



D. J. TOMBE'S
The Bunny Trail

The Bunny Trail

DJ Tombe

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Pen, who doesn't fit society's mold but is perfect, nonetheless.

This book is also dedicated to Isabella, who is my muse and inspiration.

And, finally, this book is dedicated to all of those young adults who are afraid to show their true colors.

Never forget that you are beautiful exactly as you are.

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

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

Michael (a.k.a. Bastian)

1 CHAPTER ONE: MEETING BUNNY

I was born a monster. I don't really want to go into it, but I was born lacking a nose and with some pretty severe scarring over much of my face and most of my upper torso. So, you can imagine how many friends I had as a child. I have three brothers, all older than me, and they were my only childhood companions.

Their names are Michele, Giovanni, and Luca, and they are eight, six, and four years older than me, respectively. I was never really close with Michele. It almost seemed like he never lived at home. He was handsome and popular and had plenty of places to go. I was probably closest to Giovanni (Gio) who was six years older than me, although I believe his fascination with me stemmed more from the fact that he wanted to be a physician like my father, so I was like his own personal medical project. He was always making plans for what my nose would look like when I was 18, which is the age I would be permitted to have a new one constructed and grown for me. Any earlier than age 18 would be difficult, as one's body continues to grow and change until then. And, finally, there was Luca. By far, Luca was the best-looking of all of us brothers, and he had quite a few beautiful girls chasing him around in his teens. Too bad that they never caught on that he was gay. Luca had his own life and his own friends. I always knew he loved me, but we really just didn't have much in common.

Thirteen was a tough age for me. All three of my brothers had left home, either living away at college or getting apartments of their own. And, Michele was in the midst of planning his wedding to his beautiful fiancée, Greta. Her family had their own business near Milano, and Michele was living with them, working for her father part-time and starting his Laurea Magistrale, the Italian equivalent of an MBA. And, I was left out of all of it. Everyone was moving on without me, and I was an island, stuck in the basement of our house.

The basement room was built specifically for me. I didn't like

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neighborhood kids walking past our home, staring at me through the front gate and into our house. It wasn't the older kids ridiculing me that made me sad. It was the younger children who were truly terrified of me and the way I looked.

As I was not able to go to school with my siblings, my father chose to educate me at home. He did his best to try to convince me that the good Lord would not give me a situation that was more than I could handle. What a load of crap. This was torture. I was not what I would call "living," and by 13, I wanted to end it all. Actually, the truth is that I had wanted to end it all ever since I could remember. But every time I tried to find a way out, I just couldn't go through with it. It made me hate myself even more. I was a freak and I was weak.

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

It was late May, and I could see the trees swaying in the spring breeze, so I cracked both the door to my room and the door that led to the outside steps. I was hoping that the fresh air would help the stench in my room, the source of which I could not locate. As I pushed the outside door open, I could hear my father speaking to someone with an unfamiliar voice in the courtyard, which was unusual, as we hardly ever had any guests. The gentleman spoke Italian fluently, but it was a different dialect. Even without seeing his face or how he was dressed, it was clear that the soft-spoken man was not educated. However, his voice was gentle and kind, as if he had worked in some kind of subservient role. It was so ridiculous, but I remember that at that moment, I was jealous of my father. Jealous of that man he was talking to. Jealous of people who could just have a casual conversation without worrying about having others shirk back or run off or make some hurtful comment. I couldn't talk to anyone. No one knew me. No one understood.

I sat on the edge of the couch and openly prayed to a God that I really didn't think existed. How many times had I sat here before, pleading to this imaginary entity? But I was out of options. Without a thought, I began to pray. It's all I knew. I began to ask for Him or Her to send me a sign that I was meant to be there. I just wanted to know that I was put on this Earth for a reason.

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

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I saw a tiny, chubby hand. It was reaching up to a plate of cookies that was sitting on top of a low bookshelf. The plate was precariously teetering on top of the books, ready to fall at the slightest movement.

