about a couple of pizzas? We'll figure something out. We'll have Frank sit with them for a few minutes while we grab something at the Pub across the street. We're already on our way. We'll be there in about 30."

And with that, he hung up.

A half-hour later, Frank walked in with three extra-large pizzas for the kids: one quattro formaggi, one veggie, and one pepperoni and sausage. I had put plates, plastic cups, and drinks out for everyone.

"Go, go, I got it!" Frank said as he shooed me out the door. "Louie is already over there waiting for you."

I got my jacket on and ran down the stairs and across the street in the snow to the Tarrytown Pub. I hadn't been there since the night before Gio left, and it made me a bit sad to think of him. I surprised myself by realizing that I missed him very much.

The place was completely deserted, with the exception of Louie and me. One waitress and the cook stayed behind, knowing darn well that Louie always tipped exceptionally well.

Lou was sitting in one of the two overstuffed chairs by the fireplace. He looked quite content. The waitress came over, and I ordered a club soda as I sat down in the chair next to him.

"No beer tonight, eh?"

Louie was acting as if he already had a few.

"There was a very nice open bar at the event I just came from, and I was able to set up a meeting with an important client. So, a win for me!" Louie said, slurring his words a bit.

He then got very serious, leaned over, and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Okay, Michael, just so we're on the same page, you do know that Diarah owns the building you live in? I'm assuming you do. Okay, so your wife has been sending me checks every month for the rent from the business downstairs. I get $800.00 every month from her. It's not my money. It's her money. Why doesn't she understand that? I guess she's thinking that she owes me something.

"Anyway, I opened up a separate bank account specifically for the money she keeps giving me. I have, gosh, probably close to $25,000 in it by now. I've just been holding onto it in case she needed it. So, I would like to pay you from that account until you can get your medical license straightened out here. It's her money, anyway."

Even though he was seated, Louie was weaving just a bit. He took a swig from his beer mug and put it down on the side table much harder than he should have.

"Actually, Louie, you're not going to believe this, but is there any way we could use that money for plane tickets?"

I explained to him about the church, Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa

Maria dei Ricci, and how Diarah always wanted to get married there.

"You… You're going to have a second wedding? That seems a bit excessive, no?" Louie asked.

"Lou, when she was just a girl, she took me to a concert at this tiny church in the centre of Florence. When the concert ended, she looked right at me and said, 'I'm going to get married here.' It wasn't a wish. It was a statement. I want to give that to her. It's the only thing she's ever asked of me.

"But there really is another reason—an important one. I am Catholic, as you know. And it was okay that Diarah and I got married at City Hall, but I don't think either of us, in good conscience, could bring a child into this world without us having a church wedding, one overseen by a priest.

"I understand that you think I am being somewhat foolish and wasteful with this money. And, believe me, I do see your side of things. But no matter what, I will find a way to take Diarah to Firenze right after the semester ends so we can get married in that church. I'm hoping that our kids can be there, too, and we'll have a lovely little dinner reception somewhere afterward. Diarah will get that church wedding she's always wanted. So, the wedding will be small. The money will only be used to get our family there—the people she loves—so that they can be with us.

"Lou, you gave us a wonderful, beautiful wedding reception in December, and for that, I will be eternally grateful. And we could always have a small church wedding here. But I know it's not what she wants. I just want to give her this one thing. Just this one. I just want to do this right."

Louie stared at his beer while I was talking, his pointer finger tracing a circle along the rim of his mug. When I was finished, he still didn't look up.

After a minute, he smiled and said, "Okay, but I get to help plan it."

That comment was the last thing I was expecting. I still thought he was going to talk me out of it.

"You're serious?" I asked.

"It's not fair that you two get two weddings, and I don't even get one!" he said, laughing. "I actually want to do this. I do."

"Okay, the job is yours."

And with that, I gently clinked my club soda glass to his heavy beer mug.

Over the following month, Louie and I met for lunch in the city twice a week to hash out plans for the event. I would come home each night, so excited to tell Diarah of all of the developments. And she was happy to hear them, as well.

However, a few weeks later, Dia became more serious whenever I mentioned the wedding. One night in April, she put the kids to bed and asked Bobby to keep an eye on them so we could go to the diner at the end of the street for some dessert. I was worried. This didn't feel like it was going to be a fun outing.

We got to the diner, and Diarah asked the hostess to seat us in a far booth,

away from everyone. The waitress came over almost immediately, and Dia ordered a piece of cheesecake with two forks and two cups of coffee. She grabbed our menus and left, and Diarah glanced over at me. I could see that she was taken aback by how awful I looked. I didn't like these kinds of serious discussions.

"I know. You want to know why we're here. I'll get right to it. There's something that I need you to do. And it's important. Really important.

"We're all going to be flying back to Italy next month for our wedding. And I'm so excited. I can't wait. But… you do know that you need to go back before then, right?"

"No, I don't," I said curtly.

"Listen, you need to make up with your father and brothers. Have you even invited them to the wedding?" she asked.

I looked away. I shook my head no, saying nothing.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I want them there. I think you do, too. You need to work things out with them. I don't want it to be awkward when we get there."

She paused for a moment and stared directly at me.

"And, also, there is something else I need you to do for me."

By this point, I was shaking my head at the audacity of everything she was asking. I was livid, but I did my best to keep my emotions in check.

"This is going to sound crazy, I know, but I'm going to need you to clean your room."

I laughed out loud, sarcastically.

"*Really?* After everything that has happened, you need me to go all the way to Firenze to clean up my prison cell? I love you very much, but that's *not* going to happen."

I was pissed. What the hell was she even talking about? Cleaning my room? Ridiculous.

She just stared at me sweetly, not saying anything.

"What?" I asked her, quite perturbed.

"I'm just giving you a minute to process it."

I took a deep breath in and apologized to her.

"Okay, I'm listening."

"That space represents you. You took really shitty care of that room, just like you took really shitty care of yourself. You need to deal with that. There is a lot of garbage still floating around in your life, both literally and figuratively.

"Our little family here has been a great distraction for you. You've been so overwhelmed and busy here that you haven't had to face anything yet.

"Look, Bastian, you need to forgive your family, and you can't do it until you forgive yourself. A way to start is by purging those piles of garbage. I know you know that that room is literally the physical representation of those

years you were so sad, those years you spent abusing yourself with drugs and alcohol. You need to work through this."

She leaned over the table and gently grabbed my chin so I would look at her.

"Bastian, you cannot truly love anyone, not even me or this baby, until you love yourself. I know you adore being here with us because your life here is insane. You haven't had a single moment to yourself, to sit down and process everything that has happened.

"Please, trust me. You need this. It will be truly, truly awful, but you need this."

She pulled her hand away and glanced down at the cheesecake that was being placed in front of her. Dia acknowledged the waitress and thanked her. However, the waitress did seem to understand that it was a tense moment for us and left quietly without saying a word.

"And…" She spoke in almost a whisper. "Gio already is on his way here to come get you."

She scrunched her face in a manner that indicated she thought I was going to yell at her. Had we not been in a public place, I might have.

"So, Diarah, let me understand this situation. You're forcing me to go to a place that I don't ever want to go to again, not as long as I live. You are *forcing* me. You're telling me what to do. You're saying I have no choice in the matter, and you're treating me as if I'm a child and not your husband."

I wasn't happy with her, and she knew it. Slowly, she reached over the table and grabbed my hand, gently stroking it with her thumb.

Quietly, she said, "Bastian, that's not correct. You do have a choice. Of course, you have a choice. But if you don't go, I want you to know that it will make things very stressful for me.

"I'm worried about what will happen when you see this baby—what issues it will bring up for you. No matter what, the ghost of your mother will be there when this baby arrives. I think that will be overwhelming for you, even in the best of circumstances. You will need the love and support of your family. Do you really want to make that choice? To exclude your father and brothers from all of this?"

"You think I'm going to have a psychotic break?"

"I think that it's a real possibility. I think that even though this baby will be nothing but a joy for you, you are going to be emotionally shaken, and things that are not even on your radar—bad things—will rear their ugly heads. You will need your family."

"*You're* my family," I said softly. "You and Delilah and the boys."

"You know what I mean, Bastian. You want to argue semantics with me? I *need* you to do this for me. Please don't make me deal with this when I have a newborn and three other children to take care of. Please, do this for me. *I* need this. *I* do."

I sat and took deep breaths in and out for a few minutes. I had so many voices in my head, and all I wanted was to run out of the diner. But after a few minutes of sitting in silence, I knew she was right.

"Okay. Okay, I will. On one condition," I said, not looking up. "I get to bring Michael with me."

Diarah blurted out a laugh. "*That's* your condition? *Really?* Done. Take him. He'll be thrilled."

"I know. He will," I mumbled, sadly.

"Thank you, baby," Dia whispered softly, reaching over and gently stroking my hair with one hand and digging into the cheesecake with the other. I chuckled softly to myself, knowing fully well I wasn't going to get any of that dessert.

Giovanni's flight came in the next morning, and Bobby was nice enough to go to the airport to retrieve him. As our house was full, Bobby brought him to the Tarrytown Inn, just up the street, and checked him in. And when he arrived back at the house, Bobby said that Gio was waiting outside the hotel for me.

I grabbed Delilah and took her with me to walk down to the Inn. Delilah, like Mikey, was a great distraction in tense situations, and I was always happy to bring her along when I had to leave the house.

We started walking down the main street, and in the distance, I could see my brother waiting on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. As we walked closer, Gio looked up but didn't acknowledge me. When we were within a half block, I put Delilah down and let her run to "Gio Gio," as she so lovingly called him.

Within 10 steps of running, Delilah fell and scratched up her hands on the pavement. But, like the trooper she is, with tears in her eyes, she continued to run towards Gio, half-crying, half-smiling. Gio seemed to recognize Delilah, but still didn't show any recognition towards me.

I was 10 meters away from him when he finally looked at me. He picked up Delilah and was holding her, but he was staring at me. No smile came across his face, and I felt ashamed. Why was he not happy to see me?

I gave him a small smile, and he walked over to me.

"Wow. Bastian, I didn't recognize you."

He stared at me a bit longer. "I'm standing right in front of you, and I still don't recognize you."

A small smile came across his face.

"Bastian, my God, you look so good."

He grabbed the back of my neck with his free hand and pulled me in for a hug. I could feel Delilah put her arm on my shoulder, hugging me, as well.

Gio let me go and stared at me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think you would look like you again. Not this quickly."

I had missed him more than I wanted to admit.

"Hey, I'm only here for one day, so will you do me a favour?" he asked softly. "After I say hello to Diarah and the boys, I would love to see where you work. Diarah told me all about it. Can we go there today?"

The three of us walked back up the street, and when we reached our home, I told Gio to wait down in front of the building. I knew that if I brought him inside, it would be difficult for us to get away. So, I ran upstairs, dropped off Delilah, and told Dia where we were headed. I could tell that she was thrilled.

We took the train into the city and headed straight for the free clinic. I was excited to show him where I was working and have him officially meet Matteo. Alessandra was friends with Matteo's sister, so Gio never had the opportunity to meet Matteo directly, even though they both attended medical school in Firenze at the same time.

The waiting room was packed, but Matteo took a few minutes to visit with us when he saw us walk into the clinic. I have to say that it was a bit thrilling for me to hear so much Italian. I let Matteo and Gio chat alone for a few minutes, even though the clinic was busy, and I knew we were keeping him from his patients. Bobby and Diarah both spoke Italian, but it wasn't the Italian of native speakers. It was nice to listen to them, but it wasn't like the Italian of back home.

Gio said he wanted to stay at the clinic all afternoon, and he spent hours seeing patients with me.

That evening, on our way back to Tarrytown, he said, "If Papà knew what you were doing here, he would be incredibly proud of you. You need to tell him as soon as you get home tomorrow."

For a moment, I was about to correct Gio and tell him that I was already home, but Dia was right. It was all semantics. I needed to be aware of that. I'm sure it could be off-putting to people.

We had a lovely evening together. The kids were happy to see their Zio Gio again, and Bobby stole Giovanni away for a few hours. According to Bobby, neither of them got completely wasted that night, which led me to believe that Gio did not want a repeat of his last flight back home.

The next morning, we left before the sun was even up. The taxi arrived at 5:00 a.m., and surprisingly, everyone was ready to go right on time. Gio had checked out of the Inn and was waiting outside our door before the taxi even arrived.

Dia struggled a bit to get up to say goodbye. She walked over to me, rubbing her eyes the way she did when she was a small child. The last thing I wanted to do was say goodbye.

"Wanna come with me?" I asked as I held her.

"I would love to. But you need to do this just for you," she said.

I kissed her three times on her forehead and one semi-passionate kiss on the mouth, about as passionate as one can get at that hour of the day. It took

every ounce of strength in me to walk out that door.

Just as I was about to close it behind me, she said, "If you are not home within a week, I'm coming to get you."

"You better," I said, and could feel tears I didn't know I was crying streaming down my face.

The taxi ride was quiet. Gio sat up front with the driver, and Mikey slept the whole way with his head in my lap. Check-in at the airport was a breeze, as well. The only issue we had was at the security checkpoint. Mikey didn't want to be away from me and was calling, "Papà! Papà!" Luckily, the female agent was very understanding and let me help Mikey. So, it all really seemed too easy.

As we waited to board, I stayed quiet for the most part. I was mad and terrified at the same time. If I opened my mouth, I wasn't sure what was would come out. Of all the emotions I was feeling, the most prominent was sadness. I felt like I could have cried at the drop of a hat.

We boarded the plane, and Mikey was thrilled to be put in charge of finding our seats. Once he found them, he would run up to the other passengers and ask for their seat assignments. Most played along, which was nice, and allowed Mikey to escort them.

He was having the time of his life. That "boy" brought me so much happiness, and I loved how proud he was that he was the only one in our family who got to go to Italy with me. It was nearly impossible for me to be sad when he was around.

I was surprised by how much I slept on the flight. Gio sat by the window, and Mikey sat between the two of us. However, by the time we landed, I think Gio realized it might have been better to switch seats with Mikey, as he leaned over Gio to look out the window for a good portion of the flight.

We got through customs at Fiumicino Leonardo da Vinci fairly easily, although I had to explain Mikey's relationship to me. Mikey kept calling me "Papà," and I had to explain repeatedly that I was essentially his guardian. I was anticipating that getting back to the States wouldn't be as big an issue as we had planned for Bobby to meet us near customs for just this reason.

We rushed to grab our connecting flight to Firenze, as we were a bit behind schedule, and by the time we landed, it was almost 20:00. We didn't need to get any luggage, as we all brought carry-ons, so we were able to catch the first taxi and drive directly to the clinic next door to our home, as that was where Mikey and I were going to stay. We certainly couldn't use my old room downstairs, and I was not looking forward to seeing the condition I had left it in. I didn't want to stay anywhere in the house either, so I felt the clinic was a good option.

Gio told me that Michele was planning on coming down from Milano and was due to arrive at the house at any moment. I walked into the clinic and dropped my bags in the lobby area. I then asked Gio to keep an eye on

Mikey, who was already unpacking the books and small items from his backpack.

Even though it was quite dark that night, I found my way around the back of the church and entered through the "rabbit hole." I walked through the path at the rear of the house, around to the seating area under the veranda, and opened the door to the kitchen. There was a small light in the corner, and down the hall, I could see that the chandelier in the library was on. Papà leaned over in his chair to see who was coming into the house.

"I'm glad to see that you made it back safely. Do me a favour and send Bastian in. I would like to see him right away," I heard him yell from the other room.

I walked closer to the library and into the light, where he could finally make out that it was me.

"I'm sorry, you want me to send in who?" I said, a bit confused.

He was reading the newspaper and glanced up.

"Caro Dio in cielo, sei tu," I could hear him say softly, under his breath.

He then spoke at full volume, "I saw someone come in, and I thought you were Gio. In the dark, you look just like him."

I stood about three meters away from Papà, and he just stared at me. He slowly stood up, seeming to have some difficulty from his stiff, sore joints, and stared at me with big tears in his eyes. He shuffled towards me and hugged me harder than he ever had before.

He then grabbed me by my shoulders and said, "Let me look at you."

He stared intently at me. He visually examined my face, my hair, and any parts of me not covered by clothing, seemingly shocked by what he saw.

"You are beautiful, my boy," he said quietly. "Come, come sit with me."

He shuffled back to his seat and sat down hard. He said nothing and just stared at me, quietly. It made me uncomfortable. I felt a bit like a stranger in my own family home. After what seemed like minutes, he finally spoke.

"You appear to be very happy and well. It has been a very long time since I have seen you look this good. Eight months..."

A single tear streamed down his cheek. He smiled, took a deep breath, and continued.

"Eight months ago, I wasn't sure if I was ever going to see you again. You were so ill and so frail when Bunny carried you out of here. And now..."

I didn't say anything. So many feelings were going through me, and I feared opening my mouth for what might come out. I probably appeared fairly calm on the outside, but within, I was a tumultuous hailstorm of emotion.

Papà tried smiling at me but could sense my apprehension. He sat back in his chair, and his smile faded. We sat in silence, not knowing what to say to one another.

After a few minutes of the almost deafening quiet, I said, "I brought my

son with me. He's next door with Gio."

"Yes, yes. Gio has told us all about your wonderful little family. It sounds… busy," he said.

"Yeah, it is. I should go check to see if Mikey—," and with that, Mikey burst through the library door, almost at a full run. He was breathing so heavily that he could hardly speak.

"These people! —(gasp)—These people! —(gasp)—They got a pool! —(gasp) — A pool! — (gasp) — Can I go in —(gasp)?" Mikey said, barely able to get the words out.

"It's quite cold—" I started, only to have Mikey interrupt me. He looked up and pushed past me.

"Hi! Hi! Are you Papà's Papà?" Mikey asked, walking towards my father.

"Yes, this is my father. Can you say, 'Piacere di conoscerti?" I asked Mikey.

He scrunched his face, shook his head no, and said, "Of course, I can't say that!" and laughed hysterically.

I blurted out a small laugh, which somewhat surprised me.

"Okay, then, just say, 'Nice to meet you!'"

"Nice to meet you!" Mikey said loudly and grabbed my father's hand to shake it. He didn't even wait for my father to offer it. Again, I gave a small laugh.

It was then that I realized that Mikey was just like Bunny—this cute, kind, innocent force that shook up the prim-and-proper Aceti household. I loved it. It was the first time in a long while I could remember being happy in that room. It had to have been years since I laughed or felt any kind of joy there.

Luca walked in, and I was thrilled to see him. I ran over and gave him a hug.

He whispered in my ear, "Who are you, and what has Bunny done with my brother?"

He hugged me tighter. When he let me go, Michele was waiting right there next to him. As I went to hug him, I heard Luca give out a little squeak behind me. Mikey had wrapped his arms around Luca and had picked him up off the ground.

"Someone please tell me that the giant is peaceful!" Luca screamed happily.

I started to introduce Mikey, but before I could, Michele said, "We know. Gio told us about your life back in New York."

Gio yelled in English to the group, "Come, men! The taxis are here, waiting to take us to dinner. Trattoria 13 Gobbi. Any takers?"

"But what about the pool?!" Mikey cried as we walked out the door, through the courtyard, and slid into the taxis.

Luca, Mikey, and I were in the first taxi, and Michele, Papà, and Gio were in the second. When we arrived at the restaurant and got out of the cab,

Mikey reached for my hand.

Luca went over to him and said, "Would it be okay if I held your hand instead? I have had lots of practice holding boys' hands."

He looked over at me and winked. Mikey gave me a big smile and seemed very happy to have someone lavish attention on him.

Just as we were seated at our table, I informed my brothers and father that I would be speaking primarily English, not Italian, during the trip. I told them that Mikey was my priority, as I asked him to come with me to Italy, and I wanted him to feel as comfortable as possible. I knew that his listening to us speak a different language all night would exclude him not only from the conversation but from the evening as a whole, and I wanted him to know that he was 100% my family. He was going to be included in everything.

No one objected, and I was relieved.

The dinner was lovely. We feasted on gnocchi, veal, vegetables, and salad. The food was excellent, and the conversation was even better. Even though it had only been eight months since I left Italy, I hadn't had a real conversation with my brothers in many years, and I was happy that it was going much better than I had imagined. Everyone did their best to make sure Mikey was included in the conversation, and Luca interacted with him one-on-one so that I could spend time chatting with the others.

After the dinner plates had been cleared, we sat and talked and enjoyed the wine. We were on our third bottle, waiting for the dessert to be brought out, when I decided to make my announcement to the group.

"I have something I would like to tell you all. I believe you now know that Diarah and I got married back in December. It was just a small civil ceremony. The kids and our friends were there, and it was lovely. But we have decided that we do need to have a church wedding with a member of the clergy officiating. I just don't feel as if we're properly married without one.

"Diarah has always wanted to get married in Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci. So, my trip here is not only to visit with all of you but to make arrangements for our wedding, as well."

My brothers gave their congratulations.

"And there is one other piece of news." I paused. "Diarah is pregnant."

My father gasped and clapped his hands.

"Wonderful news, indeed. I'm very happy for you both."

"How far along is she?" Luca asked.

"She has just entered the second trimester. And, although we haven't had an ultrasound yet to confirm it, we might be having twins. I'm not sure, but there does seem to be two distinctive heartbeats."

Michele looked around the table and said, "I don't understand."

Staring at his lap, my father said, "Gemelli."

The table suddenly got quiet. I looked from person to person, and no one

was saying anything. Everyone either stared quietly at me or looked away altogether.

"Is there a problem?" I asked. No one was speaking, and I was getting uncomfortable.

"I don't think we should talk about it here, Bastian," Gio whispered.

I had no idea what was going on, but I was positively shocked by everyone's odd behaviour and started to get upset.

"What?! What is it?! We are going to talk about it here and now, or Mikey and I will get up from the table and find a hotel to stay in," I growled.

My father spoke up quickly.

"You were a twin, Bastian," he said softly without looking at me. "Your mother was pregnant with twins. Your twin didn't survive. You were the only viable birth."

I felt like I was going to throw up. How could this be? I was 30 years old and just learning of this. Why was so much of my life being withheld from me? How did I not know this previously?

I stood up from the table.

"Mikey, stay here with Zio Luca, okay? I just need to go outside for a minute. I'll be right back."

The dessert had just arrived, and Mikey already had his spoon ready to go. He was the only one at the table who was visibly happy.

"Okay, Papà! I'll be right here!"

Gio started to get up with me, but I held up my hand. I said as kindly as I could muster, "No, I need a minute. Alone. Please, stay here."

I started walking towards the front door of the restaurant. It felt like it took me an hour just to reach it. I walked outside, leaned against the wall, and bent over, trying to find the air. It felt like someone had just punched me. It was the strangest sensation.

Once they told me, once it was stated out loud, I felt I knew it all along. I mean, I always had an imaginary friend. I've always talked to him, confided in him. All those years ago, when I was a child, when I was all alone, disfigured in that room, he was my crutch. My emotional and psychological crutch. All of those times when I lost confidence and hope, he was there. He felt so real. So, maybe he wasn't imaginary?

And my family hadn't told me yet, but I knew, I knew, that my twin was a boy. I knew everything about him. I knew. So many things made sense, and I was angry and sick to my stomach.

I looked up and saw a payphone down the street. I had a new international calling card that Diarah gave to me. I brazenly told her a hundred times that I wouldn't need it. Oh, I was so wrong. I needed it.

It was just after 23:00 in Italy, which meant that it was 5:00 p.m. in New York. I dialled the number, and she answered on the first ring.

"Hey, baby," she said quietly.

"How did you know it was going to be me?" I said sadly.

"Oh, I could kind of feel you all the way over there. What's going on? Talk to me."

"I want to come home."

"Baby, do you remember what I told you? Nothing there matters. That's not your life there. Your life is here with me and the kids. It doesn't matter what happens. It doesn't matter what anyone says to you or tells you. You're just there to do a job, to do what you need to do, and then come home.

"Look, we knew that there were going to be things stirred up when you got there. Right? We knew that. But do you know what the best part is? The best part is that nothing that happens there affects what happens here. Everything you're going through right now? It's not real. It's not. What you and I have is real. These babies that we're going to have are real. The love our kids have for you is real. And Mikey? Good Lord, everything about Mikey is real, so focus on him.

"And just get through this week because the next time you go back to Italy, I will be there. I promise, you will never have to go back to Italy alone ever again. Okay?"

"Diarah, I had a twin. I was a twin." I was doing my best not to cry.

"Yeah, I know," she said, sounding confused. "I know that, and you know that. You know that information. Why are you acting surprised?"

"What do you mean? You know?"

"Seriously, Michael? Rocco? Did you forget about him?"

Rocco. Oh, my Lord, I somehow forgot his name. I had completely blocked it from my memory.

"You always thought you had a secret brother. You do remember, right? Your 'falso fratello'? Gosh, I was just a little kid when you told me all about him. Our midnight picnics? You used to share all sorts of things about Rocco in Piazzale Michelangelo when we snuck out at night. Do you remember? You talked about him like he was real. He *was* real."

Diarah was correct. I had completely forgotten. I used to talk about him quite a bit when she was little. And my father would get so mad whenever I mentioned Rocco. I thought he was upset that I had an imaginary friend. But that was not it—not at all. My father was upset because it was hitting too close to home, and Bunny became the only person I could talk to about him.

Diarah started to speak again, and it snapped me out of my funk.

"Hey, are you there? Listen to me. You cannot let your family affect you the way they do. You're going to have to let things slide off you this trip. Don't let them get under your skin. And anytime you feel the walls closing in on you, you call me. Okay?"

"It's going to be expensive to call you as much as I want to."

"Seriously? You think I'm that concerned about the money and not your well-being? I don't give a shit about the money, Michael. I need you to be

okay."

"Okay. I know." I took a deep breath. "Thank you. I—," and I was cut off. Mikey had pulled the receiver away from my ear.

"Mamma! Hi, Mamma! Guess where I am?!"

He had remnants of tiramisu all over his face and clothes.

I could hear Diarah on the other end. "Ummm… Japan?"

Mikey laughed loudly. "No, silly! I'm in Italy with Papà!"

"Oh, I'm so happy to hear that. Hey, look, I need you to listen to me. You have a big job there, Mikey. Do you understand me? Do you remember what your job is?" I could hear Dia say on the other end of the line.

"I have to keep Papà happy. He can't be sad, ever. Only happy, happy, happy!" Mikey yelled just a bit too loudly.

"Exactly! Go take care of him. And go have fun. I love you both very much!"

"Love you, too, Mamma!"

And with that, he hung up the phone. I didn't even have the chance to say goodbye. But that was okay.

Mikey grabbed my hand, and we walked back towards the restaurant. Gio was watching us from the doorway, making sure both Mikey and I were fine. I walked up to him and hugged him. The three of us re-entered the restaurant and walked back to our table. Papà, Michele, and Luca were staring at me to see what my reaction would be.

I sat back down and said, "It's okay. I'm okay. I talked to Diarah. I'm okay."

I think I was saying that more to myself than to them. They were quiet, but they all seemed relieved.

I looked down at the table. "Wait… Where is my piece of tiramisu?" I said, half-laughing.

My father passed me a piece from his side of the table. He smiled softly.

"Don't be upset with us, but we let Mikey have four desserts. He ate everybody's piece except yours and mine. I wanted mine," Luca said sheepishly, slightly afraid of what my reaction was going to be.

I burst out laughing. And the rest of the table laughed with me. The situation really wasn't that funny, but I believe that the laughter was more of a release. Even though the evening had been lovely, there was an underlying tension as if we were all walking on eggshells around each other. But at that moment, it was gone.

Mikey and I slept in the next morning, not waking up until well after 12:00. He was still in the same clothes he had flown to Italy in, so it was apparent that I needed to get him into the bathtub and dressed for the day.

As he was playing in the tub, I opened his small suitcase and saw that there were no clothes in it. There were books and toys and games, but no clothes. I checked his backpack. No clothes. Just more books.

I walked back into the bathroom.

"Mikey, where are the clothes that Mamma packed in your suitcase?"

He dumped a cup of water over his head. There were far too many bubbles, and I hoped that with all the sloshing around he was doing, most of the water was staying in the tub and not seeping through the floor to my father's office below.

"I took them out because I didn't have enough room for my books," he said

"Oh, my Lord. You don't have any clothes?"

"I have clothes in your suitcase," he said as he smoothed out the edges of his bubble beard.

I went back to our room and looked in my suitcase, the same suitcase that I had packed. No, of course, there were no clothes for Mikey in there. I had only brought a couple of outfits myself, hoping I could find something in my room to wear.

I was much shorter and much thinner than Mikey. He wasn't going to fit in anything I brought.

I picked up the clinic phone and called the house next door. Gio answered.

"Hey, without going into too much detail, Mikey decided that it was more important to bring books on this trip than clothing. Is there anything around here that he can wear today until I can go shopping for him?" I asked.

Gio laughed on the other end.

"That is really funny. Actually, there might be something that he can borrow. Check the box of clothing on the floor of my office closet. It should include some items our patients left. You can also see if there's anything in the dresser in Papà's office."

I was able to find something for Mikey to wear, but he wouldn't like it. He wore the same style of clothing every single day—a polo shirt and black sweatpants. It didn't matter if we were going to meet the queen—his attire would still be a polo shirt and black sweatpants. It would be interesting to see what we could get him to wear to the wedding. He promised he was going to try to wear a suit. Not likely, I thought.

Once we were both dressed and ready, Mikey and I walked through the "rabbit hole" over to the house. I told him that Mamma used that hidden gate a lot, and he got a kick out of that.

Papà was gone for the day, so I thought that Mikey and I had the house to ourselves. Michele had mentioned that his kids left their video games in my father's study, so if Mikey wanted to play them, he was permitted to. I told Mikey about them, and he ran down the hall to the study.

I was in the kitchen making us breakfast when I heard a woman scream from the other side of the house. I came running in and saw Marta plastered up against the wall with Mikey standing close to her, talking a mile a minute.

She clearly would have no idea who he was, so she thought the house was being robbed. She then saw me run in, and for a moment, she didn't recognize me, either.

"Marta, it's okay, it's me. It's Bastian."

She stared at me for a moment, and her eyes grew big.

"Bastian! Oh, my goodness! Look at you! It's so good to see you!" she exclaimed.

"Marta, this is Mikey. I'm his guardian. I'm sorry he scared you."

Once Mikey heard Italian being spoken, he turned and ran back to his video game, shouting, "Bye!"

"I think he was trying to tell me something, but I didn't understand. Should you go talk to him?" she asked.

I shook my head no and smiled. "If Mikey needs something, he'll let me know. Don't you worry."

It was so good to see Marta, and I think she was a bit surprised that we were having a conversation. I don't think I spoke more than a few sentences to her in years.

"Hey, do me a favour. Stop what you're doing for a few minutes and come into the kitchen with me. I'm making breakfast, but I'd like to talk to you for a bit."

"Thank you. That's so nice of you, but your father will not be happy if I do not get his ironing done."

She looked down at the stack of clean, wrinkled dress shirts she was holding, seeming genuinely worried. She had been his employee for years and was completely devoted to him.

"I'll deal with Papà. Come. Come on."

It was the first time in my life I had a full conversation with her, and it was about time. We talked while I made us breakfast. I handed her a cup of coffee as I told her about my life in the United States and how I was married to Dia.

"I heard you married Bunny!" she said, laughing. "How wonderful! I can only imagine the trouble the two of you are getting into now!"

"Well, not really. We have three children that are in our charge, including Mikey, who you just met. Between our jobs and friends and kids and responsibilities, there's not much time for any debauchery."

She laughed.

"Actually, the reason why I wanted to talk to you is that Bunny and I are getting married again. We're having a church wedding this time, at the Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci, and I was hoping that you would be kind enough to help me plan the reception. A friend of mine also has offered his help.

"I haven't asked Papà for permission yet, but I was hoping to have it here at the house in the formal dining room. I want the courtyard decorated as

well. Maybe some lights and candles. We don't have a lot of money, but I do want it to be nice.

"And I would like to officially invite you to both the wedding and the reception."

"Me!? Why?" She seemed pleasantly surprised.

"You've been good to me, and I know I haven't been as good to you in return. It's not that I didn't want to be. I just really didn't know how to be. I would like to try to make it up to you. So, please understand that I would like for you to help me set it up, but I am not asking for you to work at the reception. I would like for you to play the part of a wedding guest. Okay, Marta?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Thank you for asking me to help you with this. And, yes, I would love to attend your wedding and reception. But I need to know one thing before I do: Am I allowed to hire any of my relatives for this? The reason I ask is that if I oversee this, I know that my family will do it right, as they will have to deal with me for a very long time if they don't."

"Whatever you want to do is fine with me. Let me work out some of the details with my father. I may have to ask him to cover the costs of things for me until I can pay him back. As soon as I talk to him, I will let you know what to expect."

I was cooking for most of the time I was talking, not looking at her much. But as I handed her a slice of the frittata I was preparing, I stared directly at her and said, "Thank you, Marta. I truly appreciate it."

Just as I thanked her, the bell for the front gate rang. I glanced out the kitchen door and saw a taxi. I pressed the button to open the gate and spoke through the intercom.

"Pronto!" I answered.

"Taxi," the driver said.

I saw the taxi pull halfway through the semi-circle of our driveway. The back door opened, and Louie emerged. I ran out of the house to greet him.

I hugged him, saying, "I don't know why, but I had this weird feeling you were going to stop by! So good to see you! I'm going to assume that Dia sent you."

Louie laughed and gave me an incredulous look.

"No, she did not! I'm *her* boss, remember? Not the other way around."

I laughed. "Are you sure about that?"

Louie smiled and then scanned the courtyard.

"Hey, not bad! No wonder Dia wanted to come and stay here each summer. I don't blame her."

"Where are you staying? Would you like to stay here with us?"

"I'm conducting some meetings in San Gimignano over the next few days. I called Diarah from the café—that same café where I met you two—and she

gave me your address. And here I am," Louie said.

Mikey saw us and came bounding out of the house.

"Louie-Louie!" Mikey screamed as he ran towards us.

Louie gave me a confused look as Mikey hugged him.

"Interesting choice for a travel companion," he said.

"Can you think of a better buffer?" I asked Louie, smiling.

"Yeah, your wife," he said and laughed.

We walked into the house through the kitchen door. Mikey went back to my father's study to continue playing on my nephew's game console. Peeking my head in, it looked like he was playing *The Legend of Zelda*. I impressed myself thoroughly by knowing that, despite knowing almost nothing about video games.

I looked back and saw Louie still standing in the kitchen.

"Ha! The famous pizza oven. Oh, I have heard stories. Is it true that she would eat pizza every day when she was here?" Louie asked.

"Very true. No exaggeration on her part," I said. "She would sit right here and watch me prepare it."

I pointed to the stool that she used to sit on and got a lump in my throat. I could picture her the first day she was there, and it caught my breath. Louie saw me get emotional.

"Sorry," I said. "I don't know what came over me."

I brought him through the hallway, past my father's bedroom and his study, to the library. Louie stopped and scanned the room.

"This is quite nice. I'm sure if I were handed a newspaper and a sherry, I could make myself quite comfortable here," Louie said.

And then I walked over to the side of the room and opened the two wood-carved double doors to reveal the formal dining room. I do have to admit that the space had always been quite striking. It wasn't like any other room in our house, and in terms of décor, it hadn't been touched since my mother died.

The room was light and bright, with windows on three of the four walls. All of the other rooms in the house had various rich shades of Gothic Damask wallpaper with dark wainscoting below, even most of the bedrooms, but not this room. Instead, it was painted a lovely shade of butter yellow with a white ceiling and white trim. And all the rooms in our home had tall ceilings, but this one was just a bit taller at three meters. The table and chairs were white, as were the overstuffed chairs next to the fireplace. There were beautiful, planted travellers' palms in each corner, and the centrepiece, the focal point of the room, was the large, crystal Swarovski chandelier. I never really paid attention to lighting sources in homes, but this was hard to ignore.

Louie looked around. He pursed his lips and nodded his head softly in the affirmative.

"I think we could do something quite remarkable with this space. Does

the table extend?"

"My father has additional leaves and chairs stored somewhere. I believe the table can seat up to 18 comfortably, which would be perfect for our needs," I said.

"This is where you want to have the reception?" Louie asked.

"Yes. It's a nice space, it's hardly ever used, and it's no cost to us. I have already put my father's housekeeper on the task of helping to arrange the dinner."

"If it's okay with you, I have a friend who is a chef that I would like to bring in for the event," Louie said.

"Yes, of course. That is incredibly generous of you," I said.

"I imagine that your room is upstairs?" he asked.

"No. It's actually in the basement. I'll be honest, I haven't been downstairs since we arrived. But I'm warning you—it's not going to be pretty."

"I'd like to see it," Louie said.

We walked outside, crossed the courtyard, and descended the steps to the basement. I opened the outer door, walked into the basement hallway, and could see that the door to my room was shut. However, there was a distinctive odour emanating from behind it. It was positively rancid. It was a cross between garbage and human waste.

Louie was behind me. I opened the door to my room and couldn't believe what was before me. It was worse—far worse—than what I had remembered.

Piles of garbage, old food containers, and dirty dishes were everywhere. Discarded bandages full of pus and other drainage from my seeping skin lesions were all over the floor. Dirty, stained clothing and bedding were scattered around the room. Old plates of dried-up dog food were in one corner.

I almost gagged at the smell. I was stunned and couldn't move. I could hardly breathe.

With my eyes glued on the disgusting sight before me, I quietly said to Louie, "I'm so sorry. I'm so embarrassed by this."

"Hey, Michael, do you know what this looks like to me?" he asked. "It looks like the home of someone who was in terrible pain."

He patted my shoulder and said, "Come on. Let's go. You can work on this room later. Right now, let's go have some fun."

As we emerged from the basement, I did my best to gather myself. I was completely shaken by what I had just seen.

It took a few minutes, but I was able to pull Mikey away from the video game. I called for a taxi to take us into town, and Louie already had the address written on a piece of paper for where he wanted to go.