Although there were seven cookies on the plate, that chubby hand could not locate one. Instead, it kept pushing the cookies from one side of the plate to the other, always slightly out of its grasp. Very slowly, I saw a tuft of brown curly hair peek up over the bookcase, and then two brown eyes. The eyes looked at the plate, and two hands came up to grab three cookies in each one. Then, with the fingertips, the two hands snatched the last cookie, using only the pointer finger on each hand. Finally, when all seven cookies were secured in those two little fists, the half of a face looked over at me quickly. Those eyes stared right into mine and glared at me. Slowly, the eyes and tuft of hair lowered, disappearing behind the bookshelf again.

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

I didn't have to wonder for long, as there were sounds of choking coming from behind the bookshelf. The child stood up and was furiously coughing. A fat, little girl in a brown, dowdy dress had stuffed the entire cookie in her mouth and was choking on it. I ran over and told her to spit it out. She did nothing. I repeated myself. She did nothing and was starting to turn blue. I put my finger in her mouth and did a sweeping motion that my father had done to me years before when I was choking on a pastry. She ejected the cookie and proceeded to then vomit all over my floor.

I bent down and asked if she was okay. She just stared at me. I asked her again. She gave me an angry look and replied, "What?" I was surprised. This child looked Italian. She was in Italy. Yet, she was speaking English.

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

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

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

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

She looked around disapprovingly and said, "You live here?"

I nodded. I could not believe this child had no reaction to the way I looked. I was stunned.

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

I said, "Bastian." (My name is pronounced "BAHZTiy-ahN". My father is half-German and wanted to give me a strong German name, he said, to help give me strength in life. He said it meant "venerable.")

She scrunched up her face. "It's what?"

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“My name is Bastian,” I said.

She looked at me dead in the face for a good three seconds and said, “I’m just gonna call you Michael.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head and said, “I already have a brother named Michele.”

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

I asked her what her name was, and she glared at me again. She said, “Um, just call me Bunny.” (Clearly, her name was *not* Bunny.)

She walked away from me slowly, looking around, taking in everything in my room, still holding onto the cookies with two death grips. She did not seem fearful in the least being in the new, unfamiliar place. After she scanned the room, she looked back at me. With a giant lump in my throat, I asked her the question that I did and did not want to know the answer to.

“Aren’t you afraid of me?”

Her expression turned to one of disgust. “No,” she said, with a sassy tone. “Are you afraid of me?”

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

I asked her if she was hungry, and she had no expression. I then told her that we had a pizza oven in our kitchen and could make her any kind of pizza she wanted. Her eyes got wide, and she nodded her head yes. She walked towards me, and I held out my hand to her. I was slightly surprised that she put her entire fist in my palm. She had a vice-like hold on those three cookies and wasn’t about to let them go. I led her down the hallway to the spiral staircase at the end of the hall which led straight to the kitchen. She followed me without question, which was slightly concerning. Why was this child trusting me?

I looked back to make sure she was navigating the spiral staircase successfully, as I knew she wasn’t going to be holding on to the handrail. She looked up at me and gave me a giant smile, one where I could see just about all of the teeth in her mouth. She still had some vomit down the front of her dress, but it was clear that she didn’t care.

What a wonderfully odd little child. I had no idea about it then, but I had just met the most important person in my life.

2 CHAPTER TWO: BUNNY AT 4

I made Bunny a pizza. She had absolutely no trouble in directing me, telling me everything that she required on said pizza. Most would have said she was bossy. I absolutely loved it. It was my first real conversation with someone other than a member of my own family or our housekeeper, Marta.