We pulled up in front of Sartoria Marinaro di Mario Sciales, where my

father and brothers got their suits. I had only owned one suit in my life—the suit I married Anja in—and that was the only time I had been inside. And that suit was thrown in the trash the day she left.

"Are you getting yourself a suit?" I asked him.

"I am," he said with glee, and the three of us walked in. "I'm going to need you to translate, please."

Louie turned and spoke to one of the salesmen, who quickly approached us.

"Tell him that you are getting married in a month and that we will need to get at least 10 of the same suit for all of the men."

"What?!" I said to Louie incredulously.

"Just translate, please."

I told the man what Louie said. The gentleman replied, and I translated his statement to Louie. "He said that they don't do rentals."

Louie was a bit shocked and quite perturbed by that statement.

"Excuse me?! Does it look like I've ever rented a suit in my life?"

Instead of translating what Louie said, I told the gentleman in my most proper Italian that Mr. Muehlmeier was one of the richest businessmen in New York City and that he would be purchasing all the suits. And, if he didn't want to lose the commission on a minimum of 10 suits, he probably needed to do a bit more ass-kissing.

The gentleman's disposition improved dramatically. He told us that he was one of the tailors there, as well, so he could handle everything we needed.

I told Louie, "He would be thrilled to assist you with whatever you need."

Louie thought for a moment and smiled to himself. "You know that Diarah wants to wear a silver wedding dress. Silver. She's going to look like a roll of tin foil."

I chuckled softly at his comment. "She can wear a burlap sack if she wants, as long as she shows up to the church," I said to him, smiling.

"Ugh, love is so gross sometimes," he groaned, rolling his eyes. "So, what I was thinking was a charcoal suit with a silver-gray tie."

Louie motioned for the tailor. He directed him to the charcoal suit that he liked the best and motioned for me to try it on.

"Tell him—white shirt, white tie, white pocket square for you, and silver-gray tie and pocket square for the rest of us."

The tailor brought me into the back and helped me get dressed. When we were done, I came out, and Louie said, "That's it. That's the one. Please tell him to get Mikey's and my measurements. And we're going to need to get your brothers down here, as well. And your father. And we're going to need Bobby and Rex's measurements. And Dominic's. Oh, gosh, and Duncan and Jahmir. Is John coming to the wedding?"

"Wait, you're not buying suits for us all?" I questioned, a bit confused.

"Yeah, I am. I would like to do that. Okay, so please tell him."

I turned to speak to the tailor.

"We're going to need you to take our measurements, and my brothers will be coming in, as well."

"Yes, sir. Does he understand that he will need to pay for everyone's suits in advance?" the tailor asked me.

"I honestly don't think that will be an issue," I stated.

He then took Louie's and Mikey's measurements, and Louie told me to stay put while he went to pay. He came back and said, "Okay, let's eat. Take us somewhere nice."

I didn't bring Lou to the fanciest restaurant in town. Instead, I brought him to Trattoria Sostanza, the oldest restaurant in Firenze. It is a cosy, little place, and the food is always excellent. Louie enjoyed it, and I think he got a kick out of Mikey and him being the only two non-Italian speakers in the place.

We took the taxi back up to my father's house, and Mikey sort of poured out of the car. It seemed that the jet lag was starting to get to him, and I think he was getting tired of "doing chores," as he called it.

Louie did not get out of the taxi, however. I invited him in, but he was adamant that he needed to get back to San Gimignano.

"I will see you back in the city!" Louie said.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you back? I would be more than happy to. My father has a decent vehicle."

"No, I'll be fine. I got here on my own, didn't I?" Louie replied with a smile, seeming a bit proud of himself.

I turned to the driver and said, "Piazza del Duomo a San Gimignano." I wanted to make sure that Louie got directly to where he needed to go.

"I can't thank you enough for everything, Louie. You are a good friend. Ti voglio bene! Viaggi sicuri!"

I stepped back from the taxi and waved to him as it pulled out of our driveway. When it was up the street and out of sight, I scanned the courtyard. I didn't see Mikey at first. Then I noticed eyes and the top of a head peeking out from the pool.

"Please tell me that you didn't jump in there with your shoes on."

Mikey's eyes got big. He stood up all the way and looked down.

"My shoes!"

"Take them off and give them to me now."

He took each shoe off one at a time and handed them to me. I poured out the excess water from the shoes into a nearby planter, went quickly into the kitchen, and threw them in the clothes dryer.

I smiled when I saw it. When Bunny was little, she wouldn't wear the clothes that we washed for her because she said that they were "crunchy." She wasn't used to them being dried on a clothesline, as we normally did, and found everything to be a bit scratchy and stiff. For a while, Marta ironed all

of Bunny's freshly laundered clothing. But after my father saw what a chore that had become for her, he invested in an American-style clothes dryer for the house. It was quite an expense, as in addition to the cost of the dryer, he had to hire someone to install an additional high-voltage outlet and a proper air vent.

Many Italian households do not have clothes dryers, and our family didn't need one, but I must admit that it came in handy many times. My father and brother used it often to wash the clothing and stuffed animals that the patients brought to the clinic. The kids would want their teddy bears or stuffed animals to console them after their operations, but we had to make sure that they were properly sanitized. Being able to wash and dry them within two hours was a big help.

I sat by the pool for an hour, just watching Mikey swim. Michele had stayed in Firenze for a few extra days, hoping to spend some time with me. He walked through the front gate, coming over from the clinic with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

He smiled when he saw Mikey in the pool, fully clothed. He stood next to me, opened the bottle, and poured just a bit too much wine in each glass. We sat and watched the sun go down, drinking our wine, while Mikey swam. It was a lovely moment.

"Hey, could you do me a favour and watch Mikey for a minute? I want to go downstairs for a bit," I asked him as I stood up.

"Yeah. Does he know how to swim?"

"Yes. He's fine. Just make sure he doesn't do anything stupid," I said, walking away from him.

"Oh, do you mean like going into the pool with his clothes on?!" Michele shouted at my back as I walked away.

I descended the stairs and, again, couldn't believe the stench. It was positively putrid. I opened the door and was just as disturbed seeing the mess for the second time as I was when I was with Louie. How embarrassing it was for me that he saw it.

Without changing into any work clothes, I retrieved a roll of garbage bags and work gloves from under the sink and started picking up the debris covering the floor. I wasn't even worried about cleaning or washing the clothing or dishes strewn everywhere. I just wanted to get rid of the trash.

I had filled the first garbage bag and started unrolling a second when it hit me. I looked around and started to feel dizzy. In a split second, I was transported back to the day I called Bunny.

I recalled how horrible I felt, how it took every ounce of effort to dial that phone and to hold the receiver up to my ear. I remembered how, until that point, I didn't see any problem with the way I was living. However, looking around my room at that moment, I realized that Louie was right. It was the home of someone in terrible pain.

How did I let it get so bad? How did my family let me live like that? Why didn't I ask for help?

I tried to steady myself on the kitchen island, but my legs gave out from under me. I slid down to the floor and sobbed in that room all alone. I cried for that poor man that I once was. I cried that I had lost all hope. I cried for Bunny and the abandonment that she must have felt.

An hour later, after I was all cried out and was completely spent, I forced myself to stand up and start working again. I was adamant that the room would not reflect the old me. It was going to represent the new me—the happy and healthy me.

Before I knew it, it was after 1:00. I carried over 20 bags of garbage up the stairs and into the garage. I would call my father's handyman in the morning to come and retrieve them.

On my way back downstairs from the garage, I noticed that both Michele and Mikey were no longer at the pool. I was a bit concerned, as Mikey didn't speak any Italian, and Michele knew very little English.

The house was dark, so I went over to the church first to see if they were there, but neither was. I walked back over to the house and opened the kitchen door. It was then that I saw a thin stream of light coming from Papà's study.

I gently pushed the door open, and there were Michele and Mikey, both sitting cross-legged on the floor with empty soda bottles and snack wrappers all around them. They both held controllers and were feverishly concentrating on the television screen in front of them.

"How are you boys doing?" I said in English.

Neither of them responded, so I partially closed the door and headed back over to the clinic.

I took a quick shower and got into pyjamas. I lay in bed and thought of what a wonderful sight it was to see my brother and my boy playing together. It made my heart happy. I was excited to tell Bunny all about it when I got back home.

I didn't remember falling asleep the night before, but I was awoken the next morning by my father, who had come over to the church.

"Bastian, wake up! Marta needs to speak to you. She said you asked her to do something for you, but she needs additional information."

Once he knew I was awake, he started to walk out of the room and said, "That's very strange—I didn't even know you knew who Marta was," and chuckled to himself.

"Sei troppo divertente," I replied sarcastically with a small smile, shaking my head.

I slid my sneakers on. Still in my pyjamas, I walked over to the house to find Marta and her son waiting on two of the barstools in the kitchen. He introduced himself as Salvatore. Marta got up from her chair and said she

was going to make us coffee, and Salvatore picked up the briefcase on the floor next to him.

"So, my mother has asked for my help in making your wedding reception as perfect as possible. You know, you should never ask my mother to do anything, as she is an absolute perfectionist. She's going to be badgering you and peppering you with questions right up until the day of the wedding," he said.

"Well, that's not going to be possible, as I will be leaving to go back home to New York at the end of the week," I replied.

Salvatore had a look of half-fear, half-surprise.

"Oh, no. Well, I guess that means that we had better get any questions answered this week. When will you be back?"

"Probably two or three days before the wedding," I said.

Salvatore blew a long stream of air out of his mouth as a symbol of defeat.

"Okay, then let's get started." He took out a sketchbook from his briefcase and opened it. "Here is a picture I drew of the dining room as it is now."

It was a very good representation. He was quite a good artist.

He then turned the page in his sketchbook to reveal a second drawing.

"And this is what we were thinking for your reception."

I looked over the drawing carefully. Marta had thought of everything. It was gorgeous.

Before I could respond, Salvatore shared the third drawing and said, "And this is the concept of what my mother would like to do in the area right outside the dining room doors. There's an open space, but I think if we do it right, it could be a lovely area for dancing."

Marta had left the room after starting the coffee, so I called for her. As she entered, I asked, "Are these all your ideas?"

"You probably don't know this, but I started working for your parents even before you were born. Way back then, they would have quite a few parties, and your mother put a lot of time and effort into making sure each one was beautiful and unique. She was very creative. So, I took some of the ideas she had, and some Signore Louie sent to me, and put them together to make something special for you. This way, a part of your mother will be there, too."

I smiled, but I hated the idea. I didn't want any part of my wedding to be inspired by my mother. But I could not deny that the pictures and concepts were so lovely. I didn't want Marta's son to recreate the sketches. I just didn't want my mother attached to the ideas, either.

"Thank you so much, Marta. I appreciate everything you are doing and have done for me."

I walked over to her and gave her a hug, and then shook Salvatore's hand.

I then went back over to the church to check on Mikey and to get dressed

in work clothes to continue tackling my room downstairs. As soon as I entered the clinic, I saw Mikey and quickly put my hand up to my mouth to stifle a laugh. It was clear that he had gone through the box of clothing in Gio's office and located something he wanted to wear. However, he was dressed in an outfit that was probably two sizes too small. He was wearing shorts, and I could pretty much see the outline of everything. Everything.

"Uh, where'd you get the clothes?" I asked, snorting a bit so as not to laugh at him.

"Oh, Gio-Gio said I should go look in the closet for some stuff. I look good, right?"

"Well, honestly, that doesn't look all that comfortable, so let's try again. Okay?"

I brought Mikey back over to the offices, and between the closet in Gio's office and the dresser in my father's, we were able to find items that fit him a bit better than what he had on previously. I talked to him as I helped him get dressed.

"Okay, so here's the plan for today. We're going to go next door and get ourselves something to eat. Then we're going to go downstairs and try to clean up my old room as much as we possibly can."

Mikey winced.

I continued, "I know it's gross down there, and I know you're not a big fan of cleaning, but I need your help, and it's something that Mamma really wants us to get done. Are you willing to help me? For Mamma?"

With a scowl on his face, he nodded his head yes.

"Then, this afternoon, we'll go into town so you can see the church where Mamma and I are going to get married."

"Can I get married, too?"

"How about you can be my best man? You can stand next to me and carry the ring that I will give to Mamma."

Mikey was no longer paying attention to what I was saying but staring out the window at something outside in our courtyard.

"Hey, look, is that man driving a tricycle?!"

Just then, my father's handyman pulled up in his Piaggio Ape to retrieve the bags of garbage in the garage. I quickly ran out of the room, down the stairs, and out the door, through the rabbit hole, and over to the courtyard to meet him. Mikey was right behind me.

"Oh, my God! This is the coolest truck ever!" Mikey screamed over me as I tried to speak to the handyman.

The man gathered the bags from the garage. His truck was small, but he was somehow able to load them all in the back. I paid him for his time and asked if he could come back the next day, as I was sure to have more garbage. He agreed.

Mikey was jumping and laughing as the Ape drove off. I could understand

his interest, as there was nothing like that vehicle in the U.S.

"It looks like what Mr. Bean would drive if he drove a truck!" Mikey said, laughing, as we walked back over to the house and into the kitchen.

"Well, he'll be back tomorrow. Maybe you might be able to sit in it then. I'll ask him when he returns," I said to him.

Mikey's eyes grew wide, and I laughed at his ridiculous expression.

He was a big help to me in so many ways. His adorable antics kept me calm so I could focus on what was really important. It was almost impossible for me to collapse in on myself under the emotion and stress of the situation while he was throwing a tantrum because I wouldn't make him a pizza for every single meal. When I was feeling my worst, he would always snap me out of my funk, for good or bad.

After I made Mikey yet another pizza, we went downstairs and worked for four hours on cleaning the room, and I was thrilled that we got so much done. I had to throw out most of my clothing, as the sores I had created permanent stains. But what I could salvage, I washed. Mikey was quite good at folding laundry, so once the couch had been cleaned off, he was able to sit on it and arrange all the clothes into neat, folded piles. My bed, however, was a complete loss, which wasn't at all surprising, and I was thankful that Mikey was tall enough and strong enough to carry both the mattress and the box spring up the stairs on his own.

It was 14:00, and we needed to be at the church by 15:30, so we headed back over to the clinic and took our showers. Gio was finishing up with a patient, so we quietly snuck up the main stairs. By 15:00, Gio was done and was waiting in the lobby for us. Mikey was back in the original outfit that he came to Italy in, but at least it was washed and clean. I was hoping we could kill two birds with one stone and find something for him to wear at the Mercato del Porcellino, which was only about a five-minute walk from the church.

The taxi dropped us off in the Piazza della Repubblica, and we walked down Via degli Speziale and onto Via del Corso. A warm feeling came over me when I saw the church. It was perfect for us. It was on the smaller side among churches in Firenze. Anja and I got married in La Basilica di Santa Croce di Firenze, one of my favourite churches in the city. It is where all the famous Florentines are buried, and it has such a rich history. But it made sense that Anja and I got married there, as everything about our wedding day was over-the-top. It was a big church for a big show.

But Diarah wanted to get married in Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci, and I could see why. It was a beautiful little church off the beaten path. It was unassuming and quaint, modest and uncomplicated, but not plain. To me, it was a physical representation of our relationship.

We met with Padre Mirabella at the church's front entrance and went inside. He introduced us to Signora Caputo, the church secretary, who would

be making all the arrangements. He explained that the calendar probably would not allow us to reserve a date for a wedding the following month, but I explained that Diarah wanted a 22:00 wedding on a Wednesday night. She wanted it to be late at night on a workday in the middle of the week so that after we were married, we could walk through the Piazza della Repubblica and over to Il Duomo to take photos, as few people would be around.

Padre Mirabella wasn't enthusiastic about any of it and told us he wasn't sure he could marry us that late at night, as he had morning mass at 7:00 the following day. I said that I would be willing to pay double the normal fee and would give that same amount as a donation to the church. I didn't have much money and was counting on Papà helping us with this until I could pay him back. Papà was very religious, and he was the type of man who would gladly tithe double what he needed to.

Thankfully, Padre Mirabella relented and agreed to our outrageous requests.

"I also need there to be soft lights and candles. Lots of candles," I said.

"That can be arranged, but you will have to pay for any boxes of candles that we use. Any other requests?" Signora Caputo asked.

"No, thank you. We just need Father Mirabella, the church, our friends, and the candles. That's it. That would make me very happy. And we will not need the full Catholic Mass. A Rite of Marriage ceremony will be more than sufficient."

"Would you like to hire the organista for the event?" Signora Caputo asked.

The organ. Oh, my goodness, I almost forgot.

"Yes! Yes, please. That would be perfect. Whatever I need to pay is fine."

The wedding was going to be even more amazing than I had ever dreamed. I couldn't wait to see Diarah's face when she walked down the aisle to Ave Maria on that giant pipe organ.

Signora Caputo examined her calendar, and we had all settled on a May 31st wedding date. This was perfect, as May 31st was Diarah's real birthday. Gio gave Signora Caputo his contact information in case any issues came up. We thanked both Father Mirabella and Signora Caputo and walked out of the church.

As soon as we were outside, I turned around and hugged Gio.

"Thank you for being here with me for this."

And, of course, like clockwork, Mikey came up and put his arms around us. Gio playfully pushed us both off him.

"A simple thanks would have sufficed," he said, laughing while straightening out his suit.

We strolled down Via dei Calzaiuoli and over to Via Porta Rossa to reach the Mercato del Porcellino, where Mikey was able to get his wardrobe for the rest of the trip. It consisted of lots of tie-dye shirts, sweatshirts, and

sweatpants, most with "Florence, Italy" written on them. He wanted to get souvenirs for everyone, but I reminded him that we would all be back in a month for the wedding. Everyone could get their own souvenirs then.

We took a taxi back up to the house, and Alessandra was waiting there with Thai take-out for us. Mikey just wanted to be in the pool, so the "adults" sat under the veranda so I could keep an eye on him.

"Should we make him a plate?" Alessandra asked about Mikey.

"No. That's very nice of you, but no," I said.

"Are you sure?" she asked once more.

"Hey, Mikey!" I yelled over to him. "Do you want us to save you some Thai food?"

"Pizza!" Mikey yelled before completely submerging himself in the water. A large number of bubbles sprang up to the surface.

Alessandra laughed. "He's like a small child, isn't he? He's a giant little baby," she said sweetly.

I checked on Mikey, who was swimming in the pool. He was adorable, talking to himself and singing while he swam.

"He's technically three years older than me, but he's my son. He is. I absolutely adore him."

She smiled as she listened to me, and I looked away as I could feel my eyes start to well up. Sensing my discomfort, she quickly changed the subject.

"So, tell me all about the wedding plans."

"I'm not sure if Giovanni mentioned this, but all of the men attending the wedding will be wearing the same suit. There are about 15 of us, and Louie thought it would be classy if we were all dressed the same for the photos."

"You should see the suit!" Giovanni gave a big chef's kiss to show his absolute pleasure. Earlier, I had shown Gio a Polaroid photo that the tailor had taken of me. Gio approved wholeheartedly.

"Anyway, Diarah wants the women to do the same, so she is requesting that all of the females wear white," I said.

"White?! No! You can't be serious! We'll all look like the bride!" She seemed shocked but happily so.

"Actually, the bride is wearing grey, silver, and white," I stated.

Alessandra stared at me incredulously, her mouth slightly ajar.

"Bastian, I think you must be wrong about this. I just don't understand. I am to wear all white? You are sure about this?"

"I'm sure. Aside from you, it will be Greta, Aida, Delilah, Louie's mother, Fionna, Renata, Marta, and one or two others whom I seem to be forgetting. You have all been instructed to wear white."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not wearing white to your wedding," Alessandra said. "I just can't believe Diarah would be okay with this."

I got up and went into the house to retrieve the cordless phone. I brought it outside with me and dialled Michele's home number. Greta answered on

the first ring.

"Hello, Greta, it's Bastian. How are you?"

"Bastian! I'm confused. I thought Michele was in Firenze with you."

"Oh, he is. But it is I who needs your assistance. I'm sitting here with Alessandra. She's going to ask you a question."

I handed the receiver over to her.

Alessandra and Greta spoke for a few minutes, and I continued eating. I looked over at Mikey. He was still splashing around, having a great time.

Alessandra hung up, and I stared at her with raised eyebrows.

"Greta told me that she spoke to Diarah directly. She and Aida are wearing white. All white."

She started to laugh. She was a beautiful woman, but she was truly stunning when she smiled. Giovanni was a lucky man. Good for him.

"Okay, okay, you convinced me! Lord, help me, I will be dressed like a bride for your wedding! I'm sorry—please forgive me for saying this—but it's a bit odd."

I looked over at Gio and smiled. "I keep forgetting that she hasn't met Diarah yet. She'll learn."

We were just finishing up our meal when I saw the lights turn on in the Kuhmalos' yard. I still had not yet officially invited them to the wedding, and they absolutely needed to be there. Diarah would be thrilled to see them. But I felt a bit embarrassed going over and talking to them, as I hadn't seen them in years.

"Hey, do me a favour and keep an eye on Mikey for me for a minute," I said as I stood up.

I glanced over at Mikey. "Hey, you stay in the pool, okay? If you need anything, Zio Gio is right over there."

I pointed to Gio and Alessandra, and Mikey gave me a thumbs-up.

I couldn't believe what I was about to do. I walked down to the lowest level of the backyard, crawled up onto Bunny's trampoline, and started to jump. The trampoline had seen better days, and I was a bit nervous about it supporting my weight, but I gave it a go anyway. It was twilight, so there was just enough light for me to see what I was doing. I jumped a few times and was able to locate Bernard.

"Bernard! (jump) It's Michael! (jump)"

"Ha-ha! Hello, Michael! How lovely to see you! It's been a very long time. You look well!"

"Do you (jump) have a minute (jump) where I can chat (jump) with you? (jump) Would you (jump) be able (jump) to come over (jump) for a glass (jump) of wine? (jump)"

I felt like a complete idiot. What a truly horrible way to conduct a conversation.

"Ha! Sure. Give me a few minutes. I'll be right over."

"(jump) Please bring (jump) Brigitte (jump) as well! (jump) See you soon!"

If I had thought there was any way Bernard would have heard me without me having to get onto that trampoline, I surely would have done it. I would have preferred to call him, too, but I had no idea where I had last put his phone number.

I squeezed my way out of the hole in the trampoline net and climbed down the stepladder. As I was walking back to the table, I heard Gio and Alessandra clapping.

"Very impressive," Gio said. "Bunny would be proud."

"Bernard and Brigitte will be here soon. We should get another bottle of wine from the cellar," I suggested.

"Oh, no," Gio gasped softly. A look of concern came across his face, and he glanced over at Alessandra.

He looked back at me and softly said, "Bastian, I'm so sorry to tell you this, but Brigitte died about a year ago."

"What? What?! No. That's not possible. I was here. I was living here a year ago." I felt myself becoming quite upset hearing the news.

"Bernard came over to tell you, but you were not doing well. We knew that you would not be able to make it to the funeral. We just didn't want to give you any additional bad news. You were so fragile."

I put my hands on my head.

"You should have told me."

"I'm so sorry. I truly am. She started getting very tired two summers ago while helping us out at the clinic, so Papà ran some blood tests. She had an abnormal white blood cell count, and her CBC was off. He sent her to one of his colleagues at the hospital, who diagnosed her with leukaemia."

I covered my mouth and did my best to hold in tears, but I wasn't successful. I could feel them running down my cheeks.

"Pizza! Pizza! Pizza!" I heard Mikey yelling from the pool.

Like clockwork, his antics snapped me out of my funk. Had that not happened, that moment could have become very dark for me.

"Yes, yes! I'm starting it now. Give me a few minutes," I snapped at him.

I was equally sad and angry when I walked into the house alone. It was good to have a task to do, as it helped me gather my thoughts.

As I was making the pizza, Bernard walked in through the kitchen door. I half-ran over to him and hugged him.

"I am so very sorry, Bernard. I didn't know." I was sobbing.

"Of course, you didn't know. I understand," he said.

My goodness, it was so good to see him.

"How are you doing?" I asked genuinely.

"Well, some days are better than others. But I'm getting by, you know? It's not easy. And how are you? I saw Luca a few weeks after Brigitte died. He was at Caffè Gilli. I was there with a colleague getting some coffee and

thought of you, as I hadn't been there since that night of the concert with you and Bunny. Luca told me that you had not seen her in years and that you were not doing well, health-wise. He mentioned you were battling a drug addiction? Judging by the way you look today, either Luca was lying to me, or you, my friend, have made a miraculous recovery."

"It's more the latter."

Bernard gave a soft smile.

"I would love to hear everything. I don't understand what happened between you and Bunny. The two of you were thick as thieves, but then she went away, and there was a beautiful but odd woman who was lurking around here. I don't mind saying that it was a bit strange."

"Bunny and I did lose touch—it's such a long story that I will certainly tell you one day—but we found each other again last summer. I moved to New York to be with her. We had a civil ceremony in December, but she always wanted to get married at the Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci."

"The church where we saw the concert?" he asked, smiling.

"Yeah, that same one. We're getting married on May 31st."

"You're getting married on Bunny's birthday? How wonderful!" Bernard said with a large smile. He seemed truly happy for us, and I was so impressed that he remembered her birthday.

"We would love for you to be at our wedding. Would you like to come?" I asked, putting Mikey's pizza in the oven.

"I would love to be there, and I would also love some of that pizza you're making, if you don't mind. I haven't had dinner yet."

I truly loved that Bernard felt comfortable enough to ask me to make him dinner. He was like family to me.

"Absolutely! But I will make you your very own. What would you like on it?"

"Surprise me," he said.

"Here, come outside and chat with Gio for a moment."

I grabbed Bernard by the shoulder and led him to the French doors. Gio saw him coming and was already pouring him a glass of wine. I poked my head out of the doorway to get Gio's attention.

"Gio, will you do me a favour and come up with a time when you and Bernard can go down to Sartoria Marinaro di Mario Sciales to get measured for your suits for the wedding? You will probably need to do that soon—this week, preferably."

I closed the kitchen door behind me and continued making Bernard his pizza. In fact, I made three, as I was fairly sure Gio would want some, too, and I knew Mikey wouldn't be willing to share.

Mikey's pizza was finished, and I brought it out to the table with a glass of chocolate milk. I called over to him, "Hey, Mikey, dinner's ready!"

I walked back into the kitchen, but through the kitchen door, I could see Mikey climb out of the pool and walk over to the table, sopping wet. He sat at the other end but did manage to get Alessandra a bit wet as he walked past her. Mikey was so focused on his pizza that he didn't even acknowledge Bernard. He probably didn't even see him.

I brought Bernard's pizza out, and he gave a small whoop. I also brought out a bottle of Pellegrino and a glass for him. And, not surprisingly, when I brought out the third pizza, Gio immediately stole a piece.

"Bernard, this very rude gentleman at the other end of the table is my son, Mikey. Mikey, can you say hello?"

Chewing ferociously with a mouthful of pizza, without looking up, Mikey nodded yes and gave him an enthusiastic grunt and a thumbs-up.

"I'm sorry. That wasn't polite. He's usually better behaved than this," I said to Bernard.

"No, he's not!" Gio argued, shaking his head and laughing.

"Hello, Mikey! I am Bernard. It is very nice to meet you."

Mikey looked up slowly with big eyes and shouted with a mouthful of food, "Oh, my God, you have the coolest accent ever! Are you from England?"

"No, I am not. I am from Africa."

With all seriousness, Mikey asked, "Are you a spy?"

Bernard leaned over and whispered, "I cannot confirm or deny that, sir."

Mikey gasped excitedly, and everyone at the table did their best to mask their snickers.

Bernard turned back towards me and said, "So, your brother tells me that my prize for attending your wedding is a brand-new suit. Is that correct? Are you in such desperate need for wedding guests that you are forced to provide them all with an expensive Italian suit?

"And from Sartoria Marinaro di Mario Sciales, no less! I have been inside only a handful of times. I love their clothing—it is of the highest quality—but nothing in there is inexpensive. Are you sure you can afford that?"

"I think it's rather clear that I'm not the one paying for it. You will meet the very generous donor at the wedding. You can thank him then."

We spent the rest of the evening, into the wee hours, chatting and drinking. It was bittersweet. It was so lovely to see Bernard, but it hurt my heart to know I would never get to see Brigitte again and to thank her for her kindness and friendship.

The next late morning/early afternoon, when I woke, I had a hell of a hangover. I didn't realize that I had that much to drink, but I truly wasn't keeping track. I knew how bad it was when I went over to the house and saw that Giovanni and Alessandra had slept over. Gio was so sick that he had to have his nurse reschedule all his morning appointments.

I walked past Papà's study and saw Mikey playing *Zelda* again. "You okay,

baby?"

Mikey didn't reply, which meant he was fine.

I walked into the kitchen and started to make myself some dry toast. As I was standing, leaning against the island, I glanced out the windows of the French doors and saw four individuals coming up the stairs from my old room. I quickly unplugged the toaster and ran outside into the courtyard. It was Marta and a few of her grandchildren.

"Good morning, Bastian! Your father paid my grandchildren to help you clean this morning. He told me that it was taking you quite a while to get it done, so he wanted to help you along a little bit."

I walked down the stairs, and they followed me. My room was beautiful. Everything was sparkling. They had steam-cleaned the tile floor, wiped down all the walls, and scrubbed the kitchen area and bathroom. It smelled so good in that room for the first time in years.

"Thank you so much. That was so kind of you. How much do I owe you?" I asked.

"Your father paid us in advance. It's all taken care of," Marta said, and they walked out the door and back up the stairs.

I turned back around and slowly scanned the place. It looked just like when Bunny used to stay with me. I smiled, thinking that the next time that room would be used would be for our wedding guests.

I picked up the phone in my room to call Diarah. It was about 7:30 in the morning, her time, so I had assumed she was up. Bobby answered the phone.

"Hold on, Michael. She's brushing her teeth. Here she is."

She sang, "Hey, gorgeous! How are you?"

"I am great. Things are great. I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Tell me everything!"

"Is it okay if I don't? I promise I'll tell you everything when I get home. I just want to hear about you and Nicky and Delilah. Tell me how you have been doing."

"Well, we went to the Farmer's Market yesterday morning. Nicky wandered away on his own and bought a box of liqueur-filled chocolates with his own money and didn't understand why I wouldn't let him eat them all. I did let him have just one and gave the rest of the box to Rex and Bobby. And Delilah stole a cucumber from one of the stands, and I didn't realize it until we got home. Pops had to watch the kids for me so that I could walk all the way back to the market to pay those lovely people for it. I felt so bad about the whole thing that I also bought two jars of blackberry preserves that we really can't afford and really don't need. So, yeah, we have a drunk and a thief for children. Is that what you wanted to hear?

"Oh, and Louie sent a tailor to our house to get the boys' measurements. Do you know that this is the first real suit for all of them? None of them has ever owned a suit tailored just for them before! They're all so excited. It's just

lovely."

Diarah talked and talked, with no shortage of information to share. She knew I would want to hear even the most banal stories about the kids. My heart was so happy to hear her on the other end of the line. I was having a lovely time with my family, but I just didn't feel like myself completely without my girl by my side.

Standing in that room downstairs, though, I remembered the last time I had used that phone. I remembered how vastly different the content of our conversation was. I recalled how I felt then, how utterly miserable I was, and how everything had changed. My whole life was completely different. With Bunny's help, I had come so far, and I was truly proud of myself.

Our flight the next day was at 18:00, so Gio was to pick us up in a taxi at 15:00. I packed us up early and spent the rest of the day with my father, doing nothing much other than talking, while Mikey took one final swim.

Alessandra was in the taxi with Gio when he came to pick us up.

"Hey, look who decided to join us!" Gio said aloud, referring to Alessandra.

He got out of the taxi, walked over to me, and whispered, "Don't worry, we'll stay at the Inn up the street from your place. I'm sorry I didn't check with you first. She wanted to meet Diarah before the wedding. I hope it's okay. She really wanted to come."

I whispered back, "Of course! It's fine. Dia will be thrilled to meet her."

I turned and said goodbye to Papà, giving him a hug and a kiss, and told him, "I'll be back soon."

Mikey hugged Papà and then turned and hugged me. He then ran over to Gio and gave him a hug. It was adorable that he truly had no concept of who was going and who was staying.

The return to the U.S. was without issue. Mikey got through customs just fine, and Bobby was waiting for us at baggage claim just like he promised he would. It was late, and I wanted to get home before everyone headed off to bed. I didn't have to worry, as everyone waited up for us. I must have hugged Diarah and Nicky for five minutes each.

Delilah, however, was a different story. She was mad and wanted nothing to do with me. She wouldn't let me hold her until the next day, and when I did, she babbled angrily at me in Italian for a few minutes. All I could say in return was "Okay. You're right. I'm so very sorry," over and over again.

Giovanni and Alessandra came into the house just to see everyone and say hi very quickly. Within ten minutes, they had grabbed their suitcases and started to leave. I walked up to the Tarrytown Inn with them, just to ensure they could check in without issue.

"What time should I get you in the morning?" I asked them once they had their room key.

"Come get us when lunch is ready. We'll sleep in a bit," Gio said.

I gave them both a kiss on the cheek and walked out the door to the hotel. Dia and Delilah were waiting for me on the sidewalk.

"She's keeping her eye on you now. You're not leaving again under her watch."

I tried to take Delilah from Dia's arms, but she crossed her arms and wouldn't come to me. So, instead, I gave both of my girls a kiss on the forehead.

The next morning, it was business as usual. I helped the kids get ready for school and walked Mikey out to catch his bus. Dia dropped off Nicky at school and had work and class herself, but she said she would be home by 2:00 that afternoon. Delilah and I went next door to let Pops and Terri know that my brother and sister-in-law would be joining us for lunch.

I decided that we would have a late lunch so that Diarah could join us. But according to everyone, it was worth the wait. I made my "famous" risotto with asparagus tips along with the steaks that I had picked up from the butcher that morning. Diarah and Alessandra became fast friends, as I knew they would, and there was much to discuss in terms of the wedding plans and the meeting with Father Mirabella.

Giovanni, however, seemed preoccupied. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something seemed to be bothering him. Right after lunch, as we were cleaning the plates off the table, he leaned over and asked Diarah if he could speak with her in private. She turned off the kitchen sink faucet, dried her hands, and grabbed Gio's arm.

"We'll be back in a few minutes, okay?" Diarah yelled as she and Gio walked out the door.

I wouldn't find out until after the wedding what they needed to discuss in private, but it was clear they were hatching a plan. I thought it was great that they had a dual relationship. Yes, Dia was my wife, but Bunny grew up in our house and was the closest thing we brothers had to a sister. So, I got the feeling they were talking more as siblings and less as in-laws.

We stayed at home the rest of the day, and that evening, Giovanni took his beautiful bride to the nicest restaurant in town, which was just up the street.

"I arranged that, you know," Dia said after they left. "I told Gio that he is so fucking lucky to have Alessandra and that he needed to spoil her a bit more. I'm kinda miffed at him for only bringing her here for two days. Do you know that she has never been to the States before?"

"What did Gio want to talk to you about?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Oh, just wedding stuff," she said with a smirk. She grabbed my hand to pull me away from washing the dishes, through the kitchen, and into the living room. She then pulled me onto the couch with her.

"Look, I've never lied to you, and I don't plan on starting now, but there

are a few things that I would like to do for our wedding that I really don't want you to know about until the day of. Okay? So, please, just let me have some secrets for the next few weeks, and I will allow you to have the same."

Diarah didn't need to tell me that. She didn't need to disclose anything. But she was always thinking of me, making sure that I was okay, and the fact that she sensed I was uncomfortable about the secrecy made me love her all the more. She was my lover, my guardian, my teacher, my family, and my best friend, and I loved her more at that moment than I ever thought possible.

The next day, we got Gio and Alessandra on the plane back to Firenze, and it seemed like mere days before the rest of us were also leaving for Italy. Louie and Fionna flew on the same flight with us, but of course, they sat in first class. The rest of us—the kids, Pops and Terri, Rex and Bobby, Jahmir, Duncan, and John, and Diarah and me—all sat in coach. Bobby, Dia, and I worked it out that each one of us would be responsible for a specific group of people once we got to Italy. This way, we could be sure that there was one Italian speaker in each group. Diarah would get the kids and Louie, I would get The Prom members and Fionna, and Bobby would get everyone else. Getting through customs was a chore, to say the least, but figuring out the logistics was the most challenging.

Fionna and Louie were the easiest to get settled, as they were staying at the Hotel Palazzo Vecchietti. As for the rest of us, Marta's grandchildren set up three queen beds in my old room, plus two large couches, enough to sleep six people comfortably, so that space was reserved for The Prom boys, Bobby, and Rex. My father was nice enough to offer his room to Pops and Terri, as Roy had issues climbing stairs, so Papà, Luca, Michele, and his family would all stay next door at the church. And Mikey and Dominic would get Gio's old room.

Everything fell into place, except for the sleeping arrangement for Diarah, Delilah, and me. We would be staying in Bunny's old bedroom, which, I don't mind saying, was a bit creepy for me. I felt as if I was going to be sleeping in the same bed with my childhood friend and not my wife.

A few hours later, just as everyone was finally situated and settled, the buzzer for the front gate rang. I asked Diarah to go answer it. I watched her walk outside, and her reaction was priceless.

I had called Jack Jamesson a few weeks prior and asked if he would be able to attend. Even though Diarah lived only about 12 blocks away from him in NYC for that one year, she never got a chance to see him in the city, as he was always on tour with his band.

It was the first time Diarah had seen him since the attack, and she broke down in tears. She opened the gate and gave him a long hug. I could see that they were both crying. I gave them a few moments alone and then went out to greet him. At that moment, Jahmir, Duncan, and John came up the stairs and into the courtyard. The three of them quickly stopped in their tracks.

"No. Fucking. Way!" Jahmir said. "It's Jack Fucking Jamesson."

The three just stared at Jack, not saying a word. They were clearly in awe.

Dia motioned towards the Prom boys and said to Jack, "Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry. You won't get a moment's peace this whole trip, you poor man."

Jack smiled and went over to introduce himself to the boys. I wouldn't say that Jack was a household name, but he and his band had a handful of moderately successful hits. But to the members of The Prom, he was a god.

"Is he staying with us downstairs?" Duncan asked, dreamily.

Dia said, "I don't really know. I guess."

The three of them grabbed him by the sleeves and almost dragged him down the stairs and into my old room. We didn't see the boys again until dinnertime, and Jack probably spent that afternoon answering hundreds of questions.

Marta was very much in charge of everything. I wanted her to be a guest and enjoy the festivities, but I knew she was not going to hand over the reins to anyone. She wouldn't rest until the wedding was over and everyone had left to go home.

Dinner that night out under the veranda was wonderful. Marta rented large folding tables and chairs for us to use in the courtyard, as no one would be permitted to eat in the dining room until our wedding reception. However, she decorated the plastic tables and chairs so beautifully, and she thoughtfully added thick padding to the seats for the older guests. She truly thought of everything. She even sent one of her grandchildren over to Bernard's home to get his phone number so that I didn't have to alert him via trampoline.

Marta's grandson, a sous chef at one of the nicer restaurants in Firenze, prepared a lovely meal, and her two granddaughters served us all. The next morning, she laid out a continental breakfast that would have rivalled any of the nicer hotels in town.

At 11:00, the small bus Marta had chartered arrived to take all the men into town for our final fittings. Louie was in the store when we arrived, already donning his suit with the tailor making the final adjustments. The suits were gorgeous, and we all looked quite handsome, so Louie decided that we all needed matching shoes to go with our outfits. The sight of the 17 of us—Mikey, Dominic, Duncan, John, Jahmir, Louie, Bobby, Rex, Roy, Luca, Michele, Luciano, Giovanni, Papà, Bernard, Jack, and me—in our suits was so special that I started to cry. Everyone stopped and stared at me, worried as to why the groom was upset. I composed myself and addressed them.

"Thank you all so much for coming. It means the world to me that you would take time out of your busy lives to travel so far for Diarah and me. It's quite overwhelming. Thank you, truly, from the bottom of my heart."

The boys started to hug me, and out of nowhere, the tailor came rushing in between us, slapping us apart, saying, "No! No! No!" I suppose he was concerned that we would wrinkle our suits.

Then, someone not from our group shouted to us in Italian. "Ragazzi, I need you all to look over here."

It was a photographer.

"Excuse me, do we know you?" Gio asked him.

"Marta told me to be here at 11:00 and take photos of your group. Okay, everyone, here!" he said while snapping his fingers at us.

"Marta, you are good," I thought to myself. The group posed for photos, and years later, looking back, they are still some of my very favourite pictures.

The bus dropped us back at the house at 14:00, and we were all starving. Marta's grandsons were there waiting for us to return. They went through the bus, brought all the suits and shoes off, and then organized them in the garage.

There was a lovely buffet set up under the veranda, waiting for us. When we were done eating, Marta stood on one of the concrete benches next to the pool and said in her best English, "Reh-xu, Jay-sono, Du-can, Jonu, Jack-ie, e Berrr-naa-do, joo must-a come-a with-a me."

At that point, a taxi pulled up with Diarah, Terri, Fionna, and Delilah in it. I hadn't even realized Dia had left. She walked up to me and gave me a kiss.

"Would you believe that I forgot to get a dress for Delilah and that I had completely neglected to tell Terri that she needed to wear white?"

Dia shook her head to indicate she was mad at herself.

She continued, "We got Delilah, Terri, and Fionna all new dresses for tomorrow. They're so beautiful."

She kissed me again.

"And now it's time for Delilah's nap."

Taking the sleepy toddler from her, I said, "I'll do it. I think you're needed in the dining room."

Dia scanned the courtyard and saw that certain people were missing. She smiled a big, excited smile and did a half-run into the house.

Marta then spoke in Italian. "Roberto? Where is Roberto?" She pointed at Bobby. "Okay, you're taking your daughter for the day. You are now responsible for her until the wedding."

Bobby walked over to me, gave me a smile, and grabbed a sleeping Delilah out of my arms.

Marta spoke again in Italian.

"Okay, if you are a male over the age of 21 and are not Roberto and are still sitting in the courtyard, you need to walk out of the gate and up the street to the bus that is waiting for you there."

We looked around at each other. It was Louie, Roy, Giovanni, Luca, Michele, Papà, and me. I whispered to Louie and Pops, "You two are coming with me."

Marta continued, "And now, children—Luciano, Dominic, Michael, and

Aida—get your bathing suits on. You will be taken to the water park for the rest of the day. Roberto, that includes you and Delilah."

The two Italian-speaking children cheered, and Mikey and Nicky looked confused.

I addressed them in English, "Hey, boys, go get your bathing suits on. You're going to a water park!"

The boys sprinted out of the courtyard and into the house to get their swimsuits. Bobby headed downstairs to get the baby's bag, and I walked over to Marta.

"Before you ask, before you say anything, Bastian, you should know that there will be one-to-one supervision on this trip for all the children, so you do not have to worry about your boys getting lost. And yes, two of my grandchildren speak English quite well, and Roberto will be there, as well," Marta replied indignantly, as if I could possibly think that there was some detail she would dare to forget.

"I apologize. I bow to you, my lady." I gave her a deep genuflection, and she scoffed at me.

"Go! Now! We're on a schedule!" Marta yelled at me and the rest of us who were still standing there. We all dispersed and walked quickly over to the gate and up the hill.

We drove to another part of town and took the same road that I used to take when Bunny and I went to the bowling alley. It brought back so many memories, and I smiled at the thought of our crazy little excursions. Of course, I had no idea then that those would become some of the best times of my life.

We pulled up alongside a salon. Luca tapped me on the shoulder and said with a big smile, "This one's my gift for you."

It was a day spa/salon that catered to the very coiffed gay men in Firenze. We spent hours getting massages, manicures, facials, and haircuts. I, however, passed on getting a facial as I was always very concerned about whatever was put on my face, or more specifically, around my nose. But I did partake in the massage that was offered. The only person who had ever given me one was Diarah, and although she did a fine job, it didn't come close to the magic that Marcello, our masseuse, could achieve.

The salon was closed for our private party, and we spent hours talking, sipping champagne, and eating chocolate-covered strawberries. And since we spoke primarily in English, Luca sat next to my father and Michele the entire time to help translate.

The best part of the afternoon was watching Roy enjoying his manicure and facial. Never in a million years would I have thought he would have been comfortable enough to partake in "all of that sissy stuff," as he liked to call it, but he shocked the hell out of me by going along with it.

After four hours, we were ready to return, but as we boarded the bus, the

driver relayed a message from Marta saying we were not yet allowed to go back to the house. So, in her infinite wisdom, she planned a detour, in case we needed one. Thirty minutes later, we arrived at a lovely little enoteca where we sampled various wines from the region and enjoyed some antipasto plates. About an hour after we arrived, the bus driver came in and told us that we were permitted to return to the house.

We dropped off Louie at his hotel on our way, and as soon as we got back, everyone headed to their respective bedrooms to take a nap. Terri was the only one awake at the house. She was in a lounge chair next to the pool, glancing through the Italian fashion magazines that Marta's granddaughters had left behind.

"I guess I took my nap a bit before everyone else," Terri said to me, smiling.

"Hey, are you hungry? Can I make you something?" I asked.

"No, thank you. Marta made me something called a panini, so I'm good until dinner. But if it's okay with you, I'd love to take a bath."

"Absolutely! You'll have to use the upstairs bathroom, as it is the only one with a tub. I'll be with Diarah in our room if you need anything. I believe dinner is scheduled for 20:00, which is 8:00 p.m. to you Americans," I said and gave her a small smile.

And, with that, I headed up to our room. Diarah was asleep, looking so comfortable, and I just stood in the doorway and stared at her for a bit. A few minutes later, Terri came upstairs to use the bathroom and saw me standing outside our room.

She gently touched me on the shoulder and whispered, "When you arrived in Tarrytown last September, I was not so sure about you. Oh, Dia spoke about you as if you could move the Earth and stars, but I was skeptical, to say the least. I incorrectly thought that you were a selfish drug addict who was going to pull Dia down with you. I admit fully that I was wrong.

"You are the man that Diarah always said you were. And that, my friend, is the biggest compliment I can give you."

She patted my shoulder twice and continued walking to the bathroom. I smiled to myself and let that message sink in for a moment. Then, I walked into the bedroom and shut the door. I curled up in the bed next to Dia. It was so nice and warm with her in it that I fell fast asleep.

I was awoken a couple of hours later by Michele.

"Luca needs you to go to Papà's study now. Bunny's having an absolute fit about something," he said, somewhat harried.

I was a bit groggy and disoriented, but I ran down the stairs as best I could. Through the French doors, I could see that everyone was outside, enjoying the lovely evening and the dinner that Marta and her family had set out. The kids had returned from the water park, and Marta had speakers and a projector set up to play movies outside against the garage doors for them

so the adults could enjoy themselves. Almost no one was in the house.

I knocked on the door to Papà's study, and Luca stepped outside quickly without letting me peek inside.

"What's going on?" I asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"Diarah is having a major meltdown. She's saying that she wants to cancel the wedding. She wants to go home. I'm doing my best to keep things calm, but you need to get in there and talk to your wife."

He grabbed my shoulders, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and walked away.

I was not prepared for what I walked in on. Diarah was a mess. Her face was swollen, and it looked like she had been sobbing for some time. She wasn't crying at that moment, but she was still suffering from the aftermath of it, shaking and hiccupping a bit and trying to catch her breath.

I sat down in the chair next to her.

"Diarah, what's going on?" I asked as softly as I could.

She slowly took a deep breath in, and as she exhaled, she said, "I don't think I can do it, Bastian. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. If you don't want to marry me tomorrow, it—," and with that, she got frustrated, stood up, and started walking towards the door.

"Please, please stay. Please just talk to me. I will listen and do my best not to get upset," I promised.

She turned and stared at me for a long moment. She then walked back and sat down, but she wouldn't look at me. She took a deep breath and started.

"I know you deserve an explanation," she said quietly.

I got off my chair and knelt in front of her, hoping she would look at me. "Tell me. I'm listening."

She closed her eyes while she spoke. "I was with the boys—John, Jahmir, and Duncan. I went downstairs with them to your old room. The room is so beautiful, by the way. You worked hard on it, and I appreciate that. Anyway, being down there was not good for me. It brought everything back. Everything. All of the hurt. The betrayal. The loneliness. And I stopped and thought, 'What the hell am I doing?'

She opened her eyes and stared directly at me.

"Look, I am so happy that I married you so that you could stay in the U.S. with me. I am happy that you get to be with all of us in Tarrytown. And I am so happy to be able to give you these babies in a few months. You deserve them. You deserve to have little people in your life who will never leave you. So, everything up to this point has been perfect.

"But I am not sure I want to marry you in my church. I am afraid to marry you for real. The civil ceremony? That was nothing. That was just a legal proceeding. It didn't mean a whole lot to me, frankly. It was almost like buying a car. But getting married in a church means something. And I cannot marry you in a church if I feel that you're just going to leave me again one

day."

For a moment, I was frantic. "But I won't—"

"You already have. That's the point. It's already been done. You've already destroyed me once. Why on earth would I want to put myself through that again?

"See, right now, if you left me, I could convince myself that our marriage wasn't real, that I only married you to keep you in the country. But for us to get married in a church? *My* church? That's real to me. That's forever for me. And I'm really sorry, but I just don't think you are capable of giving me forever. And I love myself enough to protect myself. I need to protect myself. I need to be healthy for the kids.

"It's not just about me, and you know that. The next time you leave, you will be destroying all of us. Nicky and Mikey and Delilah don't deserve that. I don't deserve that. I can't. I can't do it again. I just can't."

I stopped and thought about what she said. I knew I could have just jumped right back at her and begged and pleaded with her to marry me, to trust me. But I wanted to give her the best answer I could. I wanted to give her the truth. So, I took a moment and sat back against the wall. I closed my eyes and meditated, putting serious thought into what my response to her was going to be.

Finally, I opened my eyes, looked directly at her, and spoke.

"When I was 13 years old, I sat in my room on the couch and thought of ways that I could leave this earth. I didn't see my purpose on this planet. I was just completely numb. I was so alone for so long, and death didn't sound bad. If anything, it sounded like such a nice, peaceful option.

"I didn't believe much in God before I met you. I think you know that. But on the day you came into my life, I prayed. I begged God, whatever that was, whatever that meant, to send me some kind of sign, anything, to show me that I was meant to be there, in that room, something to show that I had a purpose. No sooner were the words out of my mouth when I saw your tiny little hand reaching for that plate of cookies. Within seconds, I was swiping your mouth, trying to save your life. I realized at that moment, it wasn't about me. That was my sign, loud and clear.

"And every year, by the grace of God, we were able to get you to stay with us each summer. Your mother made it so difficult for my father, more difficult than you will ever know, but we had the resources to deal with her ridiculous demands. And every year, my brothers, my father and I worked together on a plan to make sure you were here. I realized early on that it was something so important that even my family could see that you were needed here.

"And yes, a lot of bad things happened to us. I had to leave you, and that was the worst thing that ever happened to me. It almost killed me not to be with you. It truly did. I died a little more every day. And just when I had given

up all hope that I was ever going to be with you again, my brother gave me your letters—the letters that had your work number on them.

"And you just happened to be there right at that exact moment, at a desk and a phone that was no longer yours, and you answered. You can never convince me that that was not divine intervention."

I paused for a moment to think.

"I'm going to tell you something now that you are not going to want to hear, but it's the absolute truth. The truth is that I am happy that we had to spend that time apart. I am happy that we had to go our separate ways for a few years. I am happy that the Lord put Louie in your path and that you could start your career, get your degree, be in a band, and have three great children. Each and every one of those things makes me love you even more. You are, to me, the perfect partner. You probably don't believe that, but it is true. You are perfect, exactly as you are.

"So, if you don't want to marry me tomorrow, I will understand. But please do not say it is because you are afraid that I will leave you again. Because I am not marrying only you tomorrow. I am marrying you and your life and your children and your friends. I want it all. I want all of you. And I want to do it in the church where you told me 12 years ago that you were going to marry me.

"I know—I know what you're going to say. I know that you said that you were going to get married there someday—you didn't say then that you were going to marry me. But when you looked at me that night, I knew it was me. I knew. And I think you knew, too.

"I love you with all my heart, my mind, my soul. You are my best friend. Nothing will ever change that. So, Diarah Theresa Jamesson Aceti, please marry me tomorrow—again—and make me the happiest man on the planet—again."

She looked at me long and hard for a while and then started to cry. I was still seated on the floor, so I crawled over to hold her. I pulled her off her chair and onto the floor with me. I held her and rocked her much in the same way I did when she was a small child.

When she quieted down, she glanced up and gave me a small smile. I whispered and asked her once more, "So, do you want to marry me?"

Jokingly, she said in an exasperated tone, "Okay, I guess," and gave a small giggle.

We hugged for what seemed like an hour. I just didn't want to let her go, and it seemed like she didn't want to be let go, either. After a long while, I pulled away from her just a little bit. I looked deep into her eyes and stroked her hair.

At that point, I heard her stomach growl and said, "You must be so hungry. Can I get you something to eat?"

She nodded her head softly.

I stood up and then pulled her up to me. I hugged her once more and then opened the door. Luca was standing on the other side of it, in the hallway, looking like he was about to cry. He saw me and then fell into my arms, burying his head in my chest.

"Are you guys okay? Are we still getting married tomorrow?" he asked, muffled, speaking into my shirt.

Diarah said, patting his back, "Thank you, Luca. We're good. Thank you for being there when I needed a friend. I love you very much."

Luca kissed us both on the cheek and wiped away his tears.

His voice quivering a bit, he whined, "Listen, I am happy to help, but if I get to that buffet table and there is no tiramisu left, there will be hell to pay."

We both smiled at him and walked outside together to join our friends.

It was clear to everyone that Diarah had been crying, but she still went outside to get something to eat and to socialize with her friends. She didn't care that anyone knew she had been upset. Weddings are stressful, and she wasn't going to mask it. Everyone in that courtyard was family to her. She had nothing to hide.

Luca and Dia went right over to the table to get something to eat, but I stopped for a moment to look around the courtyard at our friends and family. The kids were all playing together and watching movies on the garage doors. The Prom boys were trying to teach Delilah to say bad words. Rex and Bernard were chatting. Terri and Fionna were relaxing on the lounge chairs and laughing about something. Renata was painting Alessandra's and Greta's nails. Bobby was talking with Michele and my dad. Everybody seemed to be having a lovely time.

I saw Marta in a corner under the veranda and went over to her for a hug.

"You have done an outstanding job thus far. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate you. But can you do me a small favour?"

Marta let go and looked directly at me.

"Can you please get yourself a plate of food and come sit with the rest of us? Come on. We'll get something to eat together."

Marta and I sat at a table in the corner, away from the crowd. I finished eating, and it was nice to just watch everyone else. Diarah walked over to me with what looked like to be her second plate of food. She sat down on my lap, leaning into me so that I could hold her while she ate. When she finished, she put her plate down, gave me three long kisses on my temple, and whispered in my ear.

"Thank you for listening to me today. Really listening. I felt heard, and that was so important to me," she said. "But, hey, I'm pretty tired, so I'm going to sneak out of here and head to the hotel."

She grabbed my chin and turned my head so I would look directly at her. "I will see you tomorrow night."

"Wait—I didn't know that you weren't staying here tonight with me," I

said, sadly.

"Don't worry. Everything's been taken care of. Bobby is in charge of Delilah until the reception tomorrow. The boys are going to have a sleepover with Aida and Luciano. Michele will keep an eye on them. He will let you know if there is any issue, but I doubt there will be. And Louie and Fionna will take me to the church tomorrow."

"Can I call you in the morning?" I asked, sheepishly.

"Of course, you can call me in the morning," she said with a little laugh.

"I—I don't know where you're staying."

She looked exasperated.

"I swear, you don't listen to a word I say. I am staying at the hotel with Louie and Fionna. My dress and all of my things for tomorrow are already over there."

"Don't go. Please? Don't go." I sounded pathetic, but I didn't care.

She hugged me tightly and said, "You are surrounded by people who love you. Take advantage of this time. To have everyone we love together like this? This will probably never happen again. So, enjoy it."

She pulled away from me, looked into my eyes. "Hey, you know you are the only man I have ever loved and will ever love, right?"

She kissed me twice, passionately.

"I will see you at the altar."

And with that, she turned and quietly walked out of the courtyard without anyone else noticing. I sat for a few minutes, watching the gate long after I knew she was gone. I felt lost.

I got up and walked over to Louie, who was sitting by himself, smoking a cigar and drinking sherry out of a crystal copita glass. I hadn't seen my father's copita sherry glasses in years and was impressed that Marta was able to convince Papà they needed to come out of hibernation.

"You're not going back to the hotel?" I asked Lou.

"Not yet. I'm actually quite enjoying myself at the moment," Louie responded as he was nursing what I believed to be his third glass of sherry.

"Would you mind some company?" I asked, sadly, and sat down next to him.

"You okay, Michael?"

Staring at the ground, I said, "This is going to sound ridiculous, but I'm just not 100% myself when Diarah's not around. I know that she just walked out that gate, but I'm already sad she's gone. I can't really explain it. I guess it's like all of the light in me drains away when she leaves."

I glanced up at him. "That sounds a bit pathetic, doesn't it?"

Louie gave me a smile and chuckled softly. He was quite inebriated and, out of nowhere, began singing to the courtyard full of our friends, "*Ain't no sunshine when she's gone*…"

The Prom boys looked at each other and snickered. Duncan came over,

sat down on the armrest of my chair, and started to sing with Louie. John ran into the house and came out with a guitar. He sat down on the lounge chair across from me and started playing. I was nothing but impressed that the boys could conjure up that song instantaneously.

I looked over at Louie. I knew almost nothing about his personal life, and I wondered who he spent his time with outside of work hours. He didn't ask to bring anyone to the wedding. I can imagine that when one has as much money as he had, relationships can become a bit complicated.

As the song continued, Louie touched my arm gently.

"Question for you," he asked with a big grin. "Do you know who Diarah asked to walk her down the aisle?"

"I do not," I replied truthfully. "I assumed it would be you."

"No, it is not I," he said with a wry chuckle. "I guess you'll have to wait and see tomorrow."

The boys continued to sing and play the guitar, and we sat in silence for a while, just listening.

I then leaned over and said to Louie, "I'm heading inside for a minute. If I write a note to Diarah, would you be able to give it to her tonight?"

He nodded as he puffed out perfect little smoke circles.

I was heading to Papà's desk in the library when I saw the light on in the study. I was about to tell Mikey to stop playing *Zelda* when I saw that it was Michele and Jack in the room, holding the game controllers. Neither acknowledged me peeking my head in, so I just let them be.

I walked into the library and sat down at my father's desk. I didn't often sit there, but when I did, I always stopped to admire it. It was a big, beautiful executive desk with exquisite, detailed inlay. It was truly the most handsome piece of furniture I had ever laid eyes on, and I would imagine it was worth more than most vehicles on the road today. My father always kept personalized stationery with the Aceti family crest in his drawer, so I took out a sheet and began to write.

In my note, I told Diarah that the past few days had been some of the best of my life and that Marta and I had a couple of small surprises planned for the reception. I said that because we weren't going to be able to say our own vows the following day, as Catholic wedding ceremonies usually didn't allow for it, I would write my own vows that night and give them to her the next day, after the reception, when we were alone. And I told her that I would do my best in the coming months to create another word for how I felt about her, because "love" just wasn't big enough. When I was finished, I found a matching envelope for the stationery, put the letter inside, and sealed it shut.

I walked outside, gave Louie the letter, and thanked him for his help. I then retreated up to Bunny's old bedroom, where we had been staying. As I lay in bed, I stared for a while at the mint colour on the walls and the pretty lace curtains. For all the complaining about how much trouble Bunny was,

my father sure did a lovely job of redecorating Luca's old room for her. And, even now, over six years since this was her room, he hadn't changed a thing. Even some of her old clothing was still hanging in the closet.

And that's when I realized it. Bunny and my father had a real father-daughter relationship. Maybe it was even more authentic than my relationship with him. We boys obeyed Papà without question, never giving him a hard time. But Bunny? She challenged him often. She disobeyed him outright when she thought that the rules were too strict, and she encouraged me to do the same.

How many nights did we sneak out to go to Piazzale Michelangelo or bowling? How many nights did we tour Italy in his vehicle without his knowledge? She was a defiant little thing, and although he didn't like to be disobeyed, I think, deep down, my father had a strange kind of respect for her. And because of that, I think he did little things, like redecorating a room just for her, to quietly show that he cared. Why didn't I understand that previously?

I slept incredibly well that night, and I woke up quite late to the sound of everyone in the courtyard. As always, we had to eat outside, as Marta was not permitting anyone into the house until that evening, and she put out a beautiful spread. However, the most interesting sight in the courtyard that morning was what was occurring on the other side. Two attractive men were arranging chairs and other supplies next to the pool. They were an intriguing sight.

I recognized them as the stylists from the salon the day before, and they were giving each of the men a straight-razor shave. It was fun to watch them all, but it was especially a joy to watch Dominic's turn in the chair. He was 16 years old, and although he probably needed to shave daily, he rarely did. So, he was thoroughly enjoying the pampering.

I walked up to Luca and grabbed his shoulders from behind.

"Is this you? Did you do this?" I asked as I motioned towards the chairs.

"Yes and no. I suggested it, and Louie paid for it," Luca said. "And he's not even here to enjoy it!"

I wasn't worried about Louie missing out. I was sure he had arranged to have his own pampering at the hotel. In fact, I was sure he was taking very good care of Fionna and my girl, as well. I later found out that Louie had not forgotten about the women, as he had arranged for a hairstylist and makeup artist to be over at the clinic next door for the ladies. Even Delilah was on the list to get her hair done.

Jack walked up to Luca and me with two platefuls of food and said, "Hey, mates, if any of you blokes are gettin' married in the near future, do not forget to invite me. This wedding is like a spa holiday! Can't believe Ma is missing this!"

I smiled as he walked away. Luca grabbed my arm and walked me towards

the one empty chair. Nicky was finishing up, and he looked quite good. I was thrilled that someone pulled him aside to help him style his hair, as it was a bit of a mess.

"Okay, make room, here comes the groom!" Luca shouted as he pulled me closer to the chair.

I whispered to the barber, "Um, I know my skin is full of scar tissue, so do the best you can, and I will gladly finish it up later. I know that it's not easy to shave this face."

With a scowl, he grabbed my chin and scanned my face, moving it from one side to the other. He nodded his head and began working. It was the best shave I had ever gotten, and I couldn't believe how close he was able to get in the areas between the scarring. I thanked him profusely.

Marta came out of the house with her clipboard, stood on the concrete bench, and asked for our attention. She informed us of the plans for the day: one last snack at 17:00, showered and in socks and underwear by 18:30, and to the garage no later than 19:00 to get the suits on. Everyone, including the women, needed to be dressed, coiffed, and ready to leave by 20:00. The bus would be up the hill at 20:15 and would leave at precisely 20:30. The plan was that we would arrive at the church at 21:00 where formal photos would be taken first of all of the ladies together, then of the groom and his men, followed by family pictures, and finishing up with individual portraits of everyone. The bride would be at the church by 21:45, and the service would begin at exactly 22:00.

"Do we all understand the plan?" Marta asked everyone within earshot. No one said a word, which visibly frustrated her.

"Luca, what time is the bus leaving?!" Marta demanded like a drill sergeant.

Luca got all nervous and jittery at being put on the spot. "20:00?"

"Wrong!" Marta yelled. "You need to be ready by 20:00. The bus leaves at 20:30. Michele, what is the latest you should be at the garage to get your suit?"

Michele, being funny, replied in English, "Sir, 19:00 hours, sir!" and saluted Marta.

She was not amused.

"Look here, funny guy, you mess up this schedule, you will have to answer to me. Got it?" Marta snapped, seething a bit.

The smile left Michele's face, but the rest of us snickered under our breath.

"Now, someone, help me down!"

I grabbed Marta's hand and helped her off the concrete bench.

"You're amazing. Thank you," I whispered to her.

"I am so happy to do this for you. And, between you and me, your father is giving me a three-week paid vacation for doing this, so it's a win-win,"

Marta whispered and patted me twice on the cheek.

In the afternoon, everyone was relaxing, eating, and talking, but at 17:30, the courtyard was empty. Everyone retreated to their rooms to shower and get ready. I went outside to see Marta, who was still in the courtyard. She was finally relaxing, and her grandsons were getting her something to eat.

"What are you doing here? Go upstairs and get your shower!" she yelled at me. "And what are you doing with your hair?"

My hair? Well, my hair was in terrible condition. It was long and wavy, but it was still not very healthy. I also needed it to hang down to hide the patches that had not fully grown back. In addition, I liked my hair long, as it covered a good portion of the scarring on my face and neck.

"I—I don't know. I don't know what to do with it," I answered, pathetically.

"Go get a shower quickly. Then come downstairs immediately afterward so that Bruno can help you," Marta said.

I really didn't want anyone touching my hair, but I did recognize that it could have looked better. I took my shower, got into my undershirt, underwear, socks, slippers, and robe, and went downstairs. Bruno sat me under the veranda and worked on my hair with various products and a blow dryer for about 10 minutes and said, "Okay, you're good. Go get your suit on."

I didn't even have the chance to glance at myself in a mirror, but I assumed Bruno knew what he was doing. I got up and walked over to the garage. I was the second one there, with Bernard being the first.

"I thought I would get here right away so that there would be less of a traffic jam later," he said when he saw me walk in. He was smiling, staring at himself in the three-panel mirror. He was wearing his suit and looked fabulous. He turned and put his arms out.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, doing a slow dance with a 360-degree turn.

"It's perfect. You look like you're the one getting married today."

He smiled and walked over to me. He hugged me gently, so as not to wrinkle his suit.

"I am so very happy for you, Michael. But I am happier for me! This is a nice suit!" Bernard laughed a big belly laugh.

I glanced over and could see Marta's other grandson, Vito, already holding my suit, waiting for me. It took him and Bruno about 10 minutes to dress me. By then, Michele had walked into the garage.

"Well…?" I asked and turned towards him.

He scanned me up and down.

"Very nice. And you look a bit happier for this wedding than for the last one I attended for you. Now move out of the way. I want that suit."

He started to walk past me but stopped. He pulled me in for a hug and

gave me a quick peck on my forehead. With Michele being the tallest of us boys and me being the shortest, he was able to do it with ease.

Bruno and Vito ushered each man in and out of the room in the garage. They were not finished by 20:00 as their grandmother had wanted, but everyone was dressed and ready to go by 20:30. I walked up the hill with my father and brothers.

Standing outside the bus, I found Mikey in his suit, not his sweatpants. I was thrilled. I asked him two very important questions.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?" He shook his head no.

"Good. Do you have the ring I asked you to hold on to?" He shook his head no.

For a moment, I panicked.

"I have it!" I heard Bobby's voice coming from inside the bus.

I walked up a few steps into the bus so that I could see him. He was sitting in a seat towards the back.

"Hey, I know you're a bit stressed today, but I think you are completely mental for wanting to give Mikey the ring to guard."

"I—"

I was going to say something to defend myself but decided that Bobby was right. I could show Mikey on any other day that I trusted him.

Just then, Delilah popped up on the seat next to Bobby. I couldn't see her when she was sitting. She looked so beautiful. The hairstylist straightened her hair, and it was in two beautiful ponytails with a big white bow on each. It also appeared that someone gave her a tiny bit of rouge. As for her dress, the only one Diarah could find was a little communion gown. She looked so sweet and adorable.

"Hey, gorgeous baby! You look so beautiful!" I said to her, and she gave me one of her scrunchy-faced smiles that showed all her teeth.

"You do have her diaper bag with you, right?" I asked Bobby, and his smile faded. He gave me a face that showed that he had the bag and was not thrilled that I was checking on him. I cringed a bit, knowing I had insulted him, gave him a thumbs-up, and quickly sat down in the front seat of the bus.

The first seat had a sign showing that it was reserved for me, and Luca slid into the seat next to me.

"Wait… You two are wearing wedding rings?" he asked. "What about your tattoos?"

"The rings are just for the wedding. We're just re-using the plain silver bands we used for our civil ceremony. Diarah and I have chains for them and will wear them around our necks after today."

I looked down at my tattooed finger.

"I'm glad we're not wearing rings, as I rather like my original wedding band."

"Yeah, it's pretty much the coolest thing about you," Luca said, giving me

a small shove with his shoulder.

The ladies then entered the bus, and each was more beautiful than the last. I was originally against the idea of the women wearing white, but it started to grow on me. I liked that Diarah was going to wear grey, silver, and white to blend us all together.

We got to the church late, which did not make Marta happy. The tourist season was just starting up, and the streets were jam-packed with cars and taxis. It was 21:30 before we walked in the door.

"Hurry! Everyone into the church!" Marta cried.

She directed the photographer to take photos of everyone as quickly as possible. She was about to get quite upset until the church secretary came out and announced that the bride was running late due to traffic.

Marta breathed a sigh of relief and told the photographer to do what he had originally planned. We spent the next hour with him photographing us all, and Marta had instructed him to take as many pictures as possible. The photographer, we later learned, was one whom Louie recommended and had worked for him in the past. It was obvious how good he was when we later saw the photos.

The photographer still wasn't done snapping away when Marta announced that the bride had arrived. I was a bit shell-shocked and didn't know what to do with myself. Everything was so orchestrated for my wedding to Anja. I knew what to do and where to stand every second of that ceremony. There were visual and auditory clues to guide me. This was not the same.

At that moment, Michele asked everyone to join in a circle and to bow their heads. He said a prayer, but in all honesty, I don't remember exactly what he said. I was just overwhelmed with the moment, and I appreciated the small respite to just centre myself.

Everyone said "Amen," even the non-Italian speakers, and then they all headed towards the altar. As we had so few people attending, we could all stand up towards the front, which was nice. Only a few—Papà, Renata, Roy, Terri, and Bobby—sat in the pews. Mikey and I stood at the steps to the altar to wait for Diarah.

The organist had begun. Until then, I hadn't even realized that Aida and Delilah were missing. The doors opened, and the two walked down the aisle hand in hand. They both looked so lovely. At the end of the aisle, Delilah dropped her tiny bouquet and ran over to Bobby, who sat her on his lap. Aida picked the bouquet up off the floor, looked up at her father, and rolled her eyes. I could hear my brothers give a little snicker.

Then, the doors opened again, and Luciano began to escort Louie down the aisle. Louie climbed the steps and took the place where the maid-of-honour should have been.

"Yes, I'm the maid-of-honor. Shut up," Louie whispered when I looked

over at him.

I started to laugh, and the priest glared at me, so I stopped immediately. I don't know who I was more impressed by—Diarah for asking Louie to be her maid-of-honour or Louie for agreeing to it.

Then, Diarah and Fionna came into view, and I could feel my mouth drop open. I had known Diarah her whole life, and I had never seen her more beautiful. Her long hair, which she usually wore in a loose bun, was down around her face and shoulders in beautiful soft ringlets. Her dress had a grey satin halter top covered in long threads of thin silver jewels and tiny flatback rhinestones, which started at the top and draped down below the waistband. Her dress was tea-length in the front but long in the back, with big bunches of white crinoline dyed with silver and grey streaks. She wore silver strappy heels with the same long threads from her dress across her toes and around her ankles.

She looked like a princess. I know I am not doing it justice in my description, but if you have ever seen our wedding photos, you would know how gorgeous both the dress and my wife were.

The pipe organ, which had been playing very softly up until that point, burst loudly into Mendelssohn's Wedding March. It was so loud that I think it startled just about everyone. I could feel the organ's reverberations throughout my body, and when I looked over at Diarah, she was in awe. Our eyes met, and she smiled and mouthed the word, "Wow!"

She was supposed to start walking down the aisle, but she just stood in one spot, completely entranced and mesmerized by the music. I'm sure if you asked her today, she would say that was her favourite moment from our wedding.

Marta somehow got Diarah's attention and motioned to her to start heading towards the altar. Diarah snapped out of her trance and began walking down the aisle with Fionna, their arms linked. At the end of the aisle, Fionna, looking as fancy and expensive as always, turned, gave a kiss to Diarah, and walked over and sat in the front pew. Diarah's eyes met mine, and she smiled. She walked over to me and held out her hand, and we walked up the two steps together to the altar.

Father Mirabella delivered on his promise, and it was a short wedding by Catholic standards at about 40 minutes. Diarah and I spent most of the wedding trying to sneak looks at each other. We spoke the vows, exchanged rings, and gave each other a small, proper kiss.

After Father Mirabella pronounced us husband and wife, the church organ rang out again, and Diarah and I walked out of the church and into the street. Vito and Bruno were there with two wheelchairs so that Papà and Roy wouldn't have to walk that long distance, and we arranged for a Pedicab to take Fionna and Louie into the square.

We had planned to walk to the Piazza Vecchio and take photographs at

the staircase to the Loggia dei Lanzi, hoping that not too many people would be there. Many of the tourists who were out that night took photos of us as we walked through the square. Again, Marta did a great job ensuring everyone reached the meeting place safely.

Only a few people were up in the Loggia, and Diarah asked them in English if they wouldn't mind coming down for a few minutes so that we could take photos. It's hard to say no to a bride, so they obliged. Diarah had a very clear picture in her mind of what she wanted, and she told each person where to stand and what to do, including me. I gladly fell in line, as did everyone else.

When she was satisfied, she stood next to me and shouted out, "Okay, everyone, no smiling! I want this to be classy!"

"I wanna smile!" Mikey cried out from the back.

"Fine! You can smile. No one else," she said, and everyone laughed.

She scanned our group once more, got back into place, and shouted an "Okay!" to the photographer. He must have taken 30 photos of us standing there, motionless. When he was done, he checked his camera and gave us the thumbs-up, meaning we were allowed to move.

I looked over at Marta to get the okay, and she nodded her head in affirmation.

"Okay, you, come with me," I said to Diarah.

From behind, Marta and her grandsons were shepherding the group. We walked up to the Palazzo Vecchio, and two men opened the doors for us. Diarah's eyes grew big.

"I've never been in the Palazzo Vecchio!" she whispered dreamily, looking at me.

"I know," I said softly.

She gave a small gasp, and we headed in. There were servers waiting for us in the courtyard with champagne and trays of small bits of cheese and fruit.

"Can we look around?" Rex asked me.

"Yeah, it's ours for the next hour."

At that point, everyone dispersed, and I was left standing alone with Diarah in the courtyard of that beautiful palazzo. She put her arms around my neck and just stared at me. It was a lovely moment for about three seconds until I realized that Delilah must have escaped from Bobby's clutches and had come looking for us. I could feel her tugging on my pant leg. I picked her up, and Bobby came running down the stairs.

"I'm so sorry!" he cried.

"Nope!" Diarah said. "You did your part. We're good."

"You sure?" Bobby asked.

"I'm sure. Go have fun," Diarah replied, nodding.

She turned to talk to Delilah, who was in my arms.

"Hey, baby girl, how are you? I missed you."

Diarah rubbed Delilah's back, and Delilah snuggled her head into the crook of my neck. Dia reached over, kissed Delilah on the cheek, and then gently kissed me on the lips. With her heels on, we were roughly the same height.

"Do you want to go and explore the palace?" I asked her.

"Actually, no. I'm just very happy being here with you two right now. Is that okay? These last few days have been so lovely, but I just want one moment alone with you."

The three of us stood in the entryway just holding one another. I could hear the click of the photographer's camera behind us, knowing that he was trying to capture that moment for posterity.