Although she did tell me that she and her grandfather—the man speaking to my father—were from New York, she wouldn't give me any information about her life back home, so I didn't press it. I asked her about silly things—favorite TV shows, favorite foods, the names of her pets—and she gobbled up each question. It was fairly clear to me that she loved the attention, and, like me, probably hadn't received much of it in her short life. Later on, I would find out that she was the third of three girls, with her having two sisters—one nine and one seven years older than her. She finally confided in me that her mother often referred to her as “the mistake” and that her home life was happier when she was with her grandparents and away from her mother.

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

“I would very much like it if she could stay for the afternoon. Please ask her grandfather if that would be okay,” I said with a clear urgency in my voice.

My father slowly looked up from Bunny and over to me and back to Bunny again, still without moving a muscle. He then said, very matter-of-factly, “I will see what I can do.”

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

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danced a jig. Yes, granted, I was 13, but this young child was the closest thing I had ever had to a real friend, and I was overjoyed.

I wasn't sure at that moment, of course, but it seemed that Bunny might be able to stay for more than just a few hours. Her grandfather almost seemed relieved to leave her with us. It couldn't have been easy for a 70-year-old man to constantly keep a four-year-old in check. I asked Marta if she could help Bunny switch out of her vomit-stained dress and into one of my father's shirts. I would have offered one of mine, but my clothing was probably just as stained as Bunny's dress was.

Soon after lunch, Bunny started to wander the house, interested to see what we were all about. Her favorite room quickly became the library, and she immediately picked out a book and asked me to read to her. It was a university-level economics book that my brother Michele had left after he graduated from college, and it was written in Italian. She didn't seem to mind and curled up next to me on the couch, looking at the various bar graphs and charts. It didn't take her long to drift off to sleep. I picked her up and walked over to my father's rocking chair. For the first time in my life, I got to really hold someone. I wanted to cry, it felt so good. She napped for over two hours, and I never put her down.

About an hour into her nap, Gio came in from the other room with his camera. Up until that point, I had refused to have a camera anywhere near me, but I was okay with him taking photos of her. One of my favorite photos to this day is of that afternoon with her sleeping on my shoulder, her big cheek resting against me, drooling down my shirt sleeve. Gio took the photo of her, but looking at the photograph today, in the background you can just make out my silhouette. And if you look hard enough, you will see that I was smiling. I was smiling.

One of my all-time favorite memories of Bunny was that first night, sitting down for dinner with my family after her nap. My brother Gio called Michele and told him that I had a new "friend." Michele grabbed the first train down and was back to our home in time for dinner; a three-hour train ride and a 20-minute taxi ride just to see the minor miracle of me having a friend, no matter how old. It was the first time that my father had all of his children home for dinner in years. Bunny was quite the draw.

Bunny sat catty-corner from me at the table, seated between my father (who was at the head of the table) and Gio. My father and Michele didn't know much English, but Gio and Luca were quite versed, so they did the majority of the talking. How was a four-year-old able to feel comfortable in a room full of strangers? She was such an enigma to me.

We were all having a lovely conversation and just finishing up dinner when Luca asked, "So, you're not afraid of him? You don't think he looks like a monster?" Luca was gesturing over to me with his fork.

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

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

Bunny, without even looking up, said, “Nah. I get that all the time, too.”

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

She said, “You know—got your nose! Got your nose!”

My brothers slowly looked at each other with wide eyes—Bunny thought it was a game. She believed someone had taken my nose and wasn’t giving it back. Wow. That’s why she wasn’t terrified of me. I looked over at Luca and Gio, who had huge smiles on their faces and were laughing silently. Michele and my father were still having a bit of trouble following the conversation but seemed intrigued, nonetheless.

She continued, “Yeah, but usually my grandfather gives mine back right away. He doesn’t keep it for, like, hours.” She looked up at me. “Who’s got your nose?” she said, gesturing at me with her chin. She seemed almost perturbed that someone had it.

I said solemnly, “My mother has my nose.”

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

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

I simply said, “My mother is dead.”

Bunny’s eyes grew large, and a giant scowl came across her face. She looked at me with a fierce look and said very slowly, “You mean to tell me that your mother died without giving you back your nose?!”