After a few minutes, I said, "I want to show you the Salone."

Diarah lifted her head off my chest and looked at Delilah.

"She's fast asleep. Are you okay to hold her as we walk?" she asked.

I nodded.

We walked up the stairs and entered the Salone dei Cinquecento. Diarah stopped for a moment. She looked a bit confused.

"Umm… I cannot believe I'm about to say this, but… I think I've been here before," she said, smiling, looking around. "Hey, Michele, did I come here with you?"

Michele was seated, reclining in a chair with his head back, quietly taking in the frescos on the ceiling. Dia was talking to the top of his head and his shoulders only, as he had his back to us. He nodded slightly in affirmation.

"What?! When? When did you bring her here?" I asked, a bit perturbed that I didn't know that information previously.

"It was during that first summer she spent with us. I was in town for a series of meetings, and you had to go to a doctor's appointment. So, Papà asked if I would watch her for a couple of hours. I said yes, but I certainly wasn't going to miss my meeting."

I glared at him incredulously.

"You didn't speak any English! She barely knew you, and you took her to an unfamiliar place when you couldn't even talk to her?"

"What are you so upset about? She survived, didn't she? I had just graduated from college. It was my first job. I didn't want to blow it."

I was mad, but I looked over at Diarah, who was trying to stifle a laugh.

She said, "I do remember. He sat me over in the corner, right there, and made me sit there and wait. I remember that it was a really long meeting. I was lying on the floor, staring up at that beautiful ceiling. I actually think I fell asleep over there."

"You did," Michele affirmed. "I had to carry you down the stairs, which wasn't easy. You were not a small child. And then I took you out for gelato after."

I was a bit mad not knowing that information, but Diarah, still smiling, pulled me over to the other side of the room with the arm that was not holding Delilah.

"Please don't be mad at him. Not today," she said, smiling.

Just then, one of the guides came in and made the announcement, "Signora Marta would like everyone to be out in front of the palazzo in exactly 10 minutes. Thank you."

The worker announced it in English and then in Italian, both spoken perfectly.

Slowly, we started to make our way towards the main entrance. Diarah, Delilah, and I were the first to make our way out of the Palazzo, and it was fun to watch the rest exit out of the gates and down the walkway. I noticed the photographer had moved to the Loggia and was taking photos of us from that vantage point.

We all got on the bus together. It was a tight squeeze in our seat with me holding Delilah and Diarah next to me, but we knew it wasn't going to be a long ride. Even Louie and Fionna rode the bus up the hill with us. Everyone was there with the exception of Marta. She ran back up to the house ahead of us all so that she and her grandchildren could get everything ready.

When we pulled into the circular driveway, I was amazed by how beautiful the house and courtyard looked. There were thin streams of white lights across the courtyard, and several small boxwood trees had been brought in and were covered in those same tiny lights. The house, too, was illuminated, and although it was midnight, the courtyard was bright and radiant. There was a large tent set up on one side with different coloured lights emanating from it, which all the kids ran over to immediately.

Marta stood in the courtyard and directed us into the formal dining room. It was gorgeous. Everything was silver and grey and white, our colours. The table consisted of both crystal and silver goblets, pewter charger plates, and white china. There was a silver satin table runner with several large centrepieces. I don't know how she did it, but Marta managed to extend the table so that all 20 adults could be seated comfortably around it.

In addition, the table had been moved to one side of the room to accommodate the many instruments and amplifiers. The two overstuffed chairs that usually sat in front of the fireplace were no longer there, and a beautiful black baby grand piano was pushed into the far corner. So, in addition to everything else that she had done, Marta also arranged for a baby grand piano to be rented and delivered, which I knew was not easy or inexpensive.

The room could not have been more impressive or beautiful, and I later learned that Louie showed Marta pictures from Restaurant Le Meurice in Paris to give her inspiration. According to Louie, she all but duplicated the photos. It was quite a sight to behold.

Marta saved two chairs together on one side of the table for Diarah and me, but in a very Bunny-like move, Diarah sat down at the head of the table. She looked up and motioned for me to sit at the other end.

She then noticed everyone staring at her.

"What?! I can sit next to him for the rest of my life. Tonight, I want to sit with the girls!"

And with that, she motioned for Fionna and Terri to sit next to her. Soon, the table was one side white and the other side grey. (I didn't notice it much while I was sitting there, but to look at photographs after the fact, it was quite humorous.)

Bruno and Vito were already pouring the champagne into glasses, and before everyone even sat down, Marta had a selection of antipasti, bruschetta, nuts, and fruit on small plates all around the table. The next course was Diarah's favourite, Italian pumpkin soup. The chef made it just for her, even though it was out of season.

Everyone oohed and aahed when the secondi came out: a prime rib with a lobster tail on the side and a baked potato with all the fixings for the contorni. The insalata portion of the dinner was also served, as many of our guests were American and not accustomed to having salad served at the end of the meal. The ladies were provided a plate of mixed greens, and, at Diarah's request, the men were served bacon-wrapped Brussels sprouts. The room became quiet, and it was clear that everyone was thoroughly enjoying their meal.

Diarah usually stuck to a quasi-vegetarian diet, but that night, she spoke with a mouthful of steak, "You know, Gio, if you want to give a toast, it should be for Louie, who arranged for his friend to be here tonight to cook for us."

Jack raised his glass and chimed in, "To Louie!" and everyone followed suit. The meal was outstanding, and no one could disagree that Lou deserved that toast more than anyone else there.

Then, Diarah grew serious and stood up. She looked like she was about to cry.

"Actually, if it's okay, it is I who would like to make a toast. Tonight, there is someone incredibly important to me who is missing from this table. And as deliriously happy as I am at this moment, and I am truly, truly happy, my heart is also breaking just a little because my good friend should be here, and she's not.

"Brigitte was one of my first friends here in Italy, and she was as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. To me, Brigitte is just as much a part of my family as the rest of you. She helped tremendously at the clinic during the summers, and she took care of me every day when I was hurt and could barely move. And without her, I would never have completed fifth grade.

"So, I would like to toast my dear, dear friend, Brigitte. You are not

physically here with us tonight, but your spirit is all around this room. To Brigitte!"

And with that, Diarah raised her glass. She then walked over to Bernard and stood behind him, bending down to give him a hug from behind. Bernard patted her hand that was on his chest and swallowed hard, doing his best not to cry.

Diarah then walked over to the piano. Before she sat down, she turned around quickly and said to her side of the table, "Hey, I'm still working on that. Don't let them clear my plate."

The ladies nodded their heads in acknowledgement.

Diarah started playing the piano, not any song, just mostly warming up by playing a few easy riffs from popular love songs. Then, slowly, some of the boys got up from the table and walked over to their instruments.

She looked over at me.

"I wrote a lot of songs during the four years we were apart. So, instead of writing vows, I thought it would be much more important for me to play some of the songs I have written for you over the years—the ones you haven't heard yet—the ones that were too difficult for me to share with you right away."

She smiled at me and began to play and sing.

I could tell you about the songs and their lyrics, but I would rather keep them to myself. I wouldn't do the songs justice. But we were surrounded by our friends and family, and it was special to share that moment with them. One nice thing Diarah did was to translate the lyrics on paper, loosely into Italian, so that Papà could understand. Not one to usually show emotion, he discretely shed a tear once or twice.

When Diarah and the band finished playing that first set, the formaggi e frutta was brought out shortly thereafter, along with our small wedding cake. While we enjoyed dessert, the boys in the band worked quickly to move the instruments outside under the beautiful open tent next to the dining room.

At our reception at The Four Seasons six months prior, Diarah, to my shock and dismay, impishly decided to smash a small piece of the wedding cake into my face. I, not understanding this brutish and crude American custom, was not pleased. So, as Diarah started to walk over to the cake, I grabbed her hand and pulled her back into a hug.

I whispered in her ear, "You had your fun at our last wedding with the cake, but we're now in Italy, and we don't do that here. Got it?"

She pulled away from me slowly, and for the first time in a very long time, that wonderful, glaring look that I knew so well came across her face, the same one I saw when she was trying to steal the cookies off the plate all those years ago. And that, honestly, was my favourite moment of our entire wedding. We had changed so much, yet, deep down, we were still those same fun, sweet, innocent children, too. For as serious and mature as she portrayed

herself to be, my Bunny had never left me.

And, yes, we were able to cut the cake and feed each other a small piece without incident.

The band started to play, and we all moved outside. I truly loved that many of our guests were quite talented. Diarah asked Bernard, the amazing jazz guitarist he is, to play a few songs with me, and he and I, along with the band, played our own rendition of "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?" a song that the three of us used to play many years prior during our private jam sessions. The Prom also performed several of their own tunes, and John encouraged the guests to volunteer song titles that they could perform.

After a while, Diarah wanted to join in, so she sat down at the piano. I saw her look over my shoulder at someone standing behind me.

She yelled, "Are you here for the music?"

I turned, and to my surprise, the family from across the street was walking into the courtyard.

"Yes! Marta invited us. She told us that you were going to be playing music, so in exchange for making a racket and keeping us up all night, we could come over and dance with you."

Diarah shouted, "Come on in!"

The father of the family looked at Diarah and asked her, "Who did you marry today?"

Diarah pointed at me.

He gave me a look of surprise and said, "Oh! I thought you were married to the woman next door."

Diarah jokingly snapped, "Out! Out! Out!" and pointed at the front gate.

Her eyes met mine. She smiled and said, quite proudly, "No, he's married to me now. He's all mine," and I could feel a warm glow come over me.

Michele walked up to the family to escort the parents into the dining room so that they could get some champagne and dessert. Their children ran over to the tent as they heard music and joyful shrieks coming from within.

Within twenty minutes, we had just about all the surrounding neighbours at Papà's home. He was thrilled. It had been a very long time since he had been able to host a true party, and this topped any of the events he had had in the past.

It was well into the early hours of the morning that the music played, both on tape and live. The Prom boys would try to figure out which song they would perform next while a recorded song played. It was fantastic, and even Pops stayed up late to drink and dance with us, which I did not think would happen.

It was early, the sun was just coming up, and Diarah and I sat in a group of lounge chairs near the veranda with Louie, my father, and my brothers. The Prom boys had long given up playing loud, raucous music and had switched over to softer acoustic tunes. The neighbours had left, and all of the

kids were asleep. Fionna went back to her hotel, and Terri and Pops retired to their room, but everyone else was still awake and quietly roaming around.

Marta had gone home hours prior and was physically not there, but she still made sure we were taken care of, even at that late hour. Her granddaughters brought out more antipasti, nuts, and fruit, anticipating that we would be up for a while. Diarah took off her shoes, and I draped my jacket over her shoulders. She slept softly, curled up next to me, while the men smoked cigars Louie had brought in. I had no idea where he got them from, and normally I would never smoke anything as odorous as a cigar, but those were divine.

Louie yawned and stood up to leave. He walked over to me and patted Diarah on the head.

"Hey, thanks for inviting me to your wedding. You looked beautiful today. So, I'm going to see you in—what? A month?"

Diarah sat up and rubbed her face, smearing the little makeup she still had on. She reached up to grab Louie's hand and held it.

A bit groggy, she replied, "Yeah, about a month. I'll send a message to Mr. Jarvis to let him know the fax number here."

She stood up to hug Louie. "Thank you for everything, Lou. I owe you big time. I love you so very much," she said and stood on her toes to give him a kiss on the cheek.

I was going to get up to say goodbye to him, but he motioned for me to stop. Instead, he leaned down to shake my hand.

"I truly cannot thank you enough. This day was perfect, thanks in large part to you," I said softly. He said nothing in return but tousled my hair a bit in a loving way.

Louie, the gentleman that he is, walked around to each and every person that was still awake, including Marta's grandchildren, to thank them individually and say goodbye.

Diarah took the seat that Louie had been sitting in.

"Louie said that he would see you in a month. What does that mean? Are you taking a break?" I asked Diarah.

"You haven't—," Gio interjected, looking nervous.

Diarah held up one finger to halt him from saying another word.

"Yeah, kind of. The whole family is going to take a break. We're going to stay here for a month. Is that okay?"

She grabbed my hand and held onto it, signalling that she was hoping I was okay with that decision.

"I think this is something we should talk about, don't you?" I asked, feeling myself become increasingly agitated.

She took a deep breath in, which turned into a yawn.

"Baby, I know we are a team, and normally I would never do this to you, but just this one time... You need to be here. Gio needs you. There are kids

who will be coming here who need you," she said.

I knew exactly what she wanted me to do. I took a deep breath and glared at Gio.

"This was *your* doing?" I asked him.

"Yes. It was. I'm sorry, Bastian, but you are desperately needed here. I can't do it without you." Gio was almost pleading with me.

Just at that moment, Delilah surprised me when she walked up in her little pyjamas. I picked her up and put her on my lap.

"Where did you come from, little one?" I asked Delilah.

I then looked over at Diarah.

"My Lord, what time is it? Is it 5:30?"

"Yes, it's 5:27," my father stated, glancing at his Bulgari watch.

"Oh, no, Delilah's just waking up for the day. Heaven help us all," Diarah said to me, looking a bit defeated. "Come on, baby. Let's get at least a couple of hours of sleep before everyone's awake. It's going to take us forever to clean up tomorrow, but I desperately need some sleep first."

Diarah held out her hand to me. She half-heartedly waved to everyone, walked into the house, and pulled me up the stairs by my hand as I carried the baby. We all fell into bed, Diarah in her wedding dress and me in my dress shirt and suit pants. I had no idea where my suit jacket was—Diarah was no longer wearing it—but I really didn't care at that moment. Delilah snuggled in between us, and I hoped and prayed that she would be willing to fall back asleep for at least one more hour.

I woke up with a start six hours later. I was alone in the bed but could hear quite a few voices downstairs, including Diarah's. Marta had started her vacation, so unfortunately, we were all on our own from that point forward in terms of making meals and cleaning up after ourselves. However, the aroma wafting from the kitchen suggested that someone had made pizzas for lunch for everyone.

I was just about to get out of bed when Diarah peeked her head into the room.

"Hey, gorgeous!" she sang quietly as she tiptoed into the room and snuggled up in bed next to me. I said nothing and did not smile.

"Yikes. Okay. So, exactly how mad are you?" she asked.

I wouldn't look at her. "I'm pretty fucking mad, Diarah. I don't know what's going on in your head. If I did the same thing to you, if I had made a decision for our entire family without consulting you first, you would not be happy," I said.

I was upset and still quite groggy.

She stared at me sweetly for a few moments and softly stroked my forehead with her thumb.

"I know. I'm sorry. You're right. But there's a bit more to all of this, and I think you know it, baby.

"Gio and Matteo have both been in contact with me for months about this. You do such good work at the free clinic, but you know you cannot help your patients unless you get your credentials in the U.S. Let's face it, you shouldn't even have your own patients there. Matteo could get into some real trouble, and you could blow everything you've worked so hard for.

"Louie is going above and beyond, doing his best to get you expedited through the system, and you do have a real shot at getting your medical license in the States soon, but you cannot let your Italian credentials expire. I am not telling you anything you don't already know. If we leave Italy now without you having the required number of hours fulfilled to maintain your license, everything you have worked so hard for will be lost."

I started to get emotional. "I don't care. I want to go home." I stared directly at her. "I want to go home."

Diarah took a deep breath and brushed her fingers through my hair a few times.

"Okay. Alright. Okay. Let me call the airlines. I'll try to get us a flight tonight."

She tried to stand, and I grabbed her wrist and pulled her back onto the bed.

I whispered, "Are you disappointed in me?"

"Frankly, yeah, I am. Do you think *I* want to be here? I don't want to be here. It would be a complete relief to get on a plane and go home. I'm doing this for you. We're all doing this for you. But if you don't want to be here, you're not going to be much help to those kids anyway. So, let's go."

I closed my eyes and thought for a moment. I whispered, "Why is this so hard?" and rolled over onto my back.

"I'll do whatever you want, Bastian. But, at the very least, I think you should stay one more day and talk to Gio. Just see what his plan is. After that, if you still want to go home, I'll find us a flight tomorrow. Okay? I promise."

She got up to leave, but as she reached the bedroom door, she turned around and said, with a small smile, "Hey, your wedding present from me is on the nightstand."

I looked over, and a beautifully wrapped gift was next to me. I picked it up, but before I could thank her, Diarah had already left the room. I unwrapped it and saw that it was a gorgeous leather journal. I opened the front cover and read the only word that was on the first page: Rocco. I could hear myself give a small gasp. I slowly thumbed through it and glanced at each page. The journal consisted of almost all the stories I had told Diarah about him.

She was just a small child at the time. How was she able to recall so much? With amazing detail, she remembered most of what I told her, including some things I had long forgotten. It brought back so many memories of us sitting in the park with me rambling on about him. I didn't talk to anyone

about Rocco, and not only did I feel comfortable enough with her to share details about him and what I was feeling, but she was really listening. Truly listening. He was important to me, and she knew it, even at such a young age. It had to have taken her days to write all the stories, and it was such a gift to get those pieces of him back.

After receiving that gift, how could I not agree to stay the one extra day?

Even though I was still exhausted, I got up, took a shower, and went over to the church. It was Thursday, and although Gio had gotten far less sleep than I had, he was still at the clinic seeing patients.

As I walked through the front doors and down the hallway to his office, I realized I had only told my family about the wedding a month earlier. Of course, Gio and my father had patients scheduled for that Tuesday and Wednesday, my wedding day and the day prior, but Gio had clearly rescheduled his appointments so he could be there for me. He never even mentioned it. He was happy to do it. Just realizing that, understanding the sacrifices he made so he could 100% be there for me at this wedding, made me want to stay and help him.

I spent hours talking with Gio. It was impressive seeing the time and energy he had put into the plan, making sure we could get everything accomplished within that one month. And I learned that after he consulted both Diarah and Matteo, he moved the timeline up from July to June so that I could just stay after the wedding and not have to travel back to Italy a month later.

Once he thoroughly explained everything, it was clear that if I didn't stay and help him, the surgeries were not going to happen. There was no one else who could take over. My father still did consults, but he was no longer able to handle the stress and rigors of being in a surgical theatre for hours at a time, and there wouldn't be any other surgeon who would be available at the last minute. And frankly, the clinic could not afford to hire someone for the entire month, especially as all those surgeries were pro bono.

Before we finished our conversation, Gio called over to the house and asked Rex, Jahmir, and Duncan to come over to talk with us. It seemed they knew the plan, as well, as Gio had asked them all to stay and help out. Jahmir and Duncan would spend the days with the kids, and Rex would help out at the clinic each day.

Gio had never asked anything of me before that day, and he gave up so much of his personal time to ensure that I made it back to the States safely with Diarah. I owed him—I knew that much. So, I decided that we would stay. It wasn't surprising that I would never have to tell Diarah that. In fact, I never said definitively one way or another. But she knew.

Bernard was a trooper and came to the clinic every day to help with dinners and pick up any slack. In all honesty, Rex, Bernard, and Diarah were about the best support staff we could ask for, and they always seemed to

anticipate both our needs and the needs of the patients and their families. And I believe that Duncan and Jahmir had a great time. Diarah rented a seven-passenger van for the month and hired Bruno, Marta's grandson, to drive the five of them to different destinations each day. By the end of that month, I believe that my children had seen more local tourist attractions and the Italian countryside than I had.

The month went fast—quite fast. If we were not working, we were eating, sleeping, or spending time with the kids. Rarely did any of us adults have time to ourselves. And I will probably never admit this to Diarah, but I needed that month. I needed to realize that I didn't just have to be an intern back in the States. I was a good doctor and a good surgeon, and I had valuable skills. I wouldn't say that I learned to love myself during that month, but I liked myself maybe more than I ever had in my life. That was a start.

The week before we left Italy to go home to New York, Bernard asked if he and I could have dinner together. I thought it was odd at first, as he didn't ask Dia to join us, but I was happy to go. I liked Bernard very much, and I was impressed that he still made a real effort to remain friends with Diarah and me.

Bernard picked me up in his beautiful Range Rover, which was entirely too large for our narrow Italian streets, and we weaved our way up to Fiesole, a small town above Firenze. He took me to what he told me was his favourite restaurant, Cavemare, which had outstanding seafood and even better views. We started with a bit of small talk, but I could tell something was on his mind.

After we ordered, Bernard, who was sitting across from me, leaned over as far as he could and whispered, "Your brother told me that you work with HIV-positive patients in New York."

I was not embarrassed by what I did, but I could imagine that some people in that restaurant would not appreciate our topic of conversation, so I was thankful for his reduced speaking volume.

I leaned forward, as well, and said, "Yes, I do. And I love it. I feel nothing but blessed to be able to do the kind of work where I really feel as if I'm making a difference."

Bernard looked down at his hands, which were folded and resting on the tablecloth in front of him. He glanced up at me, and I could see tears in his eyes.

"I know you don't know this, but Brigitte died from AIDS complications, not cancer."

I was taken aback. "I'm so sorry, Bernard. No, I was not aware."

He took a deep breath and continued, "As you know, she was anaemic. Several years ago, there were a couple of days when she was incredibly weak and couldn't seem to catch her breath. She thought she just had the flu until one afternoon when she fainted and fell down the stairs in our home. The ambulance rushed her to the hospital, where the doctors diagnosed her as

being severely anaemic. They told me that her heart was giving out, as it had to work overtime to supply enough oxygen to her organs, and they said that she needed an emergency blood transfusion.

"For a while, she was doing great and seemed to get better quickly. However, shortly thereafter, her illness returned, and she had one case of the flu after another. One day, she would be fine. The next, she couldn't get out of bed. This went on for what seemed like months, until I brought her to the hospital. She was so weak. After a whole series of tests, the doctors finally determined that she was HIV-positive and that it had developed into full-blown AIDS.

"They released her from the hospital that day, even though she was still incredibly ill, as they said it was dangerous for her to be around the other patients. So, for two years, I had to take care of her on my own. I had no help, and there didn't seem to be any doctors who would agree to see her. You were right on the other side of the fence, and I never even thought to ask any of you if you would help her. I honestly didn't even remember that you all were physicians. Had I known…"

Bernard broke down into tears. He sobbed quietly, but even with his effort, most of the restaurant was staring at us.

Bernard composed himself and continued.

"I feel like I killed my wife. I didn't get her the help she needed, and you were right there. How did I not even think of you?"

"Bernard," I said softly, "you did everything right. The medical field is still trying to catch up. Not many doctors have knowledge or experience with those with HIV and AIDS. I work with that population every day, and I still don't know a lot. Unfortunately, it's still mostly a mystery, as each patient presents different symptoms."

Bernard smiled at me with tears in his eyes.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'm sorry I got upset. The reason I invited you to lunch was not to talk about Brigitte, but to tell you that I am very proud of you for what you are doing. I would have paid any amount to get any doctor to come to our home to see her, but no one would. And here you are, earning a small salary to help a population that people do their best to distance themselves from. Your patients must love and appreciate you very much."

I could feel a lump forming in my throat. I swallowed hard to keep from getting emotional.

I whispered, "Thank you, Bernard. I appreciate that. I do."

Our first course arrived, and Bernard sat back in his chair. He got very quiet and serious for a moment.

He picked up his fork and knife and was about to cut into his fish when he said, "I have started a foundation to assist HIV-positive patients in getting the necessary help and treatments they need. I would like you to be on the

board as our consultant. You do not need to be in Italy for this. Maybe I can call you once a month and ask you for your advice? Would you be willing to keep in contact with me once you are back in New York?"

I gave him a small smile.

"Absolutely. Whatever you need. Maybe you could also come out to New York and spend a bit of time with us. I would love for you to see the clinic and meet some of my patients. It will be a bit crazy once the babies are here, but we'd love to have you. You are always welcome."

I looked directly into his eyes when I said that to ensure that he knew I was serious.

"Thank you," he whispered. "I just may take you up on that."

I met with Bernard twice more over the next week to learn more about the non-profit. I provided him with more information so he could get a good idea of where the need was and what should be tackled first. We worked very hard to get as much done as possible within those seven days. In fact, it was an incredibly productive month for us all.

Louie allowed Dia to work remotely during that time, so when she wasn't helping in the clinic, cooking meals, or spending time with our children, she was working on the projects Mr. Jarvis sent to her. Jahmir and Duncan did a stellar job with the kids, and Rex graciously used up all his vacation and sick time to help us that month.

Gio and I were able to complete, on average, one surgery per day, five days per week. My father assisted by taking over all the work in the evenings, checking in on the patients, and monitoring their progress, and a night nurse was hired to ensure those who were recovering remained stable overnight.

In total, we helped 22 children that month, and the day after we finished the last procedure, Rex, Jahmir, Duncan, Diarah, the kids, and I were on the first flight back to New York. I was thrilled. I couldn't wait to get back to my life.

I loved Italy, but it wasn't home anymore.

23 CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: 1990, BASTIAN AT 31/DIARAH AT 27 (I AM YOU)

Returning home to Tarrytown was divine.

Everything went back to normal fairly quickly, except for the massive pile of laundry that awaited us when we returned. Walking in the door of our little apartment, I felt like I could breathe again. It sounds ridiculous, and I am quite embarrassed to admit it, but I honestly was petrified that I would be left behind in Italy.

The instant we got home, Dia and Delilah crawled into our bed and fell fast asleep, with Snickers finding a warm spot between them. Pops, Terri, and Bobby were home that month and were kind enough to feed and walk him, but Snickers had not received the level of attention he was used to and was not happy about it.

During the wedding week, Jack and I became good friends, and we had several nice chats together. He told me about his friends in the city who were drag queens. Actually, not drag queens, per se. These were not performers. They were all married, successful men with families who enjoyed getting dressed up as women from time to time and going out on the town. I believe he knew I was interested, as I asked far more questions about the group than most did. I loved listening to his stories of their adventures and was secretly jealous, desperately wanting to be a part of that group.

One day, several weeks after returning home from Italy, I was feeling particularly brazen. I met Jack in the city and took him out for lunch, just the two of us. I shocked myself by confiding in him about Bianca, and I could see almost immediately that he was intrigued. The only person I had ever talked to about her was Diarah, and it was so freeing to discuss her with someone who wasn't going to judge me or think I was a freak.

I told him that Bianca and I were two sides of the same coin.

Jack smiled and replied, "It's not really a coin, though, is it? Coins aren't a lot of fun. I would say maybe more of a bouncy ball."

I laughed.

"Yes, more of a bouncy ball. I agree."

Jack opened his wallet and pulled out a photo of a beautiful woman in a gorgeous gown.

"Is this you?" I asked.

He looked at me with a sly smile. "That's me. That's Gigi."

Never in a million years would I have guessed that it was a man in that photo. I stared at it for a good minute. He was gorgeous.

While putting the picture back in his wallet, Jack asked, "Would you like to go out with my friends and me one night? We like to get all dolled up and frequent some of the better clubs."

I almost wanted to cry. I didn't say anything. I just nodded my head quickly in affirmation. Up until that point, only Diarah had seen Bianca. It would be terrifying yet thrilling to take her out into the world.

I told Dia about it that night, and the next day she called Jack and made him agree to a date and time for it. It seemed my wife was just as excited for Bianca to have a night out as I was.

The following weekend, Diarah helped me pack everything Bianca would need, and Jack arrived in a taxi at 3:00 p.m. that Saturday to pick me up. Diarah helped me bring my bags down to the taxi. As she reached the bottom of the outside steps, she stopped, turned around, and pulled me by my wrist into a hug.

As she held me, she whispered in my ear, "I packed a pair of sweats in there for you and an extra change of clothes. If you're tired and want to stay the night in the city, I'll understand."

She snuggled into the crook of my neck. "Please tell Bianca I said hello and that I would love to see her again soon."

She kissed me three times and gently pushed me towards the door of the taxi.

"I love you more than you know," she said.

"Oh, I know. I do know. I love you, too," I replied, reaching over and giving her one last peck before I got into the cab.

Jack lived right in the heart of the city on 2nd Avenue in a small but lovely two-bedroom. His apartment was gorgeous, but my favourite room was the spare bedroom, which had been turned into an oversized closet. Every inch of it was devoted to Gigi. It consisted of racks of designer clothing and dresses, two-tiered shelving units full of shoes, a large vanity with almost as much makeup as any department store counter, and a trifold, full-length mirror. I was in awe.

He sat down on his fur-covered stool and motioned for me to take the large, round, pink Ottoman in the centre of the room. I watched him slowly and methodically apply his face. He truly was a pro.

Before I had even started to get ready, there was a knock at the front door, and Jack got up and ran over to it. Two gorgeous women entered. They

reminded me a bit of Luca's drag-queen friends who helped Bunny years ago, but they were not the same. For as loud and overstated as Luca's friends were, the two before me were not. These men were artists. They were not dressing up to attract attention. If anything, they blended in. If they stood out, it was only due to their beauty.

Jack introduced me to his friends, and both of them looked me up and down.

"Ladies, he needs some help. This is his first time showing off his girl in public."

The first woman gasped, and the other one squealed a bit in glee, clapping her hands silently.

I won't bore you with all the details, but I will say that I had an amazing time that night. It was a rebirth, and I was never the same. I had suffered from anxiety and depression most of my life, but after that experience, my confidence level was higher than it had ever been. I couldn't wait to go out with them again.

I realized that it was the first time I had truly felt like myself in public. It was different than when I was with Diarah. When Dia and I were alone together, it was the safest place in the world for me. I could be 100% myself and never felt that I would be ridiculed or judged. I was never a disappointment to her. But being out in the world as Bianca was both incredibly exciting and terrifying.

Bianca gave me some of the best experiences of my life. Putting her on display was freeing, but we still encountered those who made us feel different, freakish, and perverted, and that was difficult for me to accept. I couldn't wrap my mind around how something that made me feel so right, so much like my true self, was so egregious to other people. And I really couldn't understand why Bianca coming out could truly enrage some individuals. Why did she bother them so? To this day, I have no answer.

For a few months, I was going out almost every weekend with Jack and his friends and having the time of my life. Diarah was at home, pregnant, with our three children, but she did nothing but encourage me to go and have fun. I loved her so much for that. But, after a while, I was no longer having as much fun, as I felt selfish for leaving her alone each weekend. She told me that she didn't mind, and I believed her, but deep down, it didn't matter.

So, for a while, a long while, I stopped going into the city other than for work. I had to leave Bianca behind. I missed her terribly, but I was so overwhelmed with my growing family. I thought about her often and hoped I would see her again soon.

The babies were due on November 14th, but Diarah was hoping and praying they would arrive a bit earlier. Twins usually arrive early, often before the 38th week, so she was hoping they would make their appearance towards the middle of October. But mid-October came and went.

She was not happy, as she had grown to be quite large. I honestly had never seen a pregnant woman with a larger belly, and she was in absolute agony every day. Being pregnant can put a lot of stress on a woman's body, but with the wide range of injuries she had endured as a child, she said she could feel pressure on every broken bone she had ever had.

Gio had arrived in mid-October and was eager to help me deliver the girls. He and Alessandra were trying to get pregnant, but they were having difficulties. With Gio being six years older than me and Alessandra only one year younger than him, they were both heading into their late 30s. Most Italians consider a woman getting pregnant in her mid-30s to be a "geriatric high-risk pregnancy," so it was quite unusual to see Italian women any older than that getting pregnant. Still, they kept trying, so Gio was happy to help with delivering our girls. He thought being around the babies might, in some way, indirectly help.

There was a hospital just outside of Tarrytown that was quite good, but if Diarah delivered there, Gio and I wouldn't be able to do the C-section, and I wanted to be the one delivering my children. I wanted that control. If something went wrong, I wanted to know that everything possible had been done, and I couldn't guarantee that with an obstetrician we barely knew, as up until that point, Matteo and I had acted as Diarah's OB/GYN.

Matteo knew a friend of a friend in Tarrytown who had his own clinic with a private operating room for some of his wealthier clients. He was willing to let us use it, albeit for a fairly hefty fee. I didn't care what the cost would be—it was the perfect option. And as long as we could plan the C-section and give Matteo plenty of advance notice, he was willing to assist if we needed him. And, without a doubt, he was going to be needed.

It was the morning of Halloween, my birthday, and Gio was in the kitchen, sketching something in his journal while finishing breakfast. He and I had decided that Diarah would have her c-section the next day, on November 1st, and we had reserved the operating room for the day. Diarah was on strict bed rest, but Dominic and Mikey were happy, as Gio, Bobby, and I said that we would be able to take the three of them trick-or-treating that night. Bobby was planning on taking off early from work just to help me with the boys and Delilah.

Diarah, who had been in constant pain for days, still managed to get the candy to the neighbours for Mikey, thanks to Rex going door to door, and she somehow also found time to finish the kids' costumes, as well. She came across a couple of old Zoot suits at the Salvation Army months earlier and, with the help of Terri's sewing machine, tailored them to make both look like the suit from *Beetlejuice*. White face paint, Diarah's black eyeliner, and a ton of baby powder in the hair rounded out the boys' look.

Terri helped Diarah by finishing up Delilah's costume. She took the darling communion dress that Delilah wore to the wedding and dyed it a

bright shade of blood-red so that she could go as Lydia. She even had the veil. I absolutely loved watching Delilah prance and twirl in her dress, as I knew that same joy of putting on a really beautiful gown and feeling like the prettiest girl in the room.

It was 4:30 in the afternoon. Gio and I were waiting for Bobby to arrive home so we could leave with the kids when we heard Diarah give a small scream from the bedroom. She was standing next to the bed, leaning over, with her sweatpants completely soaked.

"I think my water broke," she said. She started to whimper, and I could tell that she was about to cry.

She was terrified.

Bobby should have been on his way home but still hadn't arrived, and Rex wasn't coming home until around 6:00 that evening, so she was frantic. She had no idea how she could get down those stairs without their help. And to add to her stress, Pops and Terri were out to dinner, and she burst into tears when she realized we were going to have to load everyone into the car to head over to the private operating room. This was not the nice, quiet, calm experience Dia wanted for the babies, but at that point, we had no choice.

To get down the exterior stairs, Diarah had to sit at the top landing and go down each step on her rear. Standing, she couldn't navigate the stairs on her own, as she couldn't see her own feet, and the pain of being upright was making her dizzy. It was the only somewhat safe way to get her to the car without Bobby or Rex there to help.

"Call an ambulance!" Dia shouted at me as she scootched herself down the stairs one at a time.

I didn't say anything, but I stared at her and shook my head no. I was adamant. I wanted to be the one delivering my babies. The look of hatred that came over her face frightened me, but I didn't care. I wasn't changing my mind.

Diarah was half-screaming, half-crying as she walked hunched over to get into the vehicle. Normally, Dia did all the driving, and if I went anywhere in a vehicle without her, Bobby or Rex usually drove. But at that moment, I got behind the wheel and honestly couldn't remember where I was supposed to go. Diarah rarely yelled at me, but I can say with absolute certainty that the 18-minute car ride to the private clinic was the most miserable and stressful time of my entire life.

She was not happy with me that I not only couldn't remember how to get there, but that I had pretty much forgotten how to drive, and she had no issue using every curse word under the sun to tell me exactly how big an idiot I was. It didn't help that the kids were freaked out and that we were driving illegally, as Gio and Nicky were not in seat belts. It was clear that the car was not made for six passengers.

When we finally made it to the clinic, I ran out and saw that the

receptionist was just wrapping up for the evening. I banged on the locked door, and she let us in. She helped Gio get the kids situated in the lobby while I helped Diarah into a wheelchair. My shirt was soaked with perspiration. I was a mess, and I knew it.

Diarah was livid. Seeing the state I was in, she glared at me and growled through clenched teeth, "Call an ambulance! I want a fucking ambulance! I want to go to the hospital!"

I was somehow able to pull myself together enough to act like I had some control over the situation.

I knelt in front of her and calmly said, "Don't worry, baby. I got you. I got this. Everything is going to be fine. I promise I will take care of you and the girls."

We entered the building, but the office was a complete labyrinth, and I couldn't find my way to the operating room. There were various hallways of examination rooms and offices, and I couldn't locate which room we were supposed to be in. I was doing everything wrong.

"Call a goddamn ambulance, you fucking piece of shit!" Diarah screamed at me.

Gio appeared out of nowhere, grabbed the handles to the wheelchair, and quickly but gently guided Diarah into the correct room. By this point, she was leaning back slightly in the wheelchair, making a sound that was a cross between a grunt and a growl.

Gio stayed with her, talking to her gently to calm her down, while I washed up and put on the scrubs the doctor had left for us. When I returned, Gio went and washed up while I got Diarah onto the table, which was not an easy feat. She did not want to leave that chair, and I can't say that I blamed her. She had no strength, and her body was giving out. Her legs could no longer support that much weight.

I got Dia out of her clothes and into a gown. Nothing was going the way I had planned it in my head, and I was terrified that I was letting my wife down, but by that point, she was in so much pain that she was barely lucid. She was progressing rapidly, and the babies were on the way. Gio got an I.V. in her arm and started taking her blood pressure.

"Even if we called Matteo, he would never make it here in time. Are you okay for it to be just the two of us?" Gio asked.

I nodded my head yes. We both knew that was a lie—I wasn't okay with it being just the two of us delivering not one but two babies—but there was absolutely nothing we could do about it at that point.

"Stay up with Diarah. I will prep her," Gio instructed.

He worked quickly, but there was so much to do, from the epidural to the catheter to shaving her abdomen and applying the Chlorhexidine solution. It took time, and I was becoming more and more of a mess with each passing minute. When Gio was certain that she was sufficiently numbed and in the

proper position, he motioned for me to secure Diarah to the table.

When I was done, he looked at me and said, "Showtime. You ready?"

I started to shake and cry.

I could see that Gio was somewhat disgusted with my behaviour.

"Your wife is in an incredible amount of pain, but you go ahead and cry. Take your time. Let me know when you're done so we can get started," he snapped, very impatiently.

I took a very large, very deep breath and said, "I'm good. Let's go," but I could feel myself trembling. I was so thankful at that moment that Gio was in complete control of the situation, as it was clear I was devolving my responsibilities.

Gio took the scalpel and began to cut a large incision right at Diarah's bikini line. I glanced up. She didn't stir. I looked at Gio and nodded, indicating for him to continue. He began again, this time cutting into the uterus. I passed the tube to Gio so that he could suction out the amniotic fluid.

And then I saw the top of a beautiful little head.

At that point, I was absolutely no use to Gio, and I believe he knew it. He grabbed the first baby and, after a bit of tugging, pulled her out and passed her to me.

"Suction out her nose and mouth," he gently demanded as I just stood there staring at her, this perfect being. I obeyed. It was then that she cried.

Oh, Lord, she was so beautiful. She was truly the most beautiful thing I had ever laid eyes on. I was completely in awe. I gently cleaned her off, put a small shirt, diaper, and cap on her, and wrapped her in two soft blankets.

I picked her up, and, for some inexplicable reason, I bolted out of the operating room with her. I had no idea where I was going, but I was frantic and knew I had to leave with her.

Rex was standing in the lobby. Thank God, he was there! I ran up to him.

"Rex, I need you to take me home right now!"

"Is that the baby—?" he started to ask.

"Now, Rex! Now!" I yelled.

"Okay, okay, come on!"

Rex, looking panicked, held the entrance door open for me. He had no idea what I was doing and seemed genuinely worried.

As we walked out the front door, I snapped to Delilah, Nicky, and Mikey, "Stay right there! Don't move a muscle!"

I said it probably much more harshly than I needed to, but in all honesty, I don't remember much about that moment.

But I do remember the kids' faces. They looked terrified. They knew it was supposed to be a happy moment, but this was anything but, and I know that I scared them. I didn't mean to do that. Instinct had taken over.

I sat in the back seat of Rex's patrol car and told him to drive us home as

slowly and carefully as possible. He turned on the lights but not the siren and did exactly as I asked. There was no car seat in his patrol car for the baby, so I just held onto her as tightly as I could. I just couldn't take my eyes off her. Rex said nothing to me the entire ride back to the apartment, but I could see his eyes in the rearview mirror, and it was clear that he was afraid for the baby and me.

I wasn't there to see my second daughter born. I missed that, and it is something I will always regret. According to Gio, he delivered the second baby all on his own, got her suctioned out and cleaned up, took her measurements (something he didn't get to do on the first baby), dressed her, and put her under the heating lamps to be able to tend to Diarah's incision.

Just as he started the process of stitching Dia up, Mikey came into the operating room, took a look at the little girl lying under the lamp, and stated, "My baby!" And with that, he picked her up and walked off, leaving Gio angry and confused, not knowing where either baby was. Annoyed, he continued his job of taking care of Dia, and according to him, she started to come around a few minutes later.

Groggy, she lifted her head up to talk to Gio.

"Are the babies here?" she asked weakly.

"Yes, they are both here."

She put her head back down on the table with a small thud. She was thoroughly exhausted.

"Are the babies okay?" she asked with her eyes closed.

"Yes, your daughters are perfect," he assured her.

Half-asleep, she asked, "Me? Am I okay?"

He gave a small chuckle and came around to the side of the table to talk to her. He put his hand on the top of her head, gently petted her forehead with his thumb, and replied, "Yes, you are okay. You did a good job."

"Mmmm, yeah, thanks. You, too," she said softly and dozed off again.

Gio left Dia strapped to the table and went to search for baby #2. He found her in the lobby sitting in a chair with Mikey holding her. Bobby, Nicky, and Delilah were all staring down, looking at her. The baby was fine.

Bobby saw Gio and questioned, "Hey, is everything okay? What can I do to help?"

"I have to clean up here, and I don't think Diarah should be moved for a few minutes. I honestly didn't think the babies should be moved either, as I wanted to make sure they are both stable, but as Bastian left with the first one, nothing seems to be going the way I planned at this point."

Pointing at the kids, Gio then asked, "Can you take the children back to the apartment first and then come back to get Diarah and me?"

"Yeah. Should we leave the baby with Diarah?" Bobby asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Bastian is nowhere to be found, and I'd rather not be responsible for Diarah and the baby. I'm sure Bastian went

home. Could you take the baby home to him?" Gio asked.

"Yeah, sure. Both of the baby seats are in the trunk of the car. I can install one of them now so we can take her."

Bobby turned to get the kids and asked, "What's the baby's name?"

"I have no idea," Gio whispered, shaking his head.

"I will take the kids home and keep an eye on them. I'll send Rex back so he can take you two home," Bobby said as he exited the building with the kids.

Gio watched them walk to their car, and just as he was turning to go back to the operating room, Rex pulled into the parking lot. He watched as Rex got out of the patrol car and walked over to Bobby, who was loading the baby seat into the vehicle. Rex helped the kids into the car so Bobby could secure the baby. Although Gio couldn't hear exactly what they were saying outside, he gathered that Mikey was a bit disgruntled about not being able to hold the baby during the car ride back.

My brother said the image of them getting into the car will never leave his mind, as Bobby struggled to load the baby, two Beetlejuices, and a Lydia into the vehicle.

As Gio began walking back to the operating room, Rex ran up beside him.

"Hey, there's something I think you should know. I took Michael and the baby back to the apartment. I don't know if I was supposed to do that, but Michael looked frantic. I figured that he's the doctor, so he would know if it was okay. But as soon as I got them back, Michael went into the apartment with her and locked the door behind him. I tried knocking a couple of times, but he won't respond or open the door.

"I'm telling you, had Michael not been my friend, I would have broken that door down. I don't know where his mind is, and I don't know if the baby is okay."

Gio grabbed Rex's shoulders and said calmly, "The baby is fine. Don't worry. He was just overwhelmed and wanted to get her somewhere safe. They're both fine."

Although Gio was able to convince Rex, he himself did not fully believe that all was well, but he needed to take care of Diarah first. As he re-entered the operating room, he could see that she was still sleeping heavily. Although her vitals looked good and the incision was holding nicely, even with as long as it was, Diarah wasn't recovering from the anaesthetic as quickly as Gio would have liked. The plan was to get her home and into bed, but it was clear they would need help getting her back up into the apartment.

After Gio was done cleaning as best he could, he turned to Rex and said, "She's going to have to stay in your apartment for the next few days. I don't believe Bastian is in the right frame of mind to take care of both the babies and Dia. She would be safer next door. So, we need to get clean linens on one of the beds."

"I'll call Terri. She'll do it. But how are we going to get Diarah up the stairs?" Rex asked.

"Had Bastian been here, we could have worked that out, but as of right now, I do not know. I believe we will need to call an ambulance service to take her home."

To this day, I cannot thank Rex and Gio enough for getting Diarah home and taking care of her and the baby when I couldn't.

Rex called for the ambulance, and Gio rode in it back home with Diarah, who slept the entire time. And Terri turned out to be invaluable over the following 24 hours, as she focused on taking care of Diarah while Rex and Bobby took care of the kids. It must have been insanity.

The plan was for Bobby, Rex, and the kids to have a big sleepover downstairs with Duncan and Jahmir that first night, but none of the kids wanted to leave the baby. So, for one night, Pops' apartment had eight people plus one newborn baby staying there, with Duncan, Jahmir, and other friends coming in for short bursts to meet the new inchling. Everyone made special accommodations so that I could be left alone, and I will forever appreciate what my extended family did for me.

For the entire night and into the next morning, no one bothered us, and I was thrilled. I got a bit panicked even hearing someone walk by the apartment door, but it was usually just someone stopping by to see the other baby or one of the kids taking Snickers out for a walk. But by the following afternoon, almost a full 24 hours after my daughters were born, a note was slid under the door to the apartment. Still holding the baby, I picked it up off the floor.

It read, "Per favore, bussa due volte per farmi sapere che stai bene." (Translation: Please knock twice to let me know you are okay.)

Smiling, I looked down at my sweet, perfect daughter asleep in my arms and softly knocked twice on the door with my knuckle, so as not to wake her.

From the other side of the door, I heard Gio say softly, "Can I come in? I just want to see that you're okay."

I thought for a minute and begrudgingly unlocked the door. I stood back to let Gio open it, which he did quietly and slowly. I believe he thought he could frighten or startle me with any sudden movements, and he was correct. He did everything right.

He stared at the sleeping baby in my arms and gave a small gasp while he slowly shut the door behind him. He locked it, too, which I appreciated, and stood about three feet away from us, only leaning his torso closer to see her. I immediately felt bad. My brother was my best friend, and I was treating him like he was the enemy.

"Would you like to hold her?" I asked quietly.

A look of shock came over Gio's face. "Are you sure?"

I nodded slowly. He sat down on the couch, and I passed her to him. For

the first time since her birth, I allowed someone other than myself to hold her. It sounds so ridiculous, but it was the most difficult thing I have ever done.

Gio was very still, doing his best not to wake the sleeping baby.

"She is gorgeous, Bastian. She's perfect. What is her name?" he whispered without looking up.

I sat down next to him on the couch.

"It's Gia," I said.

Gio looked up at me quickly. "Gia? For me?"

I gave a small nod, and I could see tears well up in his eyes.

Gio looked down at Gia and said sweetly to her, "It's a good thing that your Papà named you after me. Between you and me, he kind of owes me."

Gio glanced up at me, expecting me to smile. I didn't.

"Does Diarah hate me?"

Gio smiled and gave a silent chuckle.

"No. In fact, she's acting like all of this insanity is perfectly normal. It's like she predicted that you would lose your mind after the first baby was born. She knew you would be completely overwhelmed. I don't think she imagined that you would hold Gia hostage for a full day, but it seems she knew something interesting would happen. I'm very thankful for Diarah remaining calm about all of this, as I was personally conflicted about this whole situation."

"I am truly sorry for that," I said, my voice quivering.

Gio secured the baby with one arm and grabbed the back of my neck with his free hand. He pulled my face close to his and touched his forehead to mine. We sat like that for a few moments.

"Would you like to meet your other daughter?" he asked as he gently pulled away.

I nodded my head yes.

Gio gently handed Gia back to me and went next door to get the other baby. I could hear a small argument coming from the other apartment. Then, I saw Mikey come through the open door, carrying the other baby, with Gio following right behind him.

"I'm so sorry. He wouldn't give her to me," Gio said somewhat frantically.

Mikey walked up to me, very matter-of-factly, and stated, "I'll trade you. My baby for your baby."

I was caught off guard by Mikey's command of the situation, and looking back, I'm surprised I obeyed. I gently handed Gia back to Gio and held my arms out for the other baby. I didn't even have the chance to look down at her before I saw Mikey carefully scoop up Gia and start to walk out the door with her.

"Not a chance, mister. Get back here with her. Sit!" I whispered angrily, pointing to the couch.

Mikey gave me a look of disgust as he slowly sat down on the couch cushion. He then looked down at Gia and spoke to her in a sweet tone.

Gio whispered, "He's a natural with babies. It's amazing, really."

"Actually, it's not that surprising. Dia said that he helped a lot with Delilah. He still does."

Once I made sure Gia was safe, I glanced down at my other daughter. I looked up at Gio in shock and then back down at the baby again. She was almost the exact image of Gia. They were not identical twins, but a less-observant person might have trouble telling them apart. Gia was a bit lighter in weight than her sister, and she clearly took after me. The baby in my arms looked like me with just a touch of Diarah, too. It wasn't anything definitive, but she just had a certain quality that reminded me of Bunny.

"What's her name?" I asked Mikey.

He ignored me and kept talking to Gia, who had woken up.

I asked Gio, "What's my daughter's name?"

Gio shook his head. "I have no idea. Diarah won't tell me. She told me that she wants you to know what it is first."

I cringed. "Cazzo! I just told you what Gia's name is before I told Diarah," I said, realizing my gaffe.

Gio gently grinned and made the motion of zipping his mouth shut and throwing away the key.

I hadn't realized that the door was left ajar until I saw Delilah come running in. Bobby ran in two steps behind her, unsuccessfully trying to grab her.

"I'm so sorry!" Bobby said, looking at me. "I'll get her."

Bobby grabbed Delilah's little wrist and started pulling her back towards the door. Not surprisingly, Delilah screamed bloody murder, upsetting both babies. Within seconds, we had three babies crying—Delilah and the two newborns.

"It's okay, it's okay," I told Bobby. "Let her stay."

He let her go, and she came stumbling back into the apartment with a smug smile on her face, knowing that she had won that battle. I bent down, still holding the baby, and stared at Delilah.

"Quietly and gently," I whispered in a stern tone.

She glared at me with big eyes and then, without making a sound, tiptoed slowly over toward me. She looked at the baby in my arms, leaned in, and gave her a tiny kiss on the top of her head. She then tiptoed over to the other baby and did the same. Then Delilah turned to me and gave me a big, cheesy smile, showing all her teeth, and screamed, "Bye!" and ran out of the room giggling hysterically.

I glanced over at Gio, who was laughing quietly. "Questa tua famiglia è pazza."

I frantically glanced over at Gia, realizing that I hadn't checked on her for

at least 30 seconds. She was fine, completely content in Mikey's arms. I asked him if I could hold both babies, and he gave me a serious look. It was apparent that it was not going to happen. I then asked him if we could switch babies again. He begrudgingly obliged, and Gio came over to help us.

"Where is Diarah?" I asked Gio.

"Mamma is in Pops and Terri's room," Mikey replied before Gio could.

I took a deep breath and began to walk over to the other apartment with Gia. I knew I would have to deal with the repercussions of the situation at some point.

I entered Pops' apartment and saw all three couches full of people. Everyone looked up, but no one said a word to me. They all seemed a bit afraid of me, and I couldn't blame them. I knew that my behaviour had been quite erratic.

I walked directly to Pops' bedroom and saw Diarah lying in bed. She was eating chips and doing a crossword puzzle, sipping a glass of Thai iced tea. She looked up at me and smiled.

"Hey," she said softly.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry," I said over and over. I felt like I was going to lose it again.

"Come here. Come sit on the bed with me." She patted the space on the bed next to her twice as an invitation. She acted as if nothing was wrong.

I sat on the bed next to her and started to hand the baby to her.

"Nope. No, no thank you," she sang.

"You don't want to hold the baby?" I asked, completely confused.

"Uh-uh," she replied, still crunching on her chips. "No. Not right now. She's all yours," Diarah said lightly.

"You *are* mad," I said, worried.

She gave me a big grin and snorted a bit.

"I am absolutely 100% not mad. You don't think I knew this was going to happen? I'm not an idiot. And I knew—*I knew*—that the instant that these babies were here, you would go insane. So, no, I don't want to hold her right now. You *need* to hold her. I get it."

She looked down at Gia and whispered softly, "Hello, little one," as she stroked the top of her head with the back of one finger. "You are very, very loved. Do you know that?"

I felt horribly guilty and was doing my best to hold back tears.

"Are you sure you don't want to hold her?" I asked, my voice cracking.

Diarah yawned, pushed the crossword puzzle book off her lap, and snuggled down into the bed.

She half-sang, "I'm sure! Nighty-night!"

And with that, she closed her eyes and started to drift off.

Quietly, I asked, "What is the other baby's name?"

"Mmm… I'll tell you later," she said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

And with that, she was asleep. I sat there watching her, trying to decide if I believed her. She wasn't mad that I abandoned her when she needed me? She wasn't upset that I took off with our daughter? I couldn't quite wrap my head around that. That didn't sound normal. My behaviour wasn't normal, and her reaction to my behaviour wasn't normal.

I walked into the living room and saw Bobby, Nicky, Pops, Terri, Duncan, and Rex watching college football on the TV. Mikey was holding "his" baby while he sat at one end of the largest couch, and Gio was curled up in a ball, napping on the opposite end.

Without looking at me, Bobby asked, "So, are we allowed to talk to you now?"

"Yes. I'm truly embarrassed about my behaviour. I'm very sorry," I said. "Would you like to see the baby?"

Bobby stood up. "Absolutely, I would."

I passed Gia to him, and he sat back down in Pops' La-Z-Boy to continue watching the game. He rocked the chair slowly, and Gia drifted off to sleep again. I don't know why, but I had completely forgotten that both Nicky and Delilah were his children. He had far more experience with babies than I had.

"Bobby, would you mind if I lay down with my wife for a few minutes? I'm exhausted." It was at that point that I realized that I hadn't slept much at all in two days.

Still staring at the TV, he said, "Yeah, go ahead. I'll wake you if there's an issue."

I turned and headed back to Pops' room. I crawled into bed next to my sleeping wife, who looked so peaceful, and honestly didn't remember falling asleep.

It must have been hours later when I finally woke up, as it was dark outside. I missed the whole day. Diarah wasn't in bed with me, but I could hear her voice just outside the door. She must have been in the kitchen. I opened the door and saw her standing at the stove cooking. She shouldn't have been on her feet at all, and there she was, making dinner for the boys.

I glanced over her shoulder and saw that she was making Pasta Pomodoro. I hugged her from behind, kissed her several times on her cheek, and took the spatula from her hand. She went and sat down in Pops' recliner. Bobby was still holding Gia, and Mikey had the other baby. Gio was still on the couch, sleeping.

Two new people were part of our family, and nothing had changed. The girls just blended right into the scenery. Everything was calm. I was stunned by this revelation. I panicked for nothing.

I made a quick salad and dished up bowls of the pasta. Everyone had automatically gotten up and gathered around the table without me having to say anything. Mikey passed his baby to Diarah, and I took Gia from Bobby. I brought her over to Dia and laid her next to her sister. It was the first time

the two were able to lie together since they were born.

Diarah and I were alone in the living room, and no one could hear our conversation over the television. I bent down next to the recliner, at eye-level with the babies, and asked the question I was dying to know the answer to.

"What is the name of my daughter?" I asked.

"I will tell you, but you have to promise two things. One, you won't get mad. And two, you won't ask that we change it. You need to act like you love it, even if you don't. Got it?" she asked.

"I hate everything you just said," I replied, being completely honest.

"Her name is Veronica."

I could feel my head shaking before I even opened my mouth to reply.

"No. No. Absolutely not. No."

Veronica was my mother's name, and Diarah knew I was not her biggest fan. She cheated on my father, she purposely tried to terminate me, she murdered my twin brother, she disfigured my face and torso, and she killed herself because she was too weak to deal with the trauma she caused. Why on earth would I want my daughter named after someone like that? Someone I thought of as weak, amoral, and pathetic?

"It's already on the birth certificate. I'm not changing it." Diarah was adamant.

"Diarah…"

I could see a look of anger come across Dia's face.

"Michael, you have spent years hating a woman you don't even know. You judge everything about her based on small pieces of information you have heard over the years. Yes, your mother made some mistakes. But let's be honest—so have you.

"Yes, she cheated on your father with another man. But you did the same. You deserted me. You married Anja behind my back and abandoned me when I needed you the most.

"And you are so mad at your mother because she tried to abort you. But let's be honest here—I'm mad at you because YOU tried to abort you. Yes, your mother was too weak to deal with the mess she had made. But so were you. You were just a few days away from killing yourself.

"You are so ready to point fingers at her, but you are very much like her. This way that you're feeling? I believe this is just as much about you as it is about her. It's time that you forgive her and yourself. I forgive you. You need to forgive yourself."

I have never forgotten how I felt at that moment, as I cannot recall a time that I had been more enraged. I can honestly say I felt hatred toward my wife right then. I felt like I could have killed something with my bare hands. As small and weak as I was, I felt my rage rise, and I was worried that I would do something rash. I had to leave.

I ran out of the apartment, slamming the door behind me. I picked up my

running shoes off the bench and headed down the stairs. I slipped them on without tying them and started running down the street.

I was probably about three miles from home when I noticed Rex following me on his bike from a distance. He knew I needed to be alone, but he also wanted to make sure I was okay. I wasn't sure if that was his decision or Diarah's, but once I calmed down a bit, I somewhat did appreciate the gesture. I think he was also worried about me running in the middle of the night. It was close to 10:00 p.m., and it was quite unusual for someone to be running so late at night in early November.

I stopped at a park outside of town, sat on top of one of the picnic tables under the pavilion, and just began to sob. About 30 seconds later, Rex's 10-speed pulled up next to the table, and he, still sitting on the seat of his bike, just sat and watched me.

I was still crying when a police cruiser pulled up. Rex got off his bike and walked over to talk to the officers, whom he knew. I'm not sure what he told them, but within a minute, they drove off and didn't bother us again. The situation snapped me out of my funk and made me smile a bit, as it reminded me of that night, years earlier, when Bunny spoke to the police officers at Piazzale Michelangelo. Within minutes (and in a language that the officers didn't speak), Bunny had shockingly cleared up the situation, and the officers drove off.

Rex walked back towards the pavilion and saw that I had stopped crying.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked, very matter-of-factly.

"I'm sorry, Rex. Things are just a bit stressful for me right now. I'm just a bit out of sorts," I said.

Rex sat down on top of the picnic table with me and stated, "I don't think that's it at all. Don't take this the wrong way, but you're kind of a jerk, Michael."

I could feel my eyes widen as he said this to me. I looked over at him to see if he was kidding. He was not.

"I don't know. To me, it just seems that you're very unappreciative of all that you have. You have a wife who adores you. You have three kids who probably love you more than Diarah does. You have a great job as a doctor and do meaningful work. You have a nice place to live, food on the table, and a lot of friends who care about you. And now, you have two of the most beautiful babies I have ever seen.

"I'll be honest—I am not a fan of babies. They kind of remind me of potatoes. They're just little round blobs that sit there. Honestly, I have no idea why people gush over them. I do so much better with toddlers. But your girls? They're quite beautiful. And instead of just enjoying what you have, you'd rather sit here, wallowing in self-pity.

"Yes, Diarah told me that she wanted to name the baby Veronica and why she wanted to do it. Yeah, maybe it's not a great name. And maybe you even

hate that name. But, seriously, Michael, after everything that woman has done for you over the past year—how she basically raised you from the ashes, how she loves you for exactly who you are—you're really going to sit there and cry like a spoiled infant because you don't agree with her decision?

"I do get that you are probably the more passive one in your relationship, but in this case, right now, fucking man up already. This is pathetic. You need to deal with whatever is going on in your head and show some gratitude for all that you have.

"And let your wife name your daughter anything she wants to. Let her name her Bertha if it makes her happy. In the grand scheme of things, does it really matter, Michael?"

I took a deep breath and looked up at the beams in the ceiling of the pavilion. "I hate my mother. I hate her."

"Well, guess what? It's not always about you," Rex snapped angrily.

I glanced over at him, and he was staring at me in a challenging way. I closed my eyes hard and felt tears run down my face. I nodded my head in agreement.

He was right. I was being a jerk. I felt like a complete jackass.

"Okay. I get it. Thank you, Rex. I probably don't show it enough, but I do appreciate all that you do for me."

"Good, then, get your ass up because I am freezing and want to go home. You're making me miss the game, and I would like to see at least the last two minutes of it."

I got up quickly and started running back home as fast as I could. I was breathing hard by the time I reached the back steps. Rex pulled up right behind me, and when he dismounted his bike, I went up to him and hugged him hard. I kissed him on the cheek, something I know he was not comfortable with but let me do in the moment. He pulled me away from him, tousled my hair, and ran up the stairs two at a time so that he could catch those last few moments of the game.

I walked up the stairs and into the mudroom. I entered Pops' apartment behind Rex, gently shutting the door.

Diarah was still sitting in the same recliner, still holding the two babies. She looked up and glared at me, showing she was still quite upset about the situation.

She stared at me for several moments, not saying a word, and then screamed at me over the booming television, "Their names are Gia and Veronica, motherfucker. If you don't like it, you can go fuck yourself."

Everyone stopped watching the game. Bobby even muted the TV. The whole room was staring at me.

"Okay. Gia and Veronica. Okay," I said, nodding my head furiously in agreement.

I knew everything was going to be okay when Bobby unmuted the

television. At that moment, Gio woke up a bit disoriented from his very long nap and looked around the room.

"What did I miss?" he asked me, completely confused. "Are you okay?"

"I'm great," I replied, walking over to him. I leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. As always, everything was going to be just fine.

24 CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: 1991, BASTIAN AT 32/DIARAH AT 28 (BLUE DRESS)

I wish I could give you more information about the first month of Gia and Nica's life, but I honestly couldn't say.

It was a complete whirlwind. I know every parent must say this, but our lives consisted of caring for our five children's physiological needs and trying to carve out some quality time for Mikey, Nicky, and Delilah, as well as for our friends. We did our best to fit in cooking, cleaning, paying bills, and squeezing in work and school when we could. That's all I can remember. But it was, by far, the happiest month of my life.

If it wasn't apparent before, I realized how much love and support we were surrounded by. Everyone pitched in, even Rex, and we never had a shortage of people willing to hold the girls for a bit while Diarah got some work done or so I could spend some one-on-one time with the boys. It was the most beautiful insanity one could imagine.

The girls were about six weeks old when I received a surprise visitor. A family lawyer dropped by the house and asked to speak to me. I thought this was incredibly strange, as I had never seen this man before, nor had I ever needed a lawyer in the U.S. As I was chatting with him at the exterior door, Diarah popped her head out of our apartment.

"Ah, good, you're here! It's nice to see you!" Diarah said to the gentleman.

"Bastian, could you please take Mr. Reynolds next door to Pops' apartment? You two need to talk alone. He has some paperwork he needs you to sign."

Bastian. My wife rarely called me by my birth name.

For a split second, I felt as if I should have said no to Dia but decided against it. I had a bad feeling about the situation. Why on earth would I need to speak to this lawyer alone? Anything he needed to say could be said to both of us. I felt a darkness come over me and just knew that he had arrived to deliver horrible news. But I did as Diarah asked and quietly walked him over to Pops' place.

The apartment was quiet, and everyone seemed to be out. We sat down at the kitchen table, and without saying a word to me, he handed me a large manila envelope. I opened it and took out the several sheets of paper inside. Maybe it was the panic that had taken hold of me, but I looked at them over and over and could not understand what I was reading.

"I'm sorry. I am a bit confused. What are these?" I asked.

"Custody papers. For your daughters. It states that from this day forward, you get 100% physical and legal custody over Gia and Veronica."

"I'm sorry, what? I don't understand. It sounds as if my wife is divorcing me?"

I formed my statement as a question, trying not to get emotional.

The lawyer let out a small chuckle.

"No, she is not. Believe me, I, too, thought this was an incredibly odd request when she first contacted me. No, she stated that she wants to do this for you, as a gift to you."

"I'm sorry, I'm still not understanding," I said, still trying to decide if his visit was bringing me good or bad news.

"Diarah has stated that she is relinquishing all rights to the two biological children. In the event that the two of you divorce, she will not have custody of the minor children, and all parental rights will go to you. Here," he said, passing me a small pink envelope.

I opened it, and there was a single sheet of paper inside that said:

To me, it's the best gift I could ever give you.
They are yours, forevermore.
You can sleep well tonight knowing that no matter
what happens between us, you will never be abandoned
and all alone on this planet ever again.
I love you with all my heart.
--Diarah

I read and reread the note over and over.

"I— don't know what to say," I replied, truthfully.

"You don't have to say anything to me. I was hired to give you the paperwork and answer any questions you may have. Let me give you my business card. I would be more than happy to help you in any way I can."

I read his card. It stated that his name was Daniel Reynolds and that he was a family attorney.

"So, you are our attorney? I'm sorry, I've not heard your name before."

"No, your wife hired me to represent you and only you. I'm here to protect your interests."

I probably shouldn't have signed the papers right away--I should have taken some time to thoroughly scan them--but I didn't. I signed them and

handed them back to Mr. Reynolds. He stood up, tossed them into his briefcase, and quickly closed it and clicked it shut. He then reached out to shake my hand.

"Thank you for your time today, Dr. Aceti. Please call if you ever need my assistance. Have a lovely day."

And with that, Mr. Reynolds left.

I sat at the table in Pops' empty apartment for a few more minutes before going back to our place, as I felt very uncomfortable about that whole interaction.

I walked in the door of our apartment, and nothing was amiss. The boys were holding and talking to the babies, and Diarah was giving Delilah some one-on-one time. We all did our best to ensure that Delilah was not ignored, but we could tell that she was not pleased that two little people were getting some of the attention she felt she wholeheartedly deserved.

Early on, if we weren't always keeping our eyes on her, she would gently kick the babies or pinch their arms. She seemed to derive great joy whenever they cried. But after a few weeks, when she realized that the babies loved watching her and she now had a captive audience, she would put on little shows for the girls. It was quite sweet to watch.

Still keeping her eyes on Delilah, Dia asked, "Well, how did it go?"

"If you're giving me custody of the girls, I guess that means we're getting divorced," I said, trying to be funny, which, I found out quickly, was not wise.

Diarah looked up at me and playfully flipped me off. Delilah quickly followed suit and did the same, which made Dia laugh. However, Mikey didn't get the joke. He turned to me quickly with Veronica still in his arms and screamed, "You're getting divorced?!?"

This startled both babies, and they began to cry. Mikey then started to cry, prompting Delilah to scream. And then Dominic stood up and threw the book he was reading to Gia across the room. With one sentence, I had unintentionally destroyed the quiet, perfect respite of our home.

"Nice job there, sweetheart. Maybe you might want to choose your words a bit more carefully next time," Diarah said, shaking her head.

As my baby girls grew, so did my confidence. I tried returning to the clinic soon after they were born, but it no longer felt like where I belonged. I wanted to be home. I have an addictive personality, and I soon realized that I was completely devoted to my girls. I didn't want to spend one moment away from them.

I took six months off from work to be a househusband. Once Diarah felt well enough to start working from home, I took care of the babies on my own during the day. And several months later, I returned to the clinic, so we paid Duncan to help Dia with childcare during the day when the boys were at school. By the time Mikey and Nicky arrived home each day, Duncan's services were no longer necessary, as the boys were a great help.

However, the best change that happened during this time was that Dia never went back to working in an office again, as Louie was more than happy to let her work from home. She had a very nice little set-up in the corner of our bedroom and was able to get everything done there that she needed to.

As for my career, I was well on my way to obtaining all the necessary documentation and licensures to practice full-time (and legally) in the state of New York, and my patient list at the free clinic grew each week. I was incredibly lucky to have a wife who not only tolerated but encouraged me to keep my low-paying position. Louie's company, Muehlmeier, was my sponsor, and although I was earning the same hourly wage as Matteo, I was still only working part-time. In addition, I was still seeing private patients several days a week on my way home from the free clinic, and I will admit that I needed those patients far more than they needed me.

After working all day at the free clinic, I was drained, mentally, emotionally, and physically. My patients were dealing with issues ranging from chronic to terminal, and although I did my best to keep an upbeat, positive attitude for them, there were times when I would lock myself in the bathroom at the clinic and just cry. I did all I could for them, but so much of the time, I wish I could have done more.

Because the work could be so taxing, I tried to do things to help me get through the day. One major change was my wardrobe. I started experimenting with my clothing during that time, and I was surprised by how much joy it brought me.

For example, I once saw a very stylish man walking near the clinic wearing a black sweater and a plaid wool kilt with large black Doc Martens. I loved that look, and as soon as I got home, I asked Dia to help me find someplace I could get a kilt and those boots. Within a week, I had both, thanks to the mail-order catalogues that Dia found. Within two weeks, I had four kilts. She also purchased a few pairs of Lycra bicycle shorts for me to wear under them.

For a while, that look almost became my uniform. I occasionally got jeers and strange glances from rowdy teens as I walked down the street, but the way I felt while wearing them compensated for any discomfort the comments caused. It was like bringing a little bit of Bianca with me every day, and soon, all my patients and clients were very comfortable seeing me in "a skirt," as some of them lovingly called it.

Everything was going well for a while, and I was truly happy, but about six months after Gia and Nica were born, Diarah suddenly got ill. She was vomiting constantly and couldn't keep any food down. She became weak and dehydrated. It was bad enough that she couldn't even get out of bed to walk the three feet over to her desk to get some work done. This was not like Dia at all, and it was a cause for concern. I knew I couldn't ask Duncan to watch both babies while I took her to the clinic, so I kept both boys and Delilah home from school that day and asked Duncan to keep an eye on all of them.

I loaded Diarah in the car and drove us into the city. I am a horrible driver, especially in the States, but she was feeling bad enough to let me drive and not complain too much. She slept most of the way.

We got to the clinic, and I parked in the back, but she was feeling so dizzy and nauseous that she couldn't even walk to the front door. Some of my patients, as weak as they were, came over and helped Diarah get into my exam room through the back door.

It took a bit of effort to get her up onto the exam table. I couldn't believe how poorly she looked. I was just about ready to call for an ambulance to come get her when Matteo walked into the room.

"What do we have here? Wait… Is that your wife?" he asked.

"She's very sick, I'm afraid." I stared at Matteo. "I'm scared. I don't know what to do."

I wasn't just scared. I was terrified.

"Well, I'll tell you what you should *not* do. You should not be acting as the doctor for your family members. Let me talk to Dia. I'll run some tests. Go down the hall and take care of Benny in Room 3. He seems to be suffering from a sore throat, probably strep."

I opened the door to the room but stopped myself from exiting. I looked back at Diarah.

"Go, I said—go!" Matteo was gently yelling at me. "I'll call you back in a few minutes."

As soon as I was done prescribing antibiotics for Benny, Matteo found me in the hallway and called me back in. Diarah was asleep on the table.

"Well, I know what the issue is, and it's going to be a problem for a while."

In my mind, I started running through all the horrible, deadly ailments Diarah could have and started to feel dizzy.

"Congratulations! She's pregnant!" Matteo said quietly.

I stopped breathing for a moment.

"That's… not possible. That's not possible. We've only been intimate twice since the girls were born," I quietly admitted.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you. She's pregnant. I helped her to the bathroom, she peed in a cup, and I did the test three times. You're having another baby."

I stared at my sleeping wife, trying to think of a way I wouldn't have to tell her for a while. She was definitely not going to be happy with that news. She was still in a lot of pain from the effects of the first pregnancy, and she had only lost about half of the baby weight. Her kidneys had never fully recovered and were still not functioning well, either.

My God, she was still on the mend. Her incision was not even fully healed in some areas.

"Are you okay, Bastian?" Matteo said, grabbing my arm.

I could feel myself getting woozy. He guided me over to one of the stools

and sat me down.

"I haven't told her yet. She fell asleep almost right away. The poor thing is exhausted," he said, looking over at her.

He turned back towards me. "I know you're worried about telling her, but she's already been through it once. It's bound to be a bit easier the second time around. And she'll only have one baby this pregnancy," he said enthusiastically.

"Are you sure about that?" I asked.

"No, of course, I'm not sure about that. Let's pray that it's only one."

I looked again at Diarah. I couldn't believe that in that noisy clinic, she was able to sleep peacefully. It was a clear sign that she was truly sleep-deprived.

Matteo and I let Diarah continue to sleep on that exam table. It was not a big space, and I am not 100% sure how Diarah was able to keep herself stable on it for such a long period of time, but I suppose when you're that exhausted, you can sleep just about anywhere.

Even though I had an area out back full of patients waiting to see me, I did something very uncharacteristic of me: I made them wait. I needed to figure a few things out. I needed to plan the next steps for us before Diarah woke up. She was the head of the family, but for once, I needed to take the reins and make some real decisions. Dia needed to be taken care of for a while.

I was shocked when she slept six more hours on that table. It was almost 7:00 p.m. by the time she woke up, and she felt much better and was in much higher spirits. In that time, I was able to plan some solutions for our family, call some people for help and advice, and see just about all my patients. (It was not a busy day at the clinic, so Matteo was able to help me out by seeing a few of my appointments that day).

I had already borrowed money from Louie for the wedding and for my courses and paperwork for my U.S. medical license, but I had to call him once again to see if he would be willing to help us out just one more time. I felt ill about it, and I dreaded making that phone call, but I knew I had to. We needed some consistent help with childcare, and it could not all fall back onto Duncan. Terri continued to help where she could, but we were still just piecemealing it. But I was thrilled I had answers and solutions for us. By the time Diarah was fully awake, I would be able to tell her the pregnancy news with glee. Okay, maybe not glee.

Again, the next year was a blur. Duncan still stayed on as our primary "manny," but we were thrilled that Jahmir quit his two part-time jobs and helped Duncan with the kids. With the additional money that Louie lent me, I was able to purchase a used seven-passenger minivan so that Duncan and Jahmir would have transportation that could accommodate all five of our children as well as the two of them. That would be an absolute lifesaver. The

rest of the funds were used to pay Duncan and Jahmir's salaries for that year. This enabled Diarah to primarily concentrate on her work, herself, and the pregnancy. In the evenings, Bobby, Rex, Pops, and Terri would help as much as they could. It was an amazing effort by all.

As our family was growing and we needed the additional space, Diarah and Pops decided together that he and Terri would move downstairs. The engineering group was moving out of the storefront, and Diarah obtained the necessary paperwork to return the space to its original use as an apartment. For the renovations, they used the money that Pops had been giving to Diarah to pay for his rent for all those years.

The space was quite large, and by the time the updates were complete, they had a lovely home with a large, open living and dining space, a galley kitchen, two bedrooms, and one and a half baths. Enough money remained to turn the large bedroom upstairs that Rex and Bobby shared into two. The rooms were small, but at least they both had their own space, which they deserved. Mikey and Dominic moved in with Bobby and Rex and took Pops' old room. The kids were older and more mature, and even though they were no longer technically living with us, they were right across the hall. It was a much better situation for us all.

The second delivery went off without a hitch. Gio and Alessandra arrived three weeks before Diarah's due date and stayed downstairs with Pops and Terri, as they had the extra bedroom. They arrived just before the Christmas holidays, which didn't interfere with his clinic appointments, and it was quite nice to share that special time with them. I hadn't celebrated Christmas with Gio since we were both children.

And Diarah was completely different during that pregnancy. She was much more at peace with the whole situation and wasn't stressed about much of anything.

On January 2nd, we welcomed a baby boy named Wolfrick Bastian Aceti, named after my father. Again, that was Diarah's decision and not mine.

Wolf was the perfect baby, not nearly as demanding as his two older sisters. He was the type of child that had no issue with anyone holding him and would only cry if he truly needed something. So, because of that, I worried about him the most. For a while, I almost convinced myself that he had a cognitive insensitivity to pain. Leave it to me to think that something is seriously wrong when a child doesn't need constant attention.

Alessandra and Gio stayed for a few additional weeks afterward to help. It was during that time that Diarah and I both noticed that Alessandra and Gio's relationship seemed a bit strained. They did their best not to show it, but it was clear that things were different.

The afternoon before Gio and Alessandra were scheduled to fly back home to Italy, Dia asked Bobby, Duncan, and me to take the five children down the block for pizza so she could talk to Gio and Alessandra alone. I

will be honest and say that I felt a bit left out, as Diarah didn't want me there, but in a way, I understood, as Gio was her brother, too.

By the time we arrived home from our pizza excursion, Gio and Alessandra's dispositions had changed drastically. They were giddy, almost as if they had been drugged, and were acting very much in love. Clearly, I wanted to know what Diarah told them to repair their relationship that quickly. I didn't have to wait long to find out.

"I need to talk to you, now," Diarah said to me, very matter-of-factly.

She didn't seem happy or mad, just adamant. She was sitting with Wolf on the lounge chair in the living room. It was officially her spot, the place she preferred to feed the babies.

"Everyone else, out. Mikey, Nicky, grab the girls, will you? Bring them and Delilah next door for a minute, okay?"

Picking up Gia, Mikey said, "Are you mad at Papà?"

"Furious," Dia growled at him with a smirk.

"No, you're not! Silly mamma," Mikey guffawed, shaking his head as he walked out the door with Gia.

"Okay, I'm all ears," I said as I sat down on the edge of the lounge, facing her.

"Brace yourself," she announced. "I'm going to be a surrogate for Gio and Alessandra."

"Do you—," I started to say.

"No, no! You have no right to give any input. This is my body, and it's what I want to do for them. I love you with all my heart, but you truly have no say in this matter."

I stared at her and smiled. After a few moments, I whispered, "I think you are so amazing."

"You're okay with this?" she asked, a bit confused.

"I'm okay with this. I support you 100%," I said, meaning every word of it.

"Good. Thank you," she whispered back. The way she smiled at me at that moment, she looked incredibly beautiful.

And just as quickly as we started our magnificent moment, it ended with Delilah running back into the apartment, slamming the front door open. In her four short years, that little girl had broken numerous doorstops with her antics.

Gio and Alessandra came to the door but not into the apartment. They stood just outside the door frame, both with worried looks on their faces.

Diarah whispered to me, "Why don't you take them down to the coffee shop and talk to them about timing and logistics? They want your blessing."

I got up and kissed her on the top of her head. Within seconds, all six of our children were in our small apartment, and luckily, I was just able to escape with Gio and Alessandra before things became too crazy.

We sat at the back of the coffee shop and talked for over two hours. I barely uttered a word. I always knew that Alessandra was desperate to have a child, but I didn't realize that Gio was also terribly heartbroken after each miscarriage. I thought he was just being a supportive husband, but it was clear that it killed him a bit every time they lost a baby.

Six miscarriages. It's enough to put a heavy strain on any marriage. But at that moment? They were completely ecstatic. It was nothing but a blessing to witness their joy.

We decided together that the best time to start in vitro fertilization would be about six months from Wolf's birth date, as it would give Diarah's body time to heal a bit, but they wouldn't have to wait long to get started. In five months' time, they would return to the States to meet with an IVF doctor in New York.

Alessandra had no issues getting pregnant, but due to a uterine abnormality, she couldn't carry any of the pregnancies to term. That piece of information was crucial, and we were hopeful it would be a fairly easy and straightforward process.

And it was.

It was shocking, as the first embryo was implanted on June 16 with no issue, and Diarah was pregnant. There were still eight viable eggs, but Dia made it perfectly clear that they were to get "one baby and one baby only" from her. If they wanted other children, they were going to have to find another surrogate elsewhere. The entire pregnancy was uneventful, and Diarah said it was the easiest one of them all.

Alessandra ended up staying downstairs with Pops and Terri for the entire nine months, not wanting to go back to Italy with Gio. He didn't mind. I think he was just as thrilled as she was. He probably would have stayed with us for those nine months, as well, if he didn't need to get back to the clinic. He spent an incredible amount of money flying back and forth to the States each month to check on his wife and their child.

Diarah loved every minute of it, as Alessandra took very good care of her. For nine months, Dia hardly had to cook, clean, or do laundry. And it was incredibly nice to have the extra help, as Terri officially "retired" from her nanny duties. She would still come upstairs almost every day to see the kids, and she would take the girls downstairs with her for a few hours every now and again so that Diarah and I could get a nap or spend some one-on-one time with Wolf, but for the most part, we hardly saw her and Pops. They were finally enjoying their retirement together.

Without event, Gino Bastian Aceti was born on February 22nd the following year, and his parents couldn't have been happier or more in love with their child. He arrived a few weeks early and was a little on the small side, but he was in perfect health.

Gio and Alessandra were so appreciative that they allowed Diarah to

name the baby. She chose the name Gino for two reasons: 1) he would be named after her grandfather, as without him, she and I would have never met, and 2) it was only one letter off from the baby's father's nickname, and she thought it would be a hoot to say Gio and Gino.

The new family stayed with us for three months, until it was safe for the baby to take that long flight back to Firenze.

It seemed that from the moment Gino was born, Alessandra was a bit frantic about getting him back home to Italy. She worried about the flight and how a long trip such as that would affect the baby. She worried about getting all of his legal documents in order. She worried about what it would be like to be a mother all on her own without any help. She was terrified of just about everything, like most new mothers.

Two days before their flight, Alessandra went to Diarah with one last request—for me to fly back to Italy with them. I don't think it was so much that she preferred that I travel with them. She probably would have chosen Diarah over me if she could, but she wanted another doctor on board to help in case of an emergency. Alessandra was visibly distressed when the two spoke. But, of course, Diarah was happy to offer my services. She didn't even ask me. She didn't have to.

Happily, the flight back was uneventful, and it was good to have a third set of hands to help, especially with getting through customs.

I chose to stay in Italy for several days so that I could see my father and brothers. My father had always loved Diarah in a certain way, but in his eyes, she was instantly elevated to sainthood within the Aceti family after her kind gesture.

Flying back home to New York was strange. It was the first time I had travelled between Italy and the U.S. on my own, and, in theory, I kind of loved the idea of it. It was something that I never thought I would be brave enough to do on my own. However, that feeling of euphoria left the instant I arrived at the Firenze airport, and by the time I sat down in my seat on the plane, I was a wreck.

I had missed my family so much, and it was a bit stressful for me to be without my girls, but at that moment, the anxiety was excruciating. I had been busy enough over those past few days that I was able to keep my thoughts of them and my sadness at bay. But sitting on that plane, I realized how far away my three babies were from me at that moment, and it made me ill. I felt as if the plane was going to crash, and I wasn't going to see them again. I couldn't get any rest on that flight, and I silently sobbed against the small window next to my seat for hours at a time.

I knew Diarah would have arranged for someone to pick me up at the airport, but it was the best feeling in the world to see her and all six children waiting for me at the gate. The three younger ones let me hold them, even though I was still quite sweaty and snotty. The three older ones wanted

nothing to do with me until I had a shower, which made me laugh.

Bobby was there, as well. Diarah couldn't fit me and all six children in our minivan, so Bobby had to follow behind in his vehicle to take Mikey and Nicky home, but not before they had a little excursion to White Castle to get burgers on the way back.

As we pulled up to our home, I saw what appeared to be a new shed next to the fence. It was cute, and I immediately assumed it was for the various garden tools that Diarah kept in the basement. This shed was larger than most and was constructed out of wood, not metal. It also sat on a concrete pad, which made it seem quite sturdy. It was dark brown, with green and pink trim, and had large flower boxes hanging from all three windows. The overall look was adorable.

"That's for you," Diarah said, pointing at the quaint shed as we exited the vehicle.

"Really?" I asked, incredulously. I smiled at her. "You need me to do some yard work right now?"

"Something like that. Help me get the kids upstairs, then come down and take a look."

Once all three babies and Delilah were safely upstairs, along with my luggage, I took a quick shower, put on clean clothes, and then headed back outside.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs and stared at it. I was almost afraid to go in. I've never liked surprises, not even good ones, and I was feeling unsure about it. I attempted to peek in through the windows, but the curtains inside blocked the view.

I slowly opened the door and was astonished. Diarah had created a type of "playhouse" for me, filled with all of Bianca's items. The walls were a light shade of mauve, and there were light blue curtains on the three small windows. On one side was a pink, overstuffed, fluffy couch, and next to it was a clothing rack filled with Bianca's dresses and some new items I had never seen before. Next to that was a wig wall showcasing all of Bianca's wigs and headdresses. And, against the last wall was a makeup table with a large, lighted mirror. Both the table and the mirror were lovely but appeared quite old, almost antique, as if they had been used many times before. The floor was covered in a wonderfully hideous rug with a neon-coloured paisley pattern, and a small chandelier hung from the ceiling. A large wooden sign above the couch read: BI HIVE. It took me several minutes to understand that the "Bi" was the first two letters of Bianca's name. Bee-anca. Bee Hive.

Very clever, Bunny.

There was a small stereo on a little folding table next to the couch, with several of my CDs on top. I picked up one of my favourites and turned on the stereo. I turned up the volume, and when the music started, I quickly realized that Diarah had taken the time to connect and hang four powerful

speakers on the walls, one in each corner. Within mere seconds, I almost blew out all the windows of my Bi Hive.

Once the music was at a tolerable volume, I picked up the eyeliner and sat down at the makeup table. I was beginning to apply it when Delilah threw open the door with Diarah right behind her. It seemed that Dia had brought her into the Bi Hive previously, as Delilah took her shoes off immediately upon entry and placed them on the rack next to the door.

"Are we interrupting?" Dia asked.

"Yes, but you're allowed to," I giggled, trying to hold back the gigantic smile that I knew was across my face. It only got bigger when I saw Delilah had started dancing to the music.

Dia walked up behind me sitting in the chair, put her arms around me tightly, and nuzzled into my neck.

"Please tell me you love it," she whispered.

"I love it so much," I whispered back, looking at her in the mirror.

"I have another surprise for you," she said and walked over to the clothing rack that contained all of Bianca's dresses. She grabbed the only one in a garment bag and passed it to me. I unzipped it and audibly gasped. It was her wedding dress, dyed my favourite shade of periwinkle.

"After four babies, I will never be able to fit into it again, and Bianca would look so very lovely in it."

"Are you sure?" I whispered.

"Very. Take it down to the tailor's this week. Get it sized just for you."

"Shouldn't you save this for the girls?" I asked sincerely.

"Sweetheart, our daughters are going to be far too spoiled to want to wear their mother's old dress. Plus, I really want Bianca to have it. When I first picked it out and tried it on, I thought that it would look far better on her than on me. I would truly love to see her in it."

"Thank you," I said softly, gently touching the jewels on the bodice.

I paused for a moment.

"Not to sound ungrateful, but… Can I also get the shoes?"

She laughed. "Yes, of course. We will get them made just for you."

And from that day forward, if my family was searching for me, they knew where to find me. Just like how some fathers retreat to the garage and tinker around with their tools when they need some time alone, I would retreat to my shed and tinker around with wigs and make-up.

From that time on, I also allowed myself to be a bit more open about who I was. I started wearing black eyeliner just about every day, and I often included necklaces, rings, scarves, and earrings in addition to the kilts I wore. I was transforming before my family's eyes, but no one said a word.

It was as if they were waiting for the metamorphosis to occur.

25 CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: 1992, BASTIAN AT 33/DIARAH AT 29 (SWEETEST PERFECTION)

Over the next few months, life progressed on as usual.

Probably the biggest change was having to put Snickers down. He was 15, and everyone was heartbroken, but I think I took it the hardest out of anyone, including Diarah. Those four years that Bunny was out of my life were impossibly hard, but somehow, having Snickers with me, always nearby, made me feel as if a part of her was still there with me. Maybe that's why I didn't want to see him much that last year that I was in Italy, downstairs in my room, wasting away. It just hurt too much to have him around, so I all but ignored him, but I loved that dog very much and have missed him every day since.

The other major change to our lives was that Diarah had to give up The Prom, once and for all. No one was happy about that, but she was needed at home, and Duncan and Jahmir understood. The boys continued to live downstairs. However. Jahmir got involved with another band, which used the studio space downstairs for practices, and he gave music lessons during the day to make ends meet.

Duncan continued helping with the kids, which was a godsend to us, and he and Diarah continued writing music together. What I hadn't realized at the time was that they had amassed a collection of over 200 songs. Aside from helping Diarah clean up the songs, Duncan acted as their agent, selling them off one at a time.

I learned much later that they were able to get decent money for their music. In situations where they were able to retain their songwriter credits, they made a fair amount, but they were able to get quite a bit more from songs where they relinquished their ties to their music altogether. Until that point, I had never realized how many songs on the radio were supposedly written by the artist or band performing them but truly were not, no matter what the album liner notes stated.

If you were to ask Diarah or Duncan today about how they felt not having

the credit for their songs, they would happily tell you that it didn't matter. It was the money they were after, and it wasn't until years later that I learned exactly how lucrative it was for them.

Diarah continued to work for Louie, who was chosen to be godparent to all three of our babies, and I was still (yes, still) working towards my U.S. license to practice medicine. Between work and family, I didn't have enough time to study for the exams, but that year, I was bound and determined to pass them all.

The babies were older (Gia and Nica were three, and Wolf was almost two), so I truly didn't have any excuses. I was determined. I needed to provide for my family.

It was not easy, but I had passed all my exams by Christmas and secured a full-time position at the free clinic. Louie continued to act as my sponsor and paid the entirety of my salary. It felt amazing. It was a great time in my life, and being able to help provide for my beautiful, not-so-little family was a dream come true.

Diarah, too, was doing well in her career. She continued to work from home, picking up more clients as some of the older cryptographers retired or moved on to other companies, and Louie started paying her per client rather than per individual job.

I'm embarrassed to say that, at that point, I had been completely unaware of how much my wife earned. We, of course, had a shared bank account, and I could see how much was being deposited into it from her paycheque. What I hadn't realized, however, was that once I started working full-time, she began taking a third of her check out each month to put into a retirement account for us. Everything she did, every major decision she made, was for the betterment of our family, and most of it I never knew about until years later.

That summer was special as it was the first time I was able to go back to Italy with my family without having to work with my father and brother in the clinic. Let me rephrase: Of course, I worked in the clinic. Of course, I wanted to help in any way I could. The difference was that that summer, I didn't *have to* work there. I did it because I wanted to.

It was wonderful to go, as in the previous few years, I had to travel back to Italy without Diarah, but as soon as Gia and Nica turned one, I brought them with me, along with Mikey and Duncan. Mikey was a phenomenal babysitter, and the girls always listened to him. He still couldn't read very well, but he had memorized most of their favourite books, and the ones he didn't, he could fake it well enough to make them sound fairly close to the originals. He didn't mind changing diapers, kissing boo-boos, feeding them, or rocking them to sleep.

Duncan came along, but really, he wasn't needed. My father stayed in the house with Mikey and the girls most days so that Duncan could just go and

enjoy the month as a tourist. He would only need to fill in on the days when my father was working at the clinic, which wasn't very often.

However, that year, Diarah, Delilah, and Wolf were able to come, as well. Nicky had a girlfriend at that time, so he no longer had the desire to travel with us. So, Bobby, Nicky, and Rex had the whole upstairs of our home in Tarrytown to themselves while we were away.

My father and Renata planned an evening when the whole family came for dinner: Michele, Greta, Luciano, and Aida; Gio and Alessandra with Gino; Luca and his new Miniature Pinscher puppy (given to him by Renata, of course); and Diarah and me with our children. It seemed everyone arrived at Papà's place all at once, and the house was positively filled with joy and laughter.

However, Michele didn't seem himself that night. He was normally a bit quiet and reserved, especially compared to the rest of us, but that night, he barely spoke a word and looked almost ill, a very pale and sombre version of his usual self. He wasn't wearing the signature outfit he often wore to family functions—a dress shirt and tie. Instead, he was wearing an older sweater in the dead of summer, and his normally coiffed hair hadn't seen a comb in a while.

Diarah and I glanced at each other with a knowing look. I was about to go over to him when Diarah grabbed my hand and gently pulled me back.

She gently grabbed Gino from Alessandra's arms and said, "Hey, I need to borrow this gorgeous boy for a minute. Is that alright? Could you also do me a favor and listen for the girls and Wolf? They're all down for a nap."

Alessandra nodded her head. Dia thanked her, and she and Gino went over to Michele. I couldn't hear what she said to him, but when they started to walk outside together, Diarah motioned for me to follow.

We walked out into the courtyard and down the stairs to my old room. It was immaculate. I heard that Marta's granddaughter was now cleaning for Papà, and if that were the case, Marta trained her well.

"Here, can you hold him for a moment?" Diarah asked, holding Gino out to Michele. He took the baby and sat down on a chair in the corner of the room.

The baby was just so beautiful. He smiled a big, toothy grin for Michele as he took him, but Michele's expression didn't change. Nothing about his demeanour changed, and it frightened me a bit. It was not like my brother.

"Michele, are you okay?" Dia asked gently.

Michele said nothing and didn't look up. I started to speak, but Dia motioned for me to stop.

"Do you want to tell us what's wrong?"

Again, he didn't speak.

"Michele, you know we need to know what's wrong in order to help you," she demanded, a bit more forcefully.

The floodgates within him opened, and Michele blurted out, all at once, "You can't help me. It's too late. Everything's falling apart. I'm going to lose my family. I'm going to lose everything," Michele said, his voice quivering.

Diarah glanced over at me with a very odd expression on her face. It was a serious situation, but I wanted to laugh.

"Ohhh-kaay, that's— that was—um, a bit scary. Hey, I really don't know what you're talking about. We know there's a problem, and all we want is to help you fix it. So, you're going to have to tell us what the problem is. Okay? So, right now. Spill it."

Michele was staring at the floor, not responding. Diarah stomped over to him and picked up his chin in her hand with a bit of force.

"Damn it, Michele! What. Do. You. Need?!"

I was impressed. She was speaking to Michele in almost a harsh tone, but she still was somehow able to convey the feeling that she cared. Michele, on the other hand, looking confused and a bit scared, pulled himself together and spoke up.

"I was working for Greta's father until he retired about a year ago. I thought that maybe the change would be good—that it would be a good time to branch out on my own. I started my own firm, and... It was a disaster. I did everything wrong, and I lost my business. All of my clients. Months ago. I owe so much money now, and I don't know what to do.

"Greta somehow doesn't know. I keep telling her that the reason why we have no money in the bank is that there's a problem with the accountant I hired. And she believes me! Why? I do not know. I've never lied to her before. I feel ill every day not telling her the truth. I have about two more days before she starts figuring out how bad a situation we are in."

Diarah stared at him for a long while. She said nothing, and I just looked at my brother, who continued to stare at the floor.

Diarah spoke up suddenly, and it scared me enough to make me jump.

"Give me your bank account information, Michele."

"What?" Michele asked, completely confused.

Diarah yelled, "Give me your bank account information! Now!"

Still holding onto Gino, Michele quickly stood up, reached into his back pocket, and threw his bank ledger down at her feet as if it were on fire. Diarah picked it up and walked over to the phone.

She snapped her fingers at me and whispered, "Go get my purse from upstairs! Quickly!"

Diarah rarely barked orders at me, so I knew that in those few times when she did, I needed to take it seriously. I honestly could not remember ever running so quickly.

I returned to the room just as Diarah was starting a conversation in English on the phone. I handed her purse to her, and while rifling through it, she thanked Mr. Jarvis, who had just put her in touch with a representative

of Banca d'Italia. Within minutes, she transferred 50,000,000 lire (the equivalent of about $30,000) from one of her work accounts to Michele's.

"What did you do?! What did you do?!"

Michele's English wasn't stellar, and he could only guess what she did, but it was clear that he was torn. He didn't want her help. He didn't want her to make the bank transfer. He didn't want to accept the money, but he knew he had no choice. He was exhibiting an odd combination of anger and relief.

Diarah hung up the phone, walked over to Michele, and handed him back his bank ledger. For the first time in that conversation, Dia spoke to Michele in Italian.

"I need you to understand that that was not a gift. That was an advance on a job. You work for Louie now. You work for Muehlmeier, but for the time being, you will be taking direction from me. Do you understand?

"You have a job now, Michele—a good one. We will negotiate the rest tomorrow. I just want to enjoy today. Tomorrow, we are going to sit down together and get things figured out. Do you understand, Michele?"

I hadn't realized it, but Gio was in the room. He had come downstairs looking for Gino, who Michele was still holding. The baby was perfectly content to sit quietly and touch the rings on Michele's hand that was placed on his belly.

"Is everything okay?" Gio asked trepidatiously.

Diarah was still standing over the sitting Michele. They continued to stare at each other.

Not taking her eyes off Michele, Dia said, "Yup! All good!" a bit too loudly and then walked towards the door.

On her way out of the room, Diarah gave Gio a peck on the cheek and said, "That is one perfect baby," while motioning over to Gino.

As Diarah turned to ascend the stairs, we could hear her happily yell, "Bernard!"

He had heard the joyous commotion on the other side of the fence and came over to see us, and after talking to him for a few minutes, we could hear Diarah give him directions to go downstairs. Bernard and the three of us brothers stayed in my old room a bit longer, talking and playing with Gino.

After a few minutes, I glanced over at Michele. He was a different human being. His clothing was still a bit dishevelled, and his hair still needed that comb, but he looked happy.

The rest of the evening was wonderful, and it felt very reminiscent of our wedding. I realized, standing there that year, our family included 18 people. When I had left Italy five years prior, my family consisted of just nine. In five years, we had doubled in size. It was such a wonderful sight.

The next day, Diarah was all business. Greta and the children headed back to Milano, but Diarah made Michele stay and put him to work. Michele brought only one pair of pyjamas and one change of clothing with him for

the overnight trip, so he was forced to wear one outfit and launder the other each day.

By our fourth day there, Louie had shown up under the guise of doing business in San Gimignano, but I had suspicions that he and Diarah had other plans up their sleeves. That Friday, Diarah put Papà and Mikey in charge of watching Delilah and the three toddlers while I worked at the clinic with Gio. Diarah, Louie, and Michele left for a business meeting and were gone the entire day. It would be another year before I learned exactly what they were working on.

Throughout that month, Diarah split her time between the clinic, spending time with the kids, and working with Louie and Michele. I tried to coax Michele into divulging what they were working on, but he said that he had signed a non-disclosure agreement and was not legally permitted to discuss any business involving Louie or his company. It made me wonder what other projects Dia did for Louie that I was not aware of.

I did enjoy seeing the three of them working together, and I loved how much Michele was learning and speaking English. Diarah had it written into his contract that he would have to devote three hours per day to working with an English-language tutor, and his skills improved rapidly.

I think Michele knew more English than he had initially let on, and by the time we left at the end of the month, he was able to converse on a basic level with Louie. Sentences were sometimes missing words, and there were times that Michele had to use the present-tense version of verbs, especially the irregular ones, but he was able to speak English well enough that Diarah no longer needed to translate every conversation.

Even with as much English as Michele knew, and he knew quite a bit, I could tell that Diarah seemed to thoroughly and sadistically enjoy the small language mistakes my prim-and-proper brother made early on. Within the first month, Louie had Michele travel back to the States with him and Diarah for a series of meetings, and during one lunch, Michele's gaffes were the entertainment for the afternoon.

According to Dia, Michele ordered himself a root beer when he clearly wanted a draft beer. Diarah said nothing to correct him, and the look on Michele's face when he took that first sip of that sticky-sweet soft drink was priceless, according to Louie. And, in that same meal, Michele received apples on his cheesecake instead of chocolate syrup, as he kept pronouncing the word fudge as "fuji." But overall, anyone would have been thoroughly impressed with how quickly his English skills progressed.

But my absolute favourite part of that summer was watching the girls enjoy the courtyard. They swung for hours on Diarah's old swing set and swam in the pool until their fingers were wrinkly and puckered. And Papà even invested in a new trampoline, which got much use that month. They frolicked and played at my father's house in a way that I never could at their

age, and my heart would melt just watching them be children.

Wolf, on the other hand, was an old soul right from the start and just wanted to be inside with the adults. He would play for hours on my father's piano, having no desire to go run and frolic with his sisters. For such a young boy, he was very much a loner and reminded me much of myself as a child.

I was miserable being alone at his age, but he never seemed to mind it. It was probably because it was his choice to be on his own, a choice I was never given. Wolf enjoyed the tranquillity of just being with one of the adults, and he would sit quietly for hours, reading or colouring. Even as babies, I knew that I would never have to worry about Wolf, but that Gia and Nica were going to give me a run for my money.

I didn't know it then, but those summer months in Italy were some of the best of my life.

26 CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: 1993, BASTIAN AT 34/DIARAH AT 30 (THE LOVE THIEVES)

That following summer, Michele and Diarah were thick as thieves, and I won't deny that I was a bit jealous.

They were working on a project they seemed to love but couldn't tell me about. Usually, Diarah would proffer up a juicy story about work here and there, without mentioning any names, of course, but this time, no one would tell me anything, and I had to admit that I felt left out.

Michele would fly to the U.S. once every other month to meet with Louie and Diarah, so it seemed that their plans were moving along quite rapidly. But once we arrived in Firenze the following summer for me to begin my work at the clinic, I hardly saw my wife. She was spending all her time with my brother, and it was becoming more than I could bear.

The day before Gio and I were to begin our surgeries, I had had enough. I was always the more emotional one in our marriage, and that day, I will admit I completely overreacted as my wife and brother were in the courtyard, about to climb into yet another taxi.

"I want to know what the fuck is going on! I'm serious."

Michele and Diarah looked at each other and smiled.

"Let's bring him," she said.

"Today? Should we call Louie to let him know?" he asked.

"No. Call Sergente Amma. Tell him we're on our way," Dia said, without taking her eyes off me.

My wife looked at me with a smile so sexy that it took me by surprise. I had no idea where we were going or why the polizia needed to be involved, but I was intrigued.

We made sure the children were well supervised, and then we loaded into the already waiting taxi in my father's driveway.

Diarah and Michele were both making phone calls while we drove, so I sat in silence, enjoying the ride. The taxi pulled up to an open field near the airport where a large helicopter was waiting. I asked Dia where we were

going, but before she could answer, I overheard one of the pilots mention Sardinia. She glanced over at me and nodded, signifying that what the pilot said was accurate. We climbed into the helicopter, and I gathered immediately that it belonged to Louie based on how luxurious it was.

The three of us and the two pilots took the one-hour flight from Firenze to Porto Vecchio, France, which is on the island of Corsica. We refuelled and took off again, landing in Cagliari, Sardinia. The scenery on both flights was gorgeous, but Michele didn't stop working the entire time to enjoy it. Diarah was more interested in my reaction than in the scenery itself. It was clear that both had taken that flight before, probably dozens of times, so the view no longer had the same effect on them as it had on me.

We landed, exited the helicopter, and made our way towards a luxury car waiting on the tarmac. Again, Michele and Dia walked over to it without hesitation, as if it were part of their routine.

We drove for over an hour to a remote area of the island, turning onto a freshly paved road. Far up ahead, I could see a small building and a security gate. The town car slowed but didn't stop as the pole was raised and the guard waved us through. Houses, small and quaint, were interspersed along both sides of the roadway, and all the structures, including the street itself, appeared to be newly constructed.

At the end of the long road was a very tall chain-link fence covered with privacy mesh so that it was virtually impossible to see on the other side. The driver pushed a button on his visor, and the gate slowly rolled open. I was intrigued, but Michele and Diarah continued to act disinterested.

Inside the gate was what appeared to be a small but new police station within a large, gated parking lot. The driver stopped the vehicle, and as we exited, a police sergeant in full garb walked over to us. Dia greeted him.

"Sergente Amma! How are you on this lovely day?" she asked with all sincerity.

"Perfect! Just perfect! Things are coming along swimmingly."

Sergente Amma looked over at me.

"We have a visitor?" he whispered to Michele. It seemed Sergente Amma had only dealt with Michele and Diarah up until that point.

She spoke up. "This is my husband, Bastian. He's Michele's brother."

I leaned over and held out my hand. "Nice to meet you, sir."

Diarah continued, "Sergente Amma, we're going to take my husband up now. I think we're both excited to show him what's behind that gate."

She motioned with her chin to a gate at the far end of the property.

Sergente Amma, who seemed like an overall serious man, gave a small chuckle and told me, "You are in for a great surprise, my friend."

He then turned to Dia and asked, "Do you need a cart?"

"Michele will take one in. I want to walk with my husband."

She grabbed me around the waist as she said this.

"See you up there!" Michele said as he began to walk towards a group of at least 10 golf carts lined up against the far fence.

"No cars are allowed past that gate. The construction workers, movers, and delivery men can bring their trucks in, but that is it," Dia said as we began to walk towards the other side of the lot.

She reached out and grabbed my hand, clearly excited for what she was about to show me.

Diarah punched in a code for a small gate over to one side. As she began to push the door open, it looked as if the paved street continued onto the other side of the gate.

Upon walking in, all I could see were beautiful, small bungalows in various colours on one side and a line of condos on the other, all in various stages of construction. Newly planted olive and palm trees were interspersed.

Up behind the condos were small, lush green hills, so it was difficult to see what, if anything, was past them. However, as we walked up the incline and turned the corner, I took in one of the most beautiful vistas I had ever seen.

Straight in front of me, behind a row of larger homes, was what appeared to be a lagoon with the most crystal-clear blue water. Upon walking up the road a bit more, I could see that it was not a lagoon, as it had an outlet at the far end, but a private water area surrounded by a small peninsula that curved around to protect the waterway and the area. I walked up the path a bit further and could see the outlet about a half-kilometre away. A completely private oasis.

"Is that the Mediterranean?" I asked quietly.

Diarah squeezed my hand. "Yeah, it is. And it's all ours."

I took a step back. "What?!"

Just then, Michele drove up in his cart. "So, what do you think?"

"Wait—what is this place?" I asked, nervously looking around me.

"Well, for Greta and me, it's home. Maybe one day for you, too," Michele said, scanning the view with me. He got out of the cart and put his arm around my shoulder.

"Over there, that's my house. The concrete slab next to mine? That will belong to Gio. And that house right there? That is yours."

Michele tried to pull me forward towards the house, but I couldn't move. I was completely overwhelmed.

"Are you okay, Bastian?" Michele asked.

I looked at Diarah, terror bubbling up from an unknown place within me.

"I'm not sure I want this to be home," I whispered to her, being completely honest. It was lovely, absolutely wonderful, but I was having a tough time processing it all.

"I'm sorry. I'm a bit overwhelmed," I said to Michele, feeling woozy.

"It's okay, baby. It's okay. Let's just go in so we can sit down. Let's get

you out of the sun. You might be a bit dehydrated," Dia whispered as she gently guided me into the house.

We went through the entryway and open living area and out the back sliding doors. She sat me under a large umbrella on a wooden lounge chair with fluffy padding. Once I was situated, she came over and sat on the chair beside me, staring at me with a worried look.

Michele went into the house and emerged with a cold bottle of Pellegrino for me. I opened it and slowly took in the view. Down below the veranda I was sitting on was another deck, and then another deck below that. The one right below me consisted of a pool, already filled and looking quite inviting. Below was an area for sunbathing with an in-ground jacuzzi tub that could fit at least eight people. I just sat in silence, trying to take it all in.

I quickly glanced up at Diarah.

"What about my father?" I asked, a bit panicked, worried that he would be left all alone in Firenze.

"He and Renata will live in this house with us. There are two suites on either end of the building—one for them and one for us."

"What about the kids? What about Bobby and Rex?"

I was starting to feel myself panic, and my breathing was becoming more laboured. Dia could see me losing control.

"Hey, baby, there is space for everyone. It's okay. We haven't forgotten anyone," she said gently as if she were talking to one of our children.

I was on the verge of hyperventilating. It was gorgeous, without a doubt, but even while sitting outside, I felt as if walls were closing in on me. I felt trapped. Thoughts were racing through my mind—the clinic, the Bi Hive. I was feeling like I was about to get sick.

Diarah grabbed my face with both hands and touched her nose to mine.

"Hey, we don't have to live here. We don't. This can be a vacation home for us. We're still going back to New York. This…? This can be for later. Maybe for our retirement. So, please, don't worry. We're going home. Don't worry."

I took a very large breath and closed my eyes. I felt two big tears roll down my cheeks. I had no idea I was crying until I felt them.

"Oh, thank the Lord," I whispered to myself.

Dia looked at me and smiled, but I could tell that she was worried. She clearly didn't understand my apprehension, and she was frightened for me. I tried my best to gather myself for her.

"Come on. I'll take you back to Firenze now," she whispered, standing.

I took a deep breath and put on a small but fake smile. "No, no. Please. Show me the rest. Show me everything."

"Really?" she replied, looking a bit sceptical.

"Yeah, absolutely," I said, lying.

All I wanted was to walk over to the gate, get back into the town car, and

leave that place forever, but I stood up and grabbed her hand. I turned to face her and saw a building up on the hill on the other side of the street.

"What's over there?" I asked, doing my best to sound enthusiastic. I could make out a corner of a large, quasi-Greek-looking structure across the way, on top of the hill. It was quite similar to a small version of the Parthenon but with large sheets of glass between the columns and a large glass structure above.

We walked slowly back through the house designated as ours and across the small street. The road was just big enough for one large car or truck. We strolled up the walkway, and at the top of the ramp, I could peer through the glass doors and see what appeared to be a conference room with three large tables.

"This is for when everyone's here, so we can all eat together."

She opened one set of doors and let me wander in while she followed. Inside, there were two larger tables side by side. Each one could easily hold 20 people. At the far end of the room, there was a smaller version of the table made for children, with eight chairs.

At one end of the room was a serving station with an island and countertops all along the wall with cabinets underneath. There were two doors on either side of the counter, and both led to a chef's kitchen. It had every tool and appliance a cook could want or need. There was a very large pantry within the kitchen, about the size of our bedroom back home, with a large fridge. I walked through it all, saying nothing, taking it all in. Diarah and my brother had put a lot of thought into everything, and it was both beautiful and functional.

We walked outside, and it was the first time I saw the view from that height. It was incredibly gorgeous. We stood there for a few moments with Dia looking at me and me looking at the view. I'm sure she desperately wanted to know what was going through my head at that moment, but in all honesty, I didn't know how I felt about anything.

It was perfect there, but I felt like I was trespassing on someone else's property. I just didn't feel comfortable.

I turned and looked at Diarah, and she gave me a small smile. Without saying a word, she took my hand, and we headed down a small staircase that led to what appeared to be the basement area of the kitchen. She opened the door, and I could barely make out a corridor. It was very dark with only the smallest of windows around the perimeter. She turned on the lights, and as I glanced over to my left, I saw that the wall was made up of one large sheet of thick glass. The room behind that window was a large music studio, spanning the length of the dining room above it. There was a brand new, black baby grand piano, and on the wall behind it, 15 guitars were strategically hung, their placement almost seeming like an art installation. There were also two drum sets and two couches. It looked cosy.

Dia then opened a door to my right, and inside was a natural refrigerator. It was built into the rock behind the structure and was almost the size of our apartment in New York. It housed enough food and supplies to feed a large group for months.

We walked down the corridor and out the door on the other side of the building. As we walked up, I could see a small spiral staircase. She started to walk up the stairs first and motioned for me to follow. Above the dining room, a greenhouse spanned the roof. She opened the door, and it immediately became my favourite space there. It was the first spot she showed me where I felt surprisingly comfortable. The room was filled with large wooden boxes full of vegetables, plants, and herbs, and there were also big, overstuffed chairs in two corners of the room. It would be a lovely, warm, quiet place to sit and read.

As we started walking out the door and back down the stairs, I looked to one side and saw a very large bank of solar panels on top of the rock.

"That's one of four sets of solar panels. Another set is on top of Michele's house, one is across the roof of the condos, and the largest one is up at Louie's house."

"Louie wants to live here with us?" I asked.

She laughed.

"No, sweetheart, it's not ours. Louie is nice enough to allow us to live here *with him*. Louie bought all this land and gave us each our own piece. All of this was his vision."

Diarah looked at me with a smile. "Do you want to go see him?"

"What? He's here now? Yes, of course, I would love to see him."

I should have known that Louie's home would be amazing. We continued walking up the road, up a steep hill that curved around almost 360 degrees from that first gate. From our houses below, you would never be able to see his place, and I think that he loved that level of privacy. We were close enough yet far enough away from him. The road ended right at his driveway.

We were 20 meters from his entryway, a bit out of breath from the hike up the hill, when I saw the front door open. I was positively thrilled to see who was standing in the doorway. I ran up and hugged Fionna tightly.

"I am so very happy to see you here," I said softly and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Where else would I be?" she asked.

"Home? The city?" I said, smiling.

She patted my cheek. "Did Diarah not tell you? This is my home now. This is where I live."

She seemed very proud at that moment.

"This is Louis' house. My little apartment is out back. Would you like to see?"

Just then, Michele drove up in the golf cart and joined us.

"Ah, you've met my English tutor," Michele said in English. Fionna patted him on the arm and chuckled. I was shocked, and for a moment, I was a bit jealous that Michele had Fionna all to himself a few hours each day.

We walked through Louie's house, which, oddly, was an almost exact replica of his and Fionna's home in New York but without the amazing basement garage. In the rear of the house was a beautiful, private patio with a small pool and jacuzzi, surrounded by several lounge chairs and umbrellas. The garden was lush, adding to the sense of privacy. And on the other side was a long, narrow house that was very modern in style. Fionna linked her arm in mine and pulled me away from the rest of the group.

"I didn't enjoy those stairs back home, so when Louie asked me what I wanted, I told him it needed to be small and cozy and all one story."

While the others waited outside, Fionna showed me around. There was no official front door to her place, but two sets of double doors opened up into the open kitchen/living room area. Everything was very sleek and very organized. Like Diarah, Fionna did not enjoy kitsch, so the room was free of knick-knacks. Everything had its purpose.

Down the hallway, I could see a large bedroom with a new bed, one at a height that I'm sure made it much easier for Fionna to get in and out of. While scanning the space, I could feel one of Fionna's two cats rub up against my legs.

Bending down to pet the cat, I said, "Wow, you really are all moved in, aren't you?"

Looking around her new home with pride, she stated, "I'm going to die here. I love it so much. I've never been happier. Oh, I'll probably go back to the city for the summers—you know, to get my fill of culture and to see my daughter and grandchildren—but the rest of the year, I will be here. I'll certainly never spend another winter there. I'm hoping Louis won't, either."

I didn't respond to anything she was saying. I didn't know what to say. Fionna turned and looked directly at me, examining me for a bit.

"I get the feeling you don't like it here as much as I do."

"I don't do very well in new spaces, I suppose."

"I don't think that's it at all. I think you want to be where your family is. They're not here with you, and I'm guessing you're having a bit of trouble envisioning them here. I suppose that is why you were so happy to see me."

I stopped and looked at her.

"I was happy to see you because I am always happy to see you. You are one of my best friends."

"You have told me that previously, but I thought that maybe it was said for Louis' sake."

"No, I said it because it's the truth." I leaned in and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"But it's okay if you still don't want to move here right away. Don't make

any rash decisions. Give it some time. There's absolutely no rush," she said.

"It's gorgeous here, but you're right—it doesn't feel like home. Maybe one day, I will change my mind. But I love our life back home. I love everything about it. I feel safe there."

Fionna sighed. "I understand. But that is too bad… For me. I would have loved to have seen you every day."

I turned and looked at her intently.

"I promise I will visit you, Fionna. I promise," I said, meaning every word.

I peered out into the courtyard and saw Dia chatting with Louie. I walked over to her. She was in mid-sentence when I gave her the biggest, most passionate kiss I could muster. I then put my forehead to hers and touched noses with her.

With her eyes still closed, she drew a deep breath and whispered, "It's still a no, right?"

I nodded softly. "I want to go home," I whispered.

"Can't blame a girl for trying," she said as she opened her eyes and pulled away. She gave me one more quick peck and then looked at Louie.

"Okay, Lou, he's made up his mind. I guess we'll be returning home to New York after his clinic work. Are you okay with me handling things from there?"

"Michele will be living here with Fionna and me, though? Correct?" he asked, looking a bit concerned.

Michele, overhearing the conversation, chimed in.

"Greta and I will be fully moved in by the end of the month. The children have elected to stay behind in Milano."

Both Luciano and Aida were over 18 and old enough to stay in Milano on their own. However, with me still thinking of them as small children, I gasped when I heard that my brother was going to "abandon" them.

"Need I remind you that Luciano is 20 and Aida is 18 years old now?" Michele admonished me in Italian.

"I know. I'm sorry. I still think of them as babies," I said sheepishly.

We said our goodbyes to Louie and Fionna and slowly got into the golf cart. I stared one last time at that amazing view before we rounded the corner.

I couldn't tell what was going on in Diarah's head. Was she disappointed in me? Louie and Fionna gave us this amazing gift, and I turned it down. Diarah had spent all this time trying to make a beautiful home for us, for my entire family, and I was essentially forcing her to return to the States. I felt horrible. I was letting everyone down. Was she going to resent me for it once we got home?

We parked the golf cart in the charging station next to the police barracks and walked over to Michele's Mercedes, which was in the parking lot. Diarah asked me to sit in the back with her while my brother drove. We got in, rode up to the main gate, and watched in silence as it opened. She didn't say a

word and didn't look at me.

As we passed through the first gate, Michele waved at the officer manning it, then drove through the final security gate without slowing. Two security gates and one checkpoint to reach that little neighbourhood. I guess if Louis Muehlmeier is going to live somewhere, multiple security gates are a given.

As soon as we were on the open road heading back to the heliport, Diarah unbuckled her seatbelt and swung her leg over to straddle my lap.

With our noses touching, she whispered, "The only thing I want in this whole world is for you to be happy. You must know this by now. And if this is not where you want to live, I am okay with that. I promise. If anything, I think Fionna is far more upset than I am."

I started to cry. "I'm so sorry."

"Michael, I know why you don't want to live there. I know."

"Really? You know? Because I don't think I do."

Diarah got off my lap and sat back down in the seat next to me. She re-buckled her seat belt and leaned forward to ask Michele if he could turn the music on in the car up front. That was her go-to move when she wanted to speak to me privately in a car. Usually, though, it was reversed, with the music playing in the back of the car so the kids couldn't hear our conversation up front.

Once the music was on, Diarah turned to me and whispered, "Bianca couldn't live there. Not comfortably, at least."

I sat quietly. I didn't even look at her. She was right.

"I'm sorry, baby. I thought that maybe she could live there. And I suppose she probably could, on some level, but she wouldn't be free. I'm sorry that I didn't recognize that sooner," Dia said, stroking my hair.

"You're apologizing to me? You and Michele and Louie have been creating that haven for my family for over a year, and you are apologizing to me because I cannot bear to be without my gowns and make-up and wigs? I'm the one being selfish here, not you."

Diarah stared out the window and shook her head softly.

"No. You're wrong. Bianca is far more than just gowns and wigs."

She turned and faced me. "I wholeheartedly love Bianca. I adore her. I'm not losing her again, and neither are you."

I felt a huge twinge of guilt come over me. I closed my eyes tight and looked away. I could feel her hand on my chin, gently pulling my face towards her.

"I swear on my life, I am happy to go back home to New York. I've never lied to you, Michael. I'm telling you the truth. All I want is you, wherever that is."

I believed her. But I was still incredibly sad about the whole situation.

We flew back to Firenze and didn't speak of La Fine del Mondo again for the remainder of our month in Italy. Diarah didn't even work for Louie that

summer. She spent the majority of her time at the clinic with the girls, who were very well-behaved, content to play with any of the children staying with us, recovering. My father was more than happy to keep track of Mikey and Wolf, with Mikey playing video games most of the summer as Michele purchased the newest gaming console for the two of them.

I can't say that I didn't think about the sacrifice that Diarah was making for me. La Fine del Mondo was beautiful.

Maybe it would grow on me. Maybe one day, we would end up there.

27 CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: 1994, BASTIAN AT 35/DIA AT 31 (HAPPIEST GIRL)

At this point in Diarah's and my story, I was the happiest I had ever been.

I was just very content with every aspect of my life. Not much out of the ordinary occurred, and even with finally receiving my New York state medical license, I had no desire to leave the free clinic to start my own practice.

Over the years, the masses became more educated about AIDS, and my patients weren't being persecuted to the same extent as they had been. More and more doctors were willing to treat them, so I was thrilled that my patients began to have options. They were able to see specialists and receive second opinions when needed.

I continued working with that population and was thrilled to see fewer of my patients succumb to that dreadful disease. Information was being disseminated, and the gay community, overall, was taking it seriously.

In addition, I, of course, continued to treat Fionna's friends, and I, of course, never told my more affluent patients about my clinic work.

During this time, my children thrived. The girls continued to grow and blossom into young ladies, Delilah was still discovering who she was, and Wolf was my sweet, gentle boy. Everything in my life seemed great, with one exception—I hardly had time for Bianca.

Going into New York for the evening to go out with Jack and his friends didn't seem possible anymore, as I just wasn't able to get away for an entire weekend. Actually, that probably wasn't true. Diarah would have made sure I could go with Jack at least once a month if I had wanted to. But if I wasn't working, I just wanted to spend every minute I could with my family.

However, Dia noticed that Bianca kept being pushed to the back of my priorities and was concerned about it.

One afternoon, Diarah arranged for Duncan, Bobby, Pops, and Terri to take the children for the day. She chartered a large van, which brought them

to the Children's Museum of Manhattan, and after that, they were to head to Katz's Delicatessen for dinner before stopping by Louie's house to see him and Fionna. Fionna rarely came "home" to her place in the city, so everyone wanted to see her. And she would always make sure her housekeeper, Nora, stopped at the amazing Italian bakery around the corner to pick up Italian Spumoni cake, rainbow layer bars, and petit fours just for the kids. So, the group would be gone all day.

It was the first time that Diarah and I had been alone together in a very long time, and as soon as the gang left, she asked me to follow her down to the Bi Hive. I was a bit sad, as I hadn't been in it in weeks. When I opened the door, there were big shipping boxes everywhere. She motioned for me to open them, and I let out a small squeal. It was like Christmas.

The first box I opened had a teal green, floor-length dress inside. It was low-cut in the front, and judging by its size when I held it up to me, it was going to be quite tight. Another box held a beautiful wig of thick, black hair. I put it on quickly, and I could feel the ends touch the small of my back. I loved it. There were black strappy heels, a black shawl, and a black clutch bag, as well.

"Let's see—it's noon now. Why don't you go back upstairs and take a bath? You will need to do some serious shaving," Diarah said as she put her hand up my shirt and felt the hair on my chest. "You're leaving at 5:00 p.m. sharp, so go get ready."

"Are we going out?" I asked, staring at myself in the mirror.

"No, you have a date."

I turned and looked at her quickly. "What? I don't understand."

She walked up to me and gently kissed me.

"Time's a-wasting. Chop-chop!" she said, smacking me gently on the behind, not offering any additional information.

I spent all afternoon getting ready. I hadn't "seen" Bianca in a long while, and other than putting eyeliner on from time to time, I hadn't done any kind of care or grooming for her.

However, the hours of work I had put into myself that day were worth it. When I was finally dressed and ready, I stared at myself in the three-panel mirror and said, "Bianca, girl, you look good!" and nodded my head in affirmation.

Right at 5:00 pm, there was a knock on the Bi Hive door. I hadn't eaten lunch, so I was happy that we were going out for an early dinner. I pushed the door open and was taken aback when I saw Rex standing outside in the suit that he wore to Diarah's and my wedding.

I was shocked and ashamed, as I was expecting my wife to be on the other side of the door. Rex had never seen me as Bianca before, and for some reason, I was terribly embarrassed.

I put my head down and wouldn't look at him. As I tried to close the door

to the Bi Hive, I could feel him block it with his foot so it couldn't latch shut.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

I kept the door ajar only a tiny bit and let him speak.

"Diarah asked me to take you out tonight."

"No, thank you!" I sang as cheerfully as I could muster.

Rex put his face right into the crack of the door and spoke softly.

"Hey, Michael, I'll be honest—I initially didn't want to go. The last thing I need is for the guys in my precinct to see me out with some dude in ladies' clothes. But you look nice. I wouldn't even know that you weren't a girl. I'm not going to be embarrassed to be seen with you. I can't say the same for you."

He let out a small chuckle, finding humour in his own joke.

"Come on, I'm starving. I haven't eaten all day. Diarah made reservations at that fancy French restaurant near the university that you always wanted to go to. Let's go have a nice dinner, and I'll bring you home right after."

I stared at him through the crack in the door. He nodded hard once to let me know he meant it.

Terrified, I gently pushed the door open. He held out his hand for me to take, which I reluctantly did.

As we walked slowly towards his car, I asked quietly, "Why are you doing this?"

Rex stopped walking, turned towards me, and glanced away, deep in thought. He then looked back at me and appeared as if he was going to say something quite astute or poetic. But instead, he looked at me with big eyes and a small frown and gave a big shrug.

We both started to laugh, and I realized that maybe it was going to be okay.

We drove to the restaurant in silence. I had my black clutch, which I kept firmly over my crotch area, and my black shawl, which I kept tightly around my shoulders. It wasn't cold out, but if anyone had seen me at that moment, they would have thought I was freezing.

As we turned onto the street where the restaurant was, Rex pulled over.

"Listen, tonight, I'm a guy, and you're a girl. We're going to stick to our roles and not break character. Got it?"

I nodded my head softly in agreement.

He turned back towards the steering wheel and was about to pull into the restaurant parking lot when he stopped the car and turned towards me once more.

"Uh…what's your name again?"

I couldn't remember the last time I laughed that hard. I was doing my best not to have tears stream down my face, as I didn't want to smear my makeup. I had spent almost an hour on my eyes alone.

When I was able to catch my breath, I said, "Bianca. My name is Bianca."

"Alrighty, Bianca. Let's do this."

Rex took a big, slow breath and pulled up to the valet parking. The attendant opened the door for me and held out his hand. I took it as gently as I could, and he helped me out of the car.

As he shut the vehicle door behind me, he said, "Have a lovely meal, ma'am."

I couldn't tell if he honestly believed I was a woman or if he was just being kind. Either way, I felt great.

We walked up to the entrance of the restaurant, and the doorman held the large wooden door open for me. As I walked through it, he tipped his hat to me. It was the same with the maitre'd. There was no reaction from anyone. I scanned the restaurant, expecting people to stare at me like they did when I was with Jack and his friends, but no one paid me any attention.

The waiter came over and greeted us, handing us our menus. He also handed the wine list to Rex, who had no idea what to do with it. As the waiter walked away, he passed the wine list to me over the candle on the table, almost lighting it on fire. Yes, I was a man in a beautiful gown and makeup in the fancy French restaurant, but Rex was the one who seemed uncomfortable.

One of the first idioms I learned right after I arrived in the U.S. was "a bull in a china shop." The only time I had used it previously was describing Delilah in, well, anywhere that wasn't home. She barrelled her way through stores and restaurants, never looking where she was going, often knocking things over.

At that moment, the idiom fit Rex perfectly. He knocked his knife off the table and spilled water everywhere. He was a nervous wreck.

"If you are embarrassed about being seen with me, we can go," I whispered over to him.

He squinted angrily at the menu and mumbled, "Sitting here with a guy in drag is the least of my worries right now. I can't read a damn thing on this menu."

"Hey, Rex, it's okay. I'll help you get through this experience, and you will help me. Deal?" I whispered.

At full volume, he replied, "Your job is going to be much harder than mine, but hey, it's your funeral."

I translated the menu for Rex, as for some reason, it was entirely in French. He was able to choose at least one item that, as he said, "sounded moderately edible."

After we ordered, I looked over at Rex, and he was staring at me. It made me feel uncomfortable, and I looked away.

"How do you know how to do all of that girl stuff?" he asked, entirely too loud.

In a much quieter tone, I responded, "Diarah and I have been playing

dress-up for many years."

"Your wife thinks you're hot when you dress like a girl."

"Yes, that is true. She is attracted to Bianca," I replied with a small smile.

He sat and stared at me again. "You two are freaks."

I smiled. "Yes, we are."

"So, how do you know how to speak French?" Rex asked, seemingly truly interested.

I sat up a bit in my chair, very much enjoying that topic of conversation.

I picked up my glass of wine and said, "Interestingly enough, the lexical similarities between the Italian language and French are considerable. I would say about 90%. However, even though our languages are similar, we cannot readily understand each other when speaking. The problem is mainly due to the large differences in syntax and pronunciation."

I glanced over at Rex when I finished speaking. He was staring at me with a scowl.

"You and Diarah talk to each other like that all the time, don't you?" He looked away and chuckled. "You two were made for each other."

Shockingly, Rex and I had a lovely evening together. Once we got over the initial worry of being discovered, we were able to enjoy each other's company. We ate course after course, including dessert, which I almost never have. The meal was amazing, and the conversation was even better.

I could see what Diarah saw in him. He often came across as quite uneducated and rudimentary, but that was not the case. I believe it was very much a façade. In addition, Rex was handsome in a rugged sort of way, and if you did a bit of searching, it wasn't too difficult to find topics that he would discuss for hours.

The waiter came with the bill. I glanced across the table and could see that our meal had been expensive—very expensive. I hadn't brought any money with me in my clutch, and of course, my wallet was back at home.

A bit frantic at this realization, I whispered, "I'm sorry, Rex. I have no funds on me. I will pay you back."

Rex scoffed, looking at the bill while taking money out of his wallet.

"Do you think I am paying for this? Not a chance. Your wife gave me more than enough money to cover this."

I smiled, thinking that, of course, Diarah would make sure I was taken care of. She always made sure I was taken care of.

As we exited the establishment, again, no one let on that I was a man. It was a great feeling.

Rex and I drove home mostly in silence. As we pulled up to the parking lot behind our home, he said, "Shall we do this again next month?"

I gasped just a bit. "Really? You wouldn't mind going out with Bianca again?"

"No, not at all. I had a nice time tonight."

"Yes, Rex, thank you. I would love to go out with you again."

He put the car in park, turned it off, and looked over at me. I silently mouthed the words "thank you" and felt tears well up in my eyes.

Rex grabbed the back of my neck, pulled my face towards him, and planted a huge kiss on my forehead.

"Great, it's a date!"

He got out of the car, slammed the door, and walked straight to the stairs. He didn't open my door for me, nor did he wait for me to get out of the car. We were back home. We were both men again.

I walked to the Bi Hive, turned on the small chandelier, and closed the door behind me. I twirled several times. What an amazing night.

I took my wig off first and put it on its nail on the wall. Then, I got out of my dress and hung it up. I sat and looked at it, thinking how amazingly lucky I was to have a friend like Rex.

Diarah walked in, and without saying a word, lay down on the couch, grabbed my wrist, and pulled me on top of her. She hugged me tightly for what seemed like hours. I was so blissfully happy.

At that moment, I truly had everything I ever wanted.

28 CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: 1995 BASTIAN AT 36/DIA AT 32 (IT DOESN'T MATTER)

That summer, we all travelled to Italy together.

I worked with my brother, doing surgery after surgery until late in the day, and Diarah spent time with the kids. It was the first year that she didn't help in the clinic.

I used some of the money I made in New York to hire three employees for that month: a secretary, a custodian, and a cook. I honestly thought I was going a bit overboard by hiring three workers to take over the jobs that only one person, Diarah, would usually do, but after the first day, it was apparent that all three were needed.

I don't know how Dia did it. She would usually do all the clinic work during the day, and then, in the evening, do the work she needed to get done for Louie. But that was my wife. She could do anything she set her mind to. Just tell her that she cannot do something—that it would be overwhelming or difficult for her—and watch her go. I have seen Louie employ this tactic on her from time to time, as well, so I know I'm not the only one privy to that piece of information. I think the only one who doesn't know it is Diarah.

On our way back home to New York, Dia told me that it was the best summer of her life. She spent more time with her children than she had ever before, and she asked not to be assigned any projects from Louie during that month. She devoted all four weeks to the kids, and she was the calmest and happiest I had ever seen her. And for the first time since she was born, Gia ran to her mother instead of me when she needed something. It was an absolute pleasure, and I was so grateful that Diarah had that time with all six of her children, as the eight of us would never be all together in Firenze again.

Two months after that perfect summer, late one afternoon that fall, Diarah took the girls to the salon to get their hair trimmed. She loved that the twins wanted to let their hair grow as long as it could, as she was not able

to do so when she was their age. However, Delilah had just turned nine and enjoyed being a bit more in boy mode. She had no desire to keep her curly hair long, as it required a lot of effort to properly care for it.

When Delilah told me she was going to get it cut short, I tried to convince her to keep it long, as her curls were just so beautiful. However, Dia quickly made me realize that I was doing the same thing to Delilah that her mother did to her years ago—Dia wanted it long, and her mother cut it. Delilah wanted it short.

Dia was very effective at making me see the error of my ways, and we both agreed that Delilah could have her hair however she wanted it.

Diarah and the girls had just left for the salon 10 minutes prior when Nicky came into the living room where I was reading a book to Wolf.

"I don't think Mikey is feeling well."

"Where is he?" I asked, not looking up from the book.

"He's in our room, but he's not waking up."

I quickly looked up and saw that Dominic was serious.

I lifted Wolf off my lap and placed him on the ground, hard, and I ran over to the adjacent apartment. Mikey was in his and Nicky's room, lying on the floor on his stomach. I tried to wake him gently. No response. I rolled him over and checked for a pulse. None. I listened for a breath. None.

I immediately started chest compressions and yelled for Nicky. He wouldn't come into the room. No other adult was upstairs—I was on my own. I had to get to a phone. I couldn't stop the compressions, but I didn't have a way to call for help, either. I finally got up and ran to the phone cradle. No phone. I ran next door. Nicky was sitting with Wolf. They both looked terrified.

"Nicky, find the phone! Now! Right now!"

I ran back over to Mikey, who was still on the ground. For what seemed like an eternity, I was doing chest compressions on my own. Finally, Nicky walked back into the room, crying, holding the cordless phone. I snatched it from his hand and dialled 9-1-1. Before the operator answered, I instructed Nicky as calmly as I could to take Wolf back next door.

"9-1-1, what is your emergency?" was the voice from the other end of the line.

And I froze. I couldn't remember any English. I didn't know what to say. My language skills had failed me at that moment.

"9-1-1? What is your emergency?" the voice repeated.

"I need help. Please send an ambulance," was all I could muster.

"What is the address, sir?"

Oh, fuck, what is our address? I don't know. I don't know.

"Um, um, we're on Main Street. Main Street. 1000 North Main Street. Tarrytown. Please hurry."

"An ambulance has been dispatched, sir, but I am going to need more

information."

"I am doing chest compressions. I believe my son has had a heart attack."

"How old is your son, sir?"

Shit. How old is he now? Mentally, he's about six. Physically, I don't know.

"Um, I don't know. I think he's around 40. I don't know. I don't remember. I can't talk anymore. I need to give him my attention. Please come fast. Please!"

And with that, I put down the phone. I could hear the operator continue to speak to me, but I ignored her. Come on, Michael. Please, Lord. Mikey, do not die on me.

I heard the distant sound of a siren. Help was on the way.

"Hold on, Mikey. They're coming," I said softly.

My arms were aching. Please hurry. I picked up the phone again and spoke to the operator.

"Please tell the paramedics that we are upstairs. The stairs are in the back."

I put the phone down again. Within seconds, I could hear the sound of big, heavy boots coming up the stairs.

"Here! We are in here!" I screamed.

The boots were coming closer.

One of the paramedics put his hands on my shoulders. "We'll take it from here."

I didn't stop the compressions on Mikey. I had to get him breathing.

"Sir, it's okay. We've got it."

I stopped, and the first paramedic took over. I was exhausted and started to cry. It took all my effort just to stand up.

They worked on Mikey for several minutes, using the paddles on him repeatedly.

And then I heard it. The small bleep of a heartbeat. On one hand, I was thrilled. It was a weak heartbeat, but it was there. On the other hand, I didn't know how long he had been without oxygen. I didn't want to think about it. I closed my eyes and felt hot streams of tears run down my face.

Once Mikey was somewhat stable, the paramedics loaded him onto a gurney and carried him down the outside stairs. It was at that moment that Diarah walked up the side path. She looked over in horror and ran to Mikey, knocking over Gia and tripping over her on the way to her boy. Diarah had stepped on Gia's hand, and she screamed in pain, but Dia paid her no mind.

Diarah looked up at me and screamed over and over, "What happened?! What happened?!"

I couldn't answer. I was in a daze.

She climbed up into the ambulance with Mikey and yelled at me to get the girls. Delilah, Gia, and Nica ran up the stairs to me, and I bent down to hug them. We were all crying as we watched the ambulance pull away from the

house.

I walked inside with the girls and saw Nicky crying on the couch.

"I'm sorry, Papà. I should have told you sooner. I just thought he was sleeping," Nicky cried softly in between gasps. He was visibly shaking.

I sat on the couch next to him and pulled all five children in for a big hug. I held them tightly, rocking them gently. All had stopped crying, but all were still upset. They each took turns asking me about Mikey, but I said nothing. I couldn't speak. I had nothing left in me to give them right at that moment.

The paramedics were able to get Mikey's heart started again, but he never recovered. He slipped into a coma and never woke up. After a week of being by his side day and night, Bobby and Diarah agreed to let Mikey go. They would turn off the machines, but not before his organs were donated.

It was of little consolation to Diarah to learn that Mikey had a heart defect that was never diagnosed. Nothing could have been done to save him. But to this day, Dia blames herself. It was one thing for Mikey to die, but for her not to be there when he needed help was what hurt her the most.

Every night for months afterward, she would silently cry alone. I would notice tears rolling down her cheeks while she was cooking in the kitchen. I could see her crying from our upstairs window as she walked to the park across the street from our home to get some fresh air after the kids had gone to bed. She did her best to shield everyone from her pain.

Something about Mikey dying changed me, too. I became anxious all the time. I hardly ever slept. I would stay up all night checking on the children or sitting next to their beds, listening to them sleep. Even when I did doze off, I would wake up with a start, completely disoriented.

Diarah wasn't sleeping much, either. For months, we were both going through the motions of our everyday lives, shells of ourselves, and we had to rely on Bobby, Rex, and Duncan to step in and help take care of our children.

Thanksgiving came and went. Terri and Pops offered to host Thanksgiving dinner downstairs and to do all the cooking, but Diarah chose to officially cancel it, having us all eat hot dogs and frozen tater tots for our only meal that day.

By mid-December, things hadn't changed much. Diarah poured herself into her work, and I took some time off from the clinic to be with the kids, helping them get ready for school in the morning, picking them up afterward, doing their homework with them, making dinner, and getting them ready for bed. If it were under any other circumstances, I would have loved it, but knowing that Diarah was just all alone, removing herself from her children and me, made each day a chore. My heart hurt for her, for all of us.

It was late one evening, about a week before Christmas, just after I put the kids to bed, when she came into the room and hugged me. A big one. She said nothing. She just wrapped her arms around me and held me tight for a long time. We were standing, but I gently rocked her back and forth,

and I could feel her start to fall asleep in my arms.

She woke herself several minutes later by taking one big, deep breath. She blinked her eyes several times to get her bearings and looked up at me.

"I need you to do me a big favor."

"Anything," I said, and meant it.

"I need you to sleep next door tonight."

I stared deep into her eyes.

"No, baby. Why?" I whispered.

I was confused and could feel my eyes start to well up. I finally had a loving moment with my wife, and she put up another barrier between us.

"It's not a bad thing, Michael. You need sleep, and I need sleep. I feel horrible, and I know you do, too. I just want to try something, just for tonight. Please, will you do this for me?"

She looked like she was about to cry, too, but her reaction was from sheer exhaustion.

"Okay," I mouthed, not wanting to say the word out loud.

It wasn't okay with me. We needed each other, and I felt that my going next door was putting a chasm between us. I loved sleeping in the same bed as her. In her deepest sleep, she would always reach out for me, even during our toughest times. She always did.

I was already in my sweats, so I grabbed my robe and walked through our door to Rex and Bobby's place. Their apartment was dark except for the one small reading light coming from Rex's bedroom.

Nicky no longer slept in the room he shared with Mikey. Who could blame him? He returned to the bunk bed still in the corner of the living room in our apartment, and Bobby took the vacant bedroom. It was late, but Bobby still hadn't returned home from the city.

Rex was in bed reading. He glanced up at me over the rims of his glasses.

"Hey, I'm glad you're here," he said, sounding like he meant it.

"I'll just clean off one of the sofas," I mumbled, looking over at the three couches in the living room, all of them covered with various pieces of clothing, fast-food containers, and newspapers.

"Nope. I got orders from the boss. You're in here with me."

"I'm sleeping in your bed with you?" I asked, not particularly pleased with that decision made for me.

"Yup. Come on, my bed is big enough, and she doesn't want you to sleep alone tonight."

I was about to say something, to protest in some way, but I was just too exhausted to put up much of a fight. Rex scooted over to one side, and I climbed into his bed. I was so exhausted that I didn't even remember what happened next.

Before I knew it, Rex's alarm had gone off. It was a loud, obnoxious noise that startled me awake. It was a horrible way to wake after such a nice night

of decent rest. I looked over at Rex, who was sitting on the edge of the bed with his back to me.

"Good morning. Thanks for letting me stay last night."

"You should be feeling at least a bit better. You fell asleep almost immediately."

He turned his head slightly towards me. "You didn't fully wake up once."

Fully wake up?

Before I could respond, we heard a knock at the front door. Diarah was already in the apartment, having done her usual knock as she entered. She poked her head around the doorway and saw that I was still in bed.

She looked amazing. She had her long hair down all around her, something she hadn't done in weeks, preferring to keep it in her usual tight bun.

She ran into the room and jumped on me, to which Rex replied, "That's my cue to get up."

"How are you?" I asked her.

"How am I? How are you?" she responded. "Did you sleep?"

Before I could respond, she said quickly, "Please tell me that you slept. Even if you didn't, tell me that you did. Did you?"

I laughed. She seemed 10 years younger. I gently stroked her hair.

"I did. I actually slept very well. I take it you slept, too?"

She smiled and closed her eyes. "I feel good, Michael. I almost feel guilty for saying it, but this is the best I've felt since Mikey died."

Dia opened her eyes and looked at me.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry I checked out. That wasn't fair to you or the kids. I'll do better. I promise. I'll do better."

I lifted my head up off the pillow and kissed her quickly on the lips.

"I love you," I said.

She bent down, kissed me deeply, and said, "I love you more."

She smiled and gave me one more quick peck.

"Come on. Help me make breakfast."

She got up off me, stood up, and held out her hand for me to grab, which I did.

We were going to be okay. Thank the Lord, we were going to be okay.

29 CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: 1996 BASTIAN AT 37/DIA AT 33 (SOOTHE MY SOUL)

It was just after my 38th birthday that my anxiety hit a level that I can only describe as "sky-high."

I learned later that Diarah had me sleep in Rex's bed that night, months prior, as I was experiencing night terrors. I had no idea.

For weeks after Mikey died, I would keep Diarah awake half the night with my screaming and kicking. I was a physician, but up until that point in my life, I had never heard of an adult experiencing night terrors. It concerned me, as I knew that it was probably tied to major psychological trauma.

Yes, a person that I had come to know and love as my son had died, but I also felt it had to be more than that. I was keeping a lot repressed. I didn't want to start digging my past up, knowing that it would irrevocably change me, my life, and my family. I was terrified of knowing, terrified of everything changing. It was just safer to stay stagnant, which, to me, represented safety.

Diarah was nothing but kind and supportive. She reminded me that in those past seven years, I was dealing with the death of my "child," two weddings, four babies (including Gino), two other children, two jobs, earning my license to practice in the U.S., friends, responsibilities at home, the clinic each summer, and truly embracing and making time for Bianca. That was a lot in seven years for anyone, no less someone who came from depression, drug use, and the brink of death.

Diarah gave me everything I ever asked for, but in hindsight, maybe she shouldn't have. In her attempt to make me "ridiculously happy," as she liked to call it, I became overwhelmed and felt unworthy and inadequate as a husband and a father. But God bless her, all I had to do was merely state that I wanted "x," and she would move mountains to ensure that I got it, whatever it was.

In addition, I was becoming concerned about the health of our marriage

and family at that time. I never shared this with her, and I don't know why. On one hand, Diarah and I had the best relationship of any couple I had ever known—I felt like I could talk to her about anything—but sometimes I wondered if what we had was a real marriage.

Without a doubt, I knew she loved me with all her heart and would often be affectionate, but it often felt the same as it did during our summers together as children in Italy. She never initiated sex, but I could understand why. I was very hot and cold when it came to intimacy, and when I was more in my girl mode, I was very much asexual.

So, yes, she waited for me to indicate that I wanted to be physical before approaching me. However, Diarah never pushed me away when I wanted affection, which I loved. Anja was the opposite. My first wife rarely did anything but push me away, so if Diarah ever started to do the same, I don't know how I would have handled it. Luckily, I never had to find out. She could be cold, but never to me.

And I knew that she loved our kids, but she wasn't the kind of doting mother that I was expecting her to be. If anything, that was me.

I was torn. I was scared to know that I couldn't define our relationship, and I was mad at myself for constantly trying to tick a box. I was truly content. Why was I always so adamant about attaching a definition to everything? It had almost become an obsession for me, and I was frustrated that Diarah seemed to do everything in her power to avoid defining anything. Was I jealous that she cared so little about what people thought? Or was I embarrassed? For years, I truly did not know.

Professionally, though, my life changed drastically, and I was truly happy. I had been offered a part-time position at a private practice as an Assistant at Surgery to a well-known and respected plastic surgeon. The job was well below what I had been trained to do, but I was glad for the experience. I had no desire to start my own practice. I didn't want to oversee staff, I didn't want the pressure of building a business from scratch, and I didn't want to worry about lawsuits or the expense of the various types of insurance that would be required.

Shortly after I started, I was able to be the surgeon that I wanted to be without all the headaches. I was the lead on most of the procedures, as the physician I worked for was in his early 60s with a fairly substantial drinking problem. Most of the time, his hands would shake so badly that he couldn't possibly perform any kind of surgery.

I wasn't about to judge. I had my own vices and addictive behaviours. I certainly wasn't going to condemn this poor man. His staff knew about his issues and kept quiet, and they were aware that he was not participating in the surgeries. It didn't seem to matter. I was unsure whether this meant his staff was trying to protect him or just didn't care. I never knew. However, one benefit was that he compensated me very well for any surgery where I

took the lead. As far as I was concerned, it was a win-win.

The part-time aspect of that position also allowed me to keep working at the free clinic, my real love. I continued to treat members of the gay community, which I felt I was a part of, despite being married with a family. I understood that as their physician, I needed to maintain a professional distance, so I wouldn't allow myself to associate with them outside of work. But going to the free clinic a few times a week allowed me the opportunity to immerse myself in that community, which I truly loved.

It sounds strange, but having the kind of wardrobe that allowed me to wear what I wanted to each day benefitted my mental health tremendously. I was passionate about having my clothing express the real me, and finding a true balance between what I wanted to wear and what was proper to wear was of utmost importance. I still wore my kilts to the clinic, but I had to be a bit more conservative at the private practice.

Diarah ordered a selection of wool and polyester tartan fabrics and had a local tailor make me beautiful plaid pants that I would pair with a black dress shirt, vest, and tie. I have to give the tailor credit, as he cut those pants to my exact specifications.

At that time, the style for men was not to have their suit pants tapered as much as I asked for, but by the time he was done, I think even Luca would have been impressed with the fit. I was thrilled. I couldn't wear makeup to work, but I could express myself through my clothing and fashion choices, which I loved.

In addition, twice a year, Diarah and I would make a trek down to the garment district in the city and visit the Indian clothiers. She would buy me heavily embroidered suit jackets with big buttons in wild colours. My favourite one was a black bandhgala blazer with intricate flower detailing around the collar and jacket hem. It was lovely, and although it didn't make me feel as good as I did when I was in girl mode, I did like the way I looked. I will admit that I got curious glances on the train into the city from time to time, but I didn't care. I'll give my wife credit—she knew my style.

Any person looking at my life would think that I had it all, yet I would often experience these major bouts of depression that would bubble up out of nowhere. I was experiencing one of these, one that had lasted for weeks, when I received an unexpected phone call at home. It was Gio, telling me that he was at the Tarrytown train station. I couldn't believe it. I hung up the phone, ran to retrieve the car keys, and kissed Diarah on the forehead, telling her that I was going to the station.

"Oh, good! Gio's here," she said to my back as I was running out the door.

I stopped in my tracks and turned around. I was not happy.

"I thought we had agreed that you were not going to keep conversations with Gio secret from me."

"I know. I'm sorry. Use the emergency credit card and take him out for a nice dinner. I think the two of you need to talk," Diarah said, looking sad but serious.

With that, I was suddenly no longer excited to see my brother. My wife was always trying to do the right thing, but when it came to my brothers and my family, I silently wished she would just butt the hell out.

I pulled up to the station and saw him waiting. I jumped out of the car and greeted him as I normally did, with a hug and three kisses on the cheek, which prompted a group of loitering teens to call us "gay."

Not usually like me, I stopped and stared at the group.

I responded, "He's my brother."

The ugliest kid with the backward cap and skateboard looked at me with no expression and said, "Still gay."

I shook my head, stepped down off the curb, and got into the driver's seat.

"It's nice to see you," Gio said while patting my leg.

"Is it? I feel like this is an ambush," I snapped back, trying to hide the joy I felt having my brother there with me.

"Well, then count me in, too. Diarah wants the two of us to talk. I'm not sure why."

Gio and I enjoyed a lovely dinner in the city, and when we arrived home, Diarah was already waiting outside for us, sitting on the back steps. It was November, but it was a lovely, unusually warm evening.

"Let's go get a drink," she announced after greeting Gio and quickly turned in the opposite direction. Gio and I looked at each other quizzically and then followed her. We ended up at the pub across the street from our home and grabbed the table closest to the fireplace.

"I'm glad you're here, Gio. I need to talk to you about something," Dia said as we sat down.

I could feel the blood drain from my face.

She continued, "I think you know that I love your brother more than anything on this planet. Nothing comes before him. You know that, right?"

Gio gave a small smile and nodded. "Yes, I know."

"My husband, this perfect being sitting next to me, isn't happy. And I so desperately want him to be happy. But the one thing he needs is something I can't do for him. He needs to do it for himself."

Gio looked confused. "So, why am I here?"

"I know you and Bastian have a very strong relationship, and he is closer to you than to anyone else in your family. Bastian knows you love him, but I don't think he knows that you love him unconditionally. I don't profess to know your relationship. However, your brother is not going to be himself, truly himself, unless he can be completely honest with you, and…"

"Diarah, basta!"

I was livid. I had no desire to come out to my family. I had no desire to tell them about Bianca. And she was overstepping her bounds. And she knew it.

Dia placed her hand on my leg and spoke again—this time, with tears in her eyes.

"Gio, I am risking my marriage here. I'm putting it all on the line. That is how important this is to me. If you love Bastian unconditionally, please tell him."

I was about to tell Diarah to leave, but she grabbed her wallet and ran out the back door of the pub. From our table, we both could see her out in the parking lot, bent over, breathing hard. I didn't move from my seat.

It was clear Gio was angry with me.

"Are you going to go out there and make sure she's okay?"

I bit my lip and said nothing. I looked at him and slowly shook my head no. Yes, she was my wife, but she was making decisions for me that she had no right to.

"I don't know what's going on, but this is not good. What is wrong with you? What have you done that is so horrible that you don't feel that you could talk to me? I thought we were better friends than that. I thought we were best friends."

Something in that statement struck a chord in me so deep that I burst into tears right in the middle of the pub. I had always considered Gio to be my best friend, but I never would have believed that he considered me his best friend. That meant the absolute world to me.

Gio just sat quietly and stared at me as I tried to gain my composure. In the meantime, the young barmaid came over, and Gio ordered us both three fingers of whiskey. She brought them back right away, and my hand was shaking so much that I could barely lift the glass. For the first time in years, I wanted a hit, and for a split second, I thought about taking a taxi into the city and raiding the cabinet at the free clinic.

"Bastian, please tell me. Talk to me."

Gio spoke in such a calm, soothing voice that I could imagine him speaking to Gino in much the same way.

"If I tell you, then Papà will find out."

"I'm not going to tell anyone. It's just between us."

"Can I tell you tomorrow?"

"No, you cannot. I won't sleep a wink, and it's obvious to me that you need to get this off your chest. And Diarah is worried about you. Please, for all our sakes, tell me."

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I then got up, put enough money on the table to pay the bill and then some, and then walked out the front door. Gio followed behind me, not saying a word. It wasn't very cold out, but I was shivering.

We walked across the street and around to the back of the house. I walked up to the Bi Hive, stopped, and looked at Gio. He gave me a small nod and a reassuring smile.

I took the keys out of my pocket, unlocked the door, and turned on the light. It felt like everything was moving in slow motion. I stepped back, pulled the door open, and motioned for him to go in.

I waited a moment before following to allow Gio a moment to look around. He walked through the Hive slowly, inspecting it all.

His eyes first landed upon the section of the wall that contained my photographs. There were several of the first time I was in girl mode at the hotel in San Gimignano. Diarah took those pictures on her camera but didn't give them to me until years later, on our first wedding anniversary. It was clear that my makeup skills were pretty bad back then, but I still looked so happy.

There were also two group shots from my outings with Jack and his friends in the city. And then there were the pictures of Diarah and me, and some with Rex and me on our "date nights."

Gio had no reaction.

He then moved on to the rack of dresses, taking the time to examine each one. For a moment, I was concerned about the state of his hands on my beautiful gowns, not knowing when he last washed them, but the feeling quickly dissipated.

Gio made his way around the entirety of the room and ended up standing in front of me. He stared at me and raised his eyebrows. He acted like he was waiting for me to say something.

"This is all mine," I said, a bit brusque.

"Mmm-hmm. I know," Gio replied, nodding his head.

I was perturbed that he did not understand.

"The dresses are mine, Gio," I barked again, a bit more forcefully.

"Yeah. I know. Who else would they belong to? Bunny?" he said, trying to be funny.

And with that, I blurted out laughing, which quickly turned into tears. I was sobbing.

Gio hugged me for a few minutes, but when he realized that I was going to be sobbing for a while, he gently pulled me over to the couch. He sat us down, holding me while I let go. It felt like I had cried for an hour. Maybe I had.

And as I started to calm down, he gently pet my head and asked, "Just for clarification, was this the big secret you didn't want to share with me?"

"Yeah," I said, a bit weepy, not wanting to look at him.

"Bastian, I've known for years. We all have."

I sat up with a start. I had never been more shocked in my life.

"What… What do you mean by 'we'? Who is 'we'?"

He distorted his face.

"Let's see—there's Papà, Michele, Greta, me, Alessandra, and Luca. I'm assuming Renata knows, too. And probably Aida and Luciano. I'm fairly sure Gino doesn't know yet, so we'll let you break it to him."

He let out a small chuckle but stopped quickly when he saw how confused I was.

"Anja and her family told us during that first meeting, Bastian. They said that it was easy for Gunnar to lure you, as they had seen you in your room 'dressing up,' as they called it."

I was blindsided. I thought I had done everything possible to hide Bianca, but Anja's family wanted dirt. Who knows what methods they used to get that information?

I couldn't even bring myself to be mad. If anything, those horrible people had done me the greatest favour.

I looked at Gio. "And Papà?"

"He knows. Several months after Anja's father—the creep that he is—told us everything, Papà went and found the credit card statements from your trip that summer. In almost four weeks of travel, you paid for hotels, meals, and makeup. That was it."

I could feel a smile come across my face.

And then for some unknown reason, I blurted out, "I'm not gay."

Gio rolled his eyes, let out a scoff, and shook his head.

"Congratulations, that might just be the dumbest thing I've ever heard anyone say. We know you're not gay. Luca said that you're something called 'fluidità di genere.'"

I nodded my head softly.

I whispered, "Genderfluid, yes."

I stared at Gio for a moment. "Everyone knows?"

He smiled. "Yes, everyone knows. We all know, and we all still love you. Tutto bene?"

I let out an incredibly long breath, one that I felt I had held in for years and could feel the tension drain from my body.

Yes, everything was good. Everything was very good. At that moment, I felt understood and loved. My whole family knew and accepted me. I felt like a whole new chapter of my life was starting.

30 CHAPTER THIRTY: 1997, BASTIAN AT 38/DIA AT 34 (I FEEL YOU)

The weeks following my chat with Gio were nothing short of amazing.

I don't want to say that it solved all my problems, as that wouldn't be true. I would always have bouts of depression and addictive tendencies and urges, but not nearly as frequently and not to the extent that they once plagued me.

At 39, I was middle-aged, and I was finally finding myself. Bunny and I were in that hotel room in San Gimignano when I was 23. That was the start of my journey. Sixteen years later, I was still on it, though now it felt more like a nice stroll through a flowery field than the mountainous trek it had been for so long.

Diarah was different, too, but I believe it was due to her reaction to my mental health. She seemed much more at peace, and as much as I loved her before, I fell in love with her even more.

Our relationship was constantly evolving. In some ways, we were closer than ever. Yet, in other ways, I felt as if we were growing apart. I didn't know, but I started to assume that it maybe was the way all marriages were.

Things around the house also changed. Four years prior, I had started wearing a bit of makeup around my family. It wasn't unusual for my children to see me with eyeliner or mascara on, and I had stepped up my wardrobe to include much more jewellery. However, almost overnight, that changed. Within days of my chat with Gio in the Bi Hive, I started wearing full makeup around the house.

No one in my family had any kind of reaction, not even Gio. I was both relieved and somewhat disappointed. Why were they not saying anything?

After Gio left a few weeks later, I walked into our home donning one of Bianca's wigs—one with long, thick, dark hair that cascaded down to the small of my back. Still nothing. Actually, that's not true. Wolf looked at me, touched my hair, said, "Pretty," and walked away. That was it.

It wasn't until I came in the door several days later in complete girl mode, wearing a large ball gown, that I received any kind of reaction. Gia, who had just turned eight, scanned me up and down and rolled her eyes. Okay, not bad. I could accept that.

It was Veronica who had the biggest reaction, but it had nothing to do with what I was wearing. The dress was far too voluminous for our small apartment, and the full skirt of my gown knocked over the Lego project she was working on.

"Can you get that out of here!?" was her response.

Diarah, leaning up against the sink in the kitchen, was watching it all with her arms crossed and a big smirk on her face.

"Nobody cares, baby," she said softly.

"I see that."

I didn't want to get out of my dress, but I couldn't move around much in our place, so I went next door to sit on Rex and Bobby's couch. I knocked on the door and let myself in. Rex was coming out of the kitchen wearing only his underwear, eating a handful of dry cereal straight from the box.

He stared at me with a look of horror on his face. "Crap! Was I supposed to take you out tonight?"

"No, no. This was just for fun."

I plopped down hard on the couch, and the air in my skirt forced half my dress up above my head.

When I finally was able to push most of it down, Rex smiled and said, "Classy."

I chuckled silently.

"Hey, since you're already dolled up, do you want to go grab some dinner?" he asked me out of the blue.

"What? Now? Like this?"

"Weeelll, I would suggest putting on something a little less—how shall I say—round."

"Uh, yeah, I would actually like that. Let me tell Dia."

Rex stood at his door while I opened ours.

I yelled inside, "Hey, babe, can I go to dinner with Rex?"

"Absolutely!" she replied and then spoke over me to Rex.

"Hey, talk to him about the trip, okay?"

"Will do."

He turned to me. "Hey, I'll be down in 20."

And with that, he shut the door.

I turned back towards Diarah. I was not happy.

"When are you going to stop talking to people behind my back?"

"Baby, you've known me since I was four. It's not likely that I'm going to change now. But this? This is a good secret, I promise. And, if you don't want to go, you certainly don't have to."

She gave me a long, hard kiss and ran her finger from in between my clavicles down to the small patch of hair on my chest.

"And, uh, keep the dress on when you get home," she said in the most seductive voice she could muster.

She quickly snapped out of her sexy character and said, "That sounded really creepy, didn't it?"

"Yeah, a bit," I admitted, smiling.

"Go have fun, baby. I'll give Rex the money for tonight."

I went back down to the Bi Hive and put on a little black leather skirt, a black blouse tucked in, with black tights and boots. I changed out the wig, as well, opting for something a bit lighter in colour against all the black I was wearing.

I was waiting outside in my fluffy, blue winter coat when Rex came out. He was in a full suit.

He saw that I was no longer dressed formally and angrily yelled, "Hey!"

And with that, he took off his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his dress shirt.

"Sorry, I just felt like switching it up a bit," I said.

"Fine by me. You won't hear me complaining about not getting to wear a tie. As far as I'm concerned, they should be considered instruments of torture."

I smiled. "Where do you want to go?"

"Come on."

He held out his arm for me to grab.

We walked up the street to the steakhouse three blocks up. I was shocked that he was willing to eat somewhere in the neighbourhood with me, but the place was dimly lit with big, wooden panels separating each booth. Chances were that no one would see us.

I didn't take offense to that. He was doing me a great favour by taking me out in girl mode, so I was willing to go along with whatever he was up for.

We were seated quickly, and after we put in our drink orders, he got right to business.

"Okay, so you know that Diarah and I have been talking, and she has asked me to take you on a trip."

"Hmm, really?" I exhaled audibly, expressing my exasperation with her. "Where would she like you to take me?"

"London."

I'm sure I had a look of surprise on my face, as the waitress had returned and asked me if everything was okay.

"She's fine, she's fine. Listen, we want two of the prime rib with the loaded baked potato and the glazed carrots. Also, we'll have two of whatever you have on tap. Thanks, sweetheart."

He grabbed the menu out of my hands and passed his and mine back to

the waitress. It was crazy—I so rarely went to a nice steakhouse, yet it seemed that every time I did, I was never able to order for myself.

Rex started again, "So, London. I've never been and have always wanted to go. Diarah told me that she would pay for everything as long as I was willing to escort you to this drag gala. Dia said they've been popping up all over Europe thanks to this Vogue craze."

He buttered a roll with entirely too much butter and then looked up at me.

"What? You don't want to go?"

"I don't know."

"What? Seriously? It's London!"

"Rex, I don't think I'm ready for that. I'm afraid to go anywhere as Bianca. I feel somewhat safe around here, but… I don't know."

"How would it be any different than here? I would go with you to the event. If you don't like it, we won't have to stay. We could still have a nice time sightseeing. Plus… I'm not sure if I'm supposed to say this or not, but she already bought the tickets for the event. And the plane tickets. And booked us hotel rooms. They weren't cheap, I'll tell you that."

I sat quietly and didn't say much for the rest of the meal. I appreciated how my wife wanted to push me out of my comfort zone a bit, and on some level, I truly did want to go. But I was scared. Of what? I really couldn't verbalize it at the time.

After our meal, Rex and I walked home in silence. But it wasn't a bad or awkward silence. He knew I had a lot to think about, and I don't think he wanted to push me too hard. He was doing me a favour by going, yes, but I would also be doing him a favour by agreeing to go, and he knew I knew it.

I arrived home and walked upstairs still in girl mode. However, instead of Diarah and me being able to spend a bit of alone time together, I found her on the couch in her bathrobe, chatting on the phone. I won't deny that I was disappointed. The whole evening was turning out to be a bust.

I was just about to head back out the door to get changed in the Bi Hive when I heard Dia say, "Hey, you, get back here! Luca wants to chat with you."

Luca. I hadn't talked to him since I learned that he knew about my gender fluidity.

I was a tad reluctant to get on the phone, but once we started chatting, it was one of the best conversations we had ever had. He told me he had wanted to talk to me about my girl mode many times, especially at the wedding, but he didn't want to make me feel uncomfortable. I know it sounds strange, but he sounded so proud of me. Proud of what, I did not know. But, yes, proud.

We talked for almost three hours. Diarah had long gone to sleep, and I was exhausted, so we started saying our goodbyes. I thought our conversation was the highlight of my night.

That was until Luca said, "Okay, well, I'll see you in a few weeks?"

Completely unaware, I asked, "Are you coming to the U.S.?"

"Heavens, no! I'm meeting you in London!"

The wave of relief that washed over me was almost spiritual. I felt such joy and peace at that moment, and I was immediately thrilled to be going to London and the event.

Luca continued, "You and I will share a room, and Diarah was nice enough to get a separate room for Rex. You know she's paying for all of this, right? She bought my plane ticket and already put some spending money in my bank account."

Of course, she did, I thought to myself. Of course, she did.

"Hey, before I let you go, I have a favour to ask. Do you have a fancy dress I can borrow?"

"Seriously? You want to wear a gown?"

"Yeah. I've never worn one before. I'd like to try it."

I could feel myself smiling big and shaking my head. Why didn't I talk to Luca about all of it a long time ago? Simultaneously, I was so very happy and so very mad at myself.

"Of course, I will bring something for you to wear. Something pretty."

"Excellent! Love you, Bastian! I'll see you in London!"

"I love you, Luca."

I hung up the phone and sat quietly on the couch for a moment. I felt nothing but blessed.

Three weeks later, Rex and I were boarding the flight to London. Both he and I had only carry-ons, as Diarah had made the smart decision to ship our luggage ahead. It cost a small fortune, but the peace of mind knowing that my gowns had already arrived safely at the hotel and were waiting for me was priceless.

As supportive as my wife was, she gave me a bit of the cold shoulder the day before we left, mad that she wouldn't be able to see Bianca at her first ball. Of course, she knew that I wanted her there, but she also knew that I wasn't going to be able to fully enjoy myself on that trip if both she and I were away from the kids. Nothing had been the same since Mikey's passing, and she still could not bring herself to leave our entire family for days. It would either have to be all of us going or just me.

The entire flight, Rex did not look good. I wasn't sure whether he just didn't like flying or if he was truly sick, but by the time we landed in London, he was quite ill. It took all his strength to get through customs, through the airport, into a taxi, and to our hotel.

I made the executive decision to have Rex sleep in my room with me so that I could keep an eye on him. I helped him get into his pyjamas and then into the queen bed closest to the restroom, just in case he needed it quickly. Luca certainly wouldn't mind having Rex's suite with a king-sized bed all to himself.

Rex and I had been in the hotel room for all of 20 minutes when I received a call from Diarah.

Before I could even properly answer the phone, I heard through the receiver, "Hey, you made it! Why didn't you call me?"

"We just walked in the door a few minutes ago. Rex is sick. It's clear that he has a fever, so he will be sleeping in my room with me tonight. I'm just waiting on Luca so we can go grab some dinner."

"Umm… That's actually why I'm calling. Luca won't be able to make it. Your dad slipped and fell in the courtyard and hurt his hip. It's not broken, but there is a hairline fracture. They're trying to determine if he needs rehab or surgery at this point. Renata is there, taking care of him, but Papà is not able to get out of bed or off the couch without assistance. So, Luca is going to stay with them for a while. I'm so sorry, baby."

"Well, I can't say that I'm not disappointed. I'll be all dressed up with nowhere to go."

"What do you mean? You're still going to the ball tomorrow night. You need to. You have to!"

"I'm not going to the ball by myself. I'm not going anywhere as Bianca by myself."

"Okay. If you're nervous, then I understand. But I want you to think about something. You are in a place where no one knows you. This is your chance to really be free. No restrictions. You can really let Bianca fly. If you feel like your safety would be compromised, then, of course, don't go. But if you can go, you should. If not, I think you truly are going to regret it."

I sat down on the edge of the bed and gave a small chuckle.

"Who *are* you? What wife thoroughly encourages her husband to do this?"

"I'm not your wife first. I'm your best friend first. You know that. And both your wife and your best friend want you to be happy. That's all we want."

"We, huh?"

"Yes, we. We love you very much."

"I'll think about it."

"Okay. Now go get some dinner. You must be starving."

"Diarah, wait."

I wanted to catch her before she hung up. Something had bothered me about our relationship for a while, but I never spoke with her about it. However, at that moment, being an ocean apart, I dared to ask her the question I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer to. I looked over at Rex once more to ensure that he was sleeping. He was.

I paused for a moment.

"I need to know something. And I want you to answer me truthfully."

I paused and took a deep breath before I spoke again.

"I know that you love me, but I sometimes feel like we're growing apart,

like we're both leading our own lives. Do you feel that, too? Are we falling out of love?"

I could hear her breathing on the other end of the phone.

After what seemed like an eternity, she said softly, "Sometimes, I feel like I'm still learning who you are. You are evolving, and I know that. I'm so happy for you that you are discovering more about yourself, and I love that you are learning to love your true self a little more each day. Sometimes I feel that maybe my purpose in this life was to help you get to this point.

"Maybe you are now a bright, new, shiny person, and maybe someday our journey as a married couple will end. I don't know. I don't feel I know you very well anymore, and maybe you don't completely know yourself, either. And that's okay. I'm here for you, no matter what. I don't want to make you stay somewhere you're not supposed to be just because we are married and had children together. I promised you that I would be your best friend first. I am your best friend always."

The other end of the phone got very quiet, and then I could hear her take a long breath.

"So, do I sometimes feel like you could cut me out of your life again? Yeah, sure. Do I feel that there is the possibility that once you discover who you truly are, you may not want to be with me in the future? Yes. Do I have a lot of intimacy issues because of that? Of course.

"I'm trying my best to do what is best for you. I truly mean that. But know this—I will never leave you. Ever. And I will never leave our children or our family. And I know I love you. From the first moment I saw you, something inside of me said, 'Hey, there you are! I've been searching all over the world for you!' I was only four years old, and I knew.

"So, to answer your question—gosh, actually, I don't know how to answer your question. I am afraid to answer it as I honestly don't even know what it means. Is it okay that we're drifting apart because you're discovering who you really are? I guess. I mean, how can that be wrong? I'm nothing but happy for you.

"All I want you to know is you are my whole world, and I know that I would die without you in my life. I would die without you. I want to be a part of your world, whatever that role is."

I felt betrayed. It probably was because I was exhausted, but I only heard the negatives in her statements. To me, it sounded as if my wife was saying that it was okay that we were drifting apart. She was okay with it. She wasn't going to fight for me, for our marriage. I couldn't believe it.

"I need to go," I said to her, probably a bit more harshly than I intended to.

And with that, I hung up. I didn't even say goodbye. I had to get out of that hotel room. I felt like I was suffocating.

I left a note next to the phone for Rex, telling him that I was going out

for a while, and then grabbed my jacket and walked out the door.

I walked up and down various streets for a while. My emotions were all over the place. I felt like I was in another loveless marriage. Unbelievable. Why didn't anyone want to be with me? Why didn't anyone want to stay married to me?

Somehow, I found my way to Piccadilly Square. The hotel was nowhere near the ball venue, but it was in the heart of London, and Diarah knew that Rex would love it. However, at that point, he was so ill that I didn't think he would see anything outside of our hotel room during the trip.

I found a nice pub and grabbed some dinner. The place was pleasant enough, and the beer was quite good, but I had forgotten about British food. It was 30 years prior that Bunny was in hospital in the UK, and it had completely slipped my mind that in those three weeks, I lost almost 4 kilos as I barely ate anything. For someone who tried to eat healthily and avoid fried foods and red meat as much as possible, there wasn't much in terms of selection.

As I finished dinner, I took the tickets for the ball out of my wallet and saw that the event was at the 491 Gallery, a new art gallery about half an hour from the hotel where we were staying. I still wasn't sure if I wanted to attend the event in girl mode, so I thought the best thing to do would be to go down there in boy mode first to check it out.

I grabbed the first taxi I could. I was hoping to be let out right in front of the gallery, but instead, I was dropped off at Leytonstone Station, about a half-block down from the venue.

I walked up the narrow sidewalk, and as I came upon the gallery, I peeked my head inside as the door was propped open. There were about 25 men and women of all ages helping to set up tables and chairs and to hang decorations.

One gentleman saw me standing in the doorway and asked, "Are you here to help?"

"Yes, I am," I said, truthfully.

"Great. We need some of you younger folks up on the ladders, hanging these curtain string lights from the rafters. Do you mind?" he asked, handing me a box.

"Happy to help."

I spent the next three hours talking and socializing with some of the nicest people I had ever met, and by the time we were done, whatever fears I had about the ball were gone. I said goodbye to the group and was walking back to the station to try and get a taxi back to the hotel when a car pulled up next to me.

Two of the men from the gallery asked me if I needed a ride. They were perfect strangers, but I reluctantly took them up on it, knowing that I might not find a taxi back so late at night.

Their names were Trent and Devon, and they were beautiful. Trent was

half-English, half-Brazilian, and he attributed his amazing physique to the Capoeira classes he taught at his studio. He sang in Portuguese with the CD that was playing loudly on his car stereo.

"This is Skank, man!" Trent yelled over the music. "They're singing about futebol."

I assumed he was talking about football, but the way he pronounced it sounded like foo-chee-bowl.

From the back seat, Devon screamed for the music to be turned down, and Trent obliged. I discovered that Devon was also half-English, but his mother was Malaysian Chinese. I asked him if he spoke any Chinese, and he laughed at me. I learned that night that almost everyone in Malaysia speaks English and that almost all business transactions there are conducted in English, as well. He referred to it as Manglish. So, it was English only for Devon growing up.

I let the two of them do most of the talking, and I enjoyed just watching and listening to them. Trent had a more masculine physique, so I was very curious to see what he would be dressed in the following evening. Devon, on the other hand, was tall—much taller than I am—and was probably as thin as I was. He also had amazing facial bone structure, and I knew that in girl mode, he would probably be able to pass as a woman wherever he went. In fact, I knew he would be gorgeous.

Trent asked if we could stop on the way back to get a pint, and I agreed. He drove us to this lovely little pub called The Albert in Old Ford. As Trent went to the bar to get us drinks, Devon and I found a nice booth off to the side. The place was packed, but it wasn't overly raucous or loud.

Devon asked me about my life, and I told him about Diarah, the kids, and our extended family.

"Wait, you're married? To a woman?" Devon asked, incredulously.

"Yes."

"And you have children?"

"Yes. Six, but one died a few years ago."

"Sorry, mate."

Trent walked up to the table with three pints and clanged them down. Some of the beer spilled and sloshed over the tabletop and into my lap. No one even realized, so I sat for the rest of the night in wet pants. It didn't matter.

"Trent, get this—Michael here is married. To a woman. And has kids."

He took a large pause between each one of those sentences for dramatic effect.

"Wait, so does your bride know you're here? Or does she think you're in London on business?"

"No, she knows I'm here. We live in New York. She bought the plane tickets and arranged the hotel. She also sent me here with a friend and was

going to fly my brother in from Italy. My father hurt his hip, so my brother couldn't make it."

The two of them sat with their mouths open, shaking their heads.

"Your wife sent you here? Does she know that you like to dress up and all?"

"Yeah. She's been helping me with it since we were kids. She was 14 or 15, and I was 23 or 24. I don't remember exactly."

Of course, I knew exactly. It was the moment I became me.

"Does she go out with you when you get into girl mode?"

"No, not very much, but she stays with the kids so I can go out. A few years ago, she bought me a kind of playhouse where I keep all my dresses and supplies. And we have a friend, a male friend, who escorts me to different places. I go out with him in girl mode once a month, and my wife always pays for our dinners."

Trent and Devon looked at each other with big eyes, shaking their heads.

"Unreal. That is unreal, my friend. She doesn't make you feel like a freak? She doesn't tell you that you are embarrassing to her?"

"No, she doesn't. Never. She's nothing but supportive. And… I can prove it. I'm wearing her wedding dress to the ball tomorrow."

"NO!" both Trent and Devon half-screamed, half-cackled.

Trent continued, "No, no, no. I'm sorry, I just don't believe that. Oh, you had me going, you did."

He was wagging his pointer finger at me.

"It's the truth. I promise." I laughed, genuinely surprised at their reaction.

"No, we don't believe you," Devon said, chuckling.

"If there's a phone I can use, I'd be happy to call her now."

"I would let you use my cell, but it won't work on international calls," Devon said.

Trent slid out of the booth and instructed Devon to watch our drinks. He grabbed me playfully but forcefully by my arm and led me over to the phone located between the two bathrooms.

"Here. Call."

I dug out my calling card and dialled.

"Hello?" Diarah answered on the first ring.

"Hey, baby, I'm so sorry about before. I…" was all I was able to say before Trent grabbed the receiver.

"Sweetheart, this is your husband's new friend. My name is Trent. What is your name, darling?" Trent said in a very sensual voice.

At that point, I knew it was safe to walk away from the conversation. Dia could easily hold her own with Trent.

I sat back down and chatted with Devon. We talked about the other galas he and Trent had been to over the past couple of years. I could tell he was normally a bit shy, but when he talked about his escapades with Trent, he

became quite animated. He certainly had one of the loveliest smiles I had ever seen.

Trent returned to the table 20 minutes later. He slid into the booth next to Devon and looked at me with a wry smile, shaking his head.

"You are unbelievably lucky, my friend. That woman loves you exactly as you are. Do you know how rare that is?"

I wanted to cry at that moment, but I held it in. I took a deep breath in and nodded my head feverishly. My wife did love me. And she was in love with me. I knew it.

Trent gave a small smack to Devon's arm and said, "And he wasn't lying. This motherfucker is wearing his wife's wedding dress tomorrow night."

31 CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: 1998, BASTIAN AT 39/DIA AT 35 (THE BOTTOM LINE)

The gala in London the year before was amazing, and the best part was that I made lifelong friends that night.

I kept in contact with Trent and Devon and planned to meet up with them a couple of days before the ball the following year. And I wanted to help decorate the night before, if I could.

That year, Rex did not join me. I flew to London on my own and met Luca there. He was thrilled to have this time with me, as he was still living at home with my father and Renata. Papà was doing better, but it was clear that he was not regaining his health or his strength as quickly as we would have liked, so Luca stayed.

I appreciated him very much for taking that on. The rest of us Aceti men were married with children. It was unfair that just because he was unattached, the responsibility fell onto him, but he didn't seem to mind it too much. That is what I have always loved about Luca—he is always willing to go with the flow and never takes life too seriously. In that way, he is the exact opposite of me.

Luca and I both arrived in London a few days before the gala and spent the time sightseeing and meeting up with some of the people I had met at the event the year prior. I had a lovely time seeing everyone, but I was soon going to discover that the trip would be bittersweet.

In the hotel room on the night before the gala, Luca told me that my father was considering selling our family home. Papà never fully recovered from his injuries, and he decided that he needed to be in a home that didn't have so many stairs. The ones from the driveway to the courtyard gave him the most trouble. It was a major struggle for Luca to get him up and down them, and I immediately thought back to Bunny's visit when she was 11. She was just a child, but with all her injuries, she could barely navigate those steps

on her own.

I called Diarah to both tell her the news and to let her say hello to Luca. When I put Luca on, she spoke *at* him for over 20 minutes. I say that, as Luca said virtually nothing during that time. There would be a "Yes, I understand" or "Uh-huh" thrown in here and there, but for the most part, Diarah had dominated the conversation.

I knew that had to mean something either very good or quite bad was going on behind the scenes. I loved my wife very much, but she continued to have that horrible habit of talking to people and making decisions for me behind my back. I never knew why. It was the only thing I could say that I truly didn't like about her.

Luca said goodbye and hung up the phone. He paced the room a few times, looking pained, almost conflicted. He then sat down on his bed, across from me, and said, "Diarah wants you to come back home with me for a couple of days after our time in London."

"Did she say why?"

"Yeah, but let's not ruin the trip." He started to stand up.

"Luca, sit down and tell me what is happening." I was angry, and Luca knew it.

He sat back down and gave a long sigh.

"You know that Papà is not doing well, Bastian. He has never fully regained his mobility, and he's afraid to leave the house. He's been very depressed, and Renata is worried that he might die. Being an occupational therapist, she has seen it time and again. Older people do not recover well from hip fractures. You know this."

"Is Papà going into a home? Who is making the decisions for him?"

"Yeah, Papà is going into a home—*your* home—in Sardinia. Diarah just told me that she gave Papà your home at La Fine del Mondo. I've seen it, and I think it would be good for him, too. It's all one level, except for that small sleeping area upstairs for the kids. It's wide and spacious, and Diarah reminded me that both bathrooms downstairs already have walk-in showers and handrails in the tub areas. It would be ideal. All the walkways are level and smooth. There are no steps. He can get around easily."

He could see that I was getting visibly upset, so he got up and sat with me on my bed. He spoke again, a bit softer.

"A few weeks ago, Michele was able to get Louie's permission to fly Papà and Renata in for the weekend, and Papà fell in love with the place. Michele and Greta live there year-round now. They're trying to get me to move there, too—they gave me my own condo and everything—but I'm not leaving Firenze. I have a life, you know."

He gave a small laugh. I think he was expecting some kind of reaction from me, but I felt unsteady, both physically and mentally.

"Wow, this is happening quickly. Is that why Diarah didn't want you to

tell me? I suppose I am to go and say goodbye to our childhood home?"

"Actually, no." Luca made a face as if he had bitten into a lemon. "Don't be mad, but Diarah bought our house."

I was floored.

"That's impossible. We don't have that kind of money."

"I think she used your home in New York as collateral. I don't know. Maybe she thinks it's an investment? I just don't know the specifics, Bastian. All I know is that Papà will be leaving in two weeks to go to La Fine full-time. And I think we can say with certainty that we will probably never see Papà at our home in Firenze again. He's never going back. It will be difficult enough just to get him and all his books over to La Fine. My God, his record collection? All those Maria Callas albums? Could you imagine?

"Oh, and get this—this is hysterical. Part of the deal that Bunny made with Papà is that he has to leave his desk for her. The one in the library. Bunny gets Papà's desk. That is the funniest thing I've ever heard!"

The idea of Bunny sitting like a queen with her feet propped up on my father's desk should have made me smile. But everything was coming to an end, and I wasn't prepared. There were too many changes, and I was feeling overwhelmed. And every time my wife tried to shelter me from bad news, it only made me hurt worse. I could feel my anxiety rise with every minute Luca and I were talking.

I felt dizzy. After a long pause, I asked, "Did Diarah say what she was going to do with our family home?"

"Well, I'm going to live there… with Bernard."

"Excuse me? With Bernard?"

"He's been alone for a long time, and now that he's retired from teaching, he just didn't want to be in his big house on his own. Diarah told him she would give him a condo over at La Fine, but, like me, he doesn't want to leave the city. So, I will get the entire upstairs to myself, and Bernard will get Papà's old room and study."

"You're going to live with Bernard? Wow. Never in a million years…"

"I'm actually looking forward to it. He sold his house two months ago and has been staying in your old room since then. He and Papà get along splendidly. As soon as Papà and his possessions are safe in La Fine, Bernard will get his items out of storage."

All the changes sounded positive, but I just couldn't get excited about any of them. If anything, I felt myself becoming a bit aggressive, almost violent.

"I need to go for a walk. I need to clear my head," I said out loud to no one in particular. I walked out of the hotel room and down the hall to the elevators.

That was the last thing I remembered.

I woke up in what looked to be a hospital. I was in a hospital bed and had a hospital gown on, but there were no machines around me. In fact, nothing

was around me. It was a cold, white, empty room. I attempted to sit up but found that my wrist had been handcuffed to the bed.

I started to panic but then heard Diarah's voice and stopped to see if I could locate where it was coming from. Within seconds, Diarah and Luca came into the room. They had just been on the other side of the door, speaking with a doctor.

It took me a few seconds to calm down, but I was terrified. I wanted to go home. I started to violently pull at the handcuffs holding me down.

Diarah ran over to me. She grabbed my hand and sat down in the chair next to the bed.

She whispered, "Shhhh. It's okay, baby. Hey, hey, it's okay. Lie down for a minute."

"I'm handcuffed to the bed, Bunny. Get these off me," I said, whining like a small child.

"I will. They will. They'll be in soon. They just have to make sure you're okay first," she whispered, giving me a sweet smile.

She stroked my hair as I attempted to calm down. I tried to take a few deep breaths, but my heart was beating a mile a minute. I couldn't get my emotions under control.

"What do you mean? Am I not okay? Was there an accident?"

Diarah looked up towards the ceiling. I knew that was her go-to move when she was trying not to cry. She took a few deep breaths and looked back at me.

"Bastian, you were missing for three days."

Dia glanced over at Luca and continued.

"Luca said that the two of you were talking in the hotel room about Papà moving to La Fine when you got upset and left. Is that correct?"

I just stared at her. I couldn't remember. Why couldn't I remember?

"I don't…I don't know," I said softly.

"When you didn't come back to the hotel that night, Luca called me. I got on the first plane to London. We searched all over for you. Two days later, a police officer found you sleeping behind a dumpster about 10 kilometers from your hotel."

"Wha—? That's… just not possible," I said softly, tears streaming down my face.

"It's okay, baby. I've got you. It's going to be okay. You've been having a lot of memory issues lately, but we'll get you the help you need. Don't worry."

"No! No, Diarah! No! I don't know what you're implying, but you are wrong!"

I could feel myself getting very angry at her. She was so small sitting in that folding chair. She looked as lost as I felt.

I glanced over at Luca. "Is this true, Luca?"

"Yeah, Bash, it is."

Luca hadn't called me Bash since we were young children.

"Diarah told me years ago that you were having memory issues. She reminded me of it before this trip and asked me to keep an eye on you."

Dia continued, "It hasn't been too bad, Bastian. I first noticed it right after Mikey died, but I just attributed it to the stress you were under. It started with those horrible night terrors. Then, your anxiety was off the charts.

"You were becoming forgetful and distracted from time to time. Sometimes you were just so confused and thought that the girls were still babies. But it started to become unpredictable. I was worried about you, so I hired Duncan to follow you to the free clinic and back each day you went into the city."

I was terrified.

"Matteo knows, too?" I could hear my voice quivering.

"Yes, Matteo knows. There were one or two days when I had to drive into the city to get you and Duncan, but I was so thankful that he was there with you, keeping you safe. I'd get you home, you'd get some sleep, and you would be back to your old self by morning.

"Bastian, you need to know that stress is a big factor in this. Most of the time, that is what seems to set it off. This trip, as much as you love coming here and going to the gala, is stressful. And then you learned we were taking on your childhood home, and that was stressful. Wondering how we were going to afford two homes, especially your father's home, was stressful. Learning that your father isn't doing well health-wise was stressful. Knowing that you were going to see him for the last time in your childhood home? Stressful."

Dia started to cry.

"So, it's my fault this time, baby. I take the blame for this one. There was too much information at one time for you. And I'm so sorry about that. I'm so sorry I did that to you.

"But your father is just so desperate to get to La Fine. He loves it there so much. He loves being with Michele and Greta, and he loves that it's spacious and that he can get around safely on his own. This move will give him back some of the independence he's lost. But in my haste to help Papà, I overloaded you. And I'm sorry for that."

Diarah was holding my hand that entire time, but she squeezed it tight when she finished talking. She really did believe that she caused my blackout. Had I not had years of medical training, I might have almost believed her. But I knew that it was *my* illness. It was my issue.

At that point, the doctor came into the room. He was a young gentleman, probably about the same age as Dominic.

He said, "Well, Mr. Aceti, I think you're cleared to go now. I'm glad your wife and brother are here and will be able to take you home safely."

He turned and spoke directly to Diarah.

"I took the time to research some good specialists in New York that deal with early-onset dementia, and I highly recommend you contact them as soon as you get back to the States. There have been some significant advancements in this area, and getting help in the early stages can make all the difference.

"And please look into those support groups I mentioned, Mrs. Aceti. You need to know you are not alone in this."

The doctor walked over to Luca and shook his hand. As he began to walk out, he waved the orderly into the room to remove my handcuffs. The orderly then placed a bag of the clothing I had arrived in on the bed next to me.

I looked down at it. The clothes were filthy, torn, and stained. They also smelled as if I had urinated on myself, probably more than once.

Diarah picked up the bag, opened it, and removed my wallet and passport. By the grace of God, they hadn't been taken. My jewellery, including my wedding ring that I wore on a chain around my neck, was nowhere to be found.

Once she had the passport and my wallet in hand, Dia asked Luca to throw the bag of clothing into the trash. From her work bag on the floor, she pulled out a pair of my jeans, my soft black sweater, a white undershirt, a pair of underwear and socks, and my black leather sneakers. She then got up and helped me off the bed and into the shower in the adjoining bathroom.

Dia stood right on the other side of the shower curtain, waiting for me to finish, and when I moved the curtain back, she stood there holding the towel open for me like she had done for our children when they were small.

I got dressed quickly and whispered pleadingly to her to get me out of that hospital as fast as she could. Within one minute, we had exited the building and were standing outside, and I took very large, deep breaths of the fresh air.

I was now so unbelievably appreciative of the small things.

I made a conscious effort at that point to experience everything—everything—to its fullest.

This was the beginning of my final act, and I knew it.

The Bunny Trail trilogy concludes with
the third and final book in the series, *I Go with Thee*.

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.