She looked down at her plate and started to huff. She said under her breath, “Motherfucking bitch!”

The table erupted in a roar of laughter. Michele sat looking at each of us quizzically as Luca and Gio laughed so hard that they were gasping for air. My father was not pleased. He didn’t know much English, but he had enough sense to know what “motherfucking bitch” was. It didn’t matter. After a few seconds, even I could see the smile begin to form in the corners of his mouth. My father looked at me and shook his head. I could see his eyes soften.

After dinner, my father sat down in his library to enjoy his aperitivo, and Bunny followed him in. Without asking permission, she started rummaging through the lower cabinets below the books and behind the family’s baby grand piano, almost fitting her entire body inside them. Surprisingly, my father let her, not seeming to mind that she was completely invading his most private and cherished spot in the house. I followed her, watching her as if she were the most entertaining show on television. She had no fear. I was afraid of everything, and I was starting to feel like I could learn a lot from her.

She pulled out some old coloring books that had belonged to my

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brothers. There were no crayons to speak of, but she found a pencil and laid on her belly under the baby grand, happy to shade in different areas of pages that had been only partially colored long ago, carelessly scribbling outside the lines. She looked up and saw me watching her. She motioned for me to crawl under the piano with her, and I obliged.

She passed me one of the coloring books and a pen, and I sat under the piano and colored like a small child. As I looked at the pen, I thought about how I never really had a childhood. My brothers had the gift of having a mother, even if just for a few years. My mother killed herself when I was two. I didn't remember her at all. My father did the best he could with me, but he was a very serious, educated man, and he treated me as a young man right from the start. He loved me, but he rarely hugged me and wasn't one for big shows of affection. And, here I was, sitting under furniture (something I couldn't remember ever having done before), shading pictures in a coloring book with a little person who could not have been more opposite of my father. Maybe this was an answer to a prayer. Bunny wasn't what I was expecting, but the good Lord almost never delivers what we are expecting, does She?

Had you seen me that summer, you would have thought me mad. I played with dolls, I pretended to be a dog (to Bunny's version of a cat), I swung for hours on the swing set that my father installed for Bunny, I played in our pool (the pool that had been in our yard since before I was born but that I had rarely been in, as my father was worried about sun exposure and how the pool water could damage or aggravate my nasal cavity and surrounding tissue), and I continued to color and make crafts. (My father invested a small mint in what seemed like thousands of crayons, markers, watercolors, coloring books, glue, glitter, and construction paper for Bunny.) My father allowed us plenty of time to be kids, but he also made sure that we spent time on our studies each day.

The worst torture Bunny had ever been through in her entire life, according to her, was sitting down each day with my father while he taught her basic Italian. It was an exercise in futility. Bunny would have rather taught the entire city of Firenze to speak English than learn Italian herself. But, each day, for a very long hour, they sat at the wooden table in the kitchen, as my father subjected himself to hearing a small child completely butcher our language.

Music lessons he left up to me. My father started to teach me to play the piano when I was just a young child, but I quickly surpassed him in skill at a fairly young age. I could read music with no effort, and there really wasn't any piece I couldn't master within a day or two. My father wanted us to do piano exercises for an hour, but I told Bunny that we could practice for 15 minutes several times a day, which worked out well for both of us. Why my father never caught on to that idea when working with her on Italian, I will

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never know. My father would be very upset if he knew this, but he and the four-year-old were quite similar when it came to stubbornness. I enjoyed sitting in the next room, listening to them argue, each in their own language. The part I enjoyed the most is when she purposefully would mispronounce the words my father was trying to teach her. He never caught on to what she was doing and would make her say the same phrase over and over and over again, with Bunny giving a different version each time. Sometimes I would peak around the corner to see her doing her best to stifle a smile, absolutely loving the fact that she was infuriating my father as much as she was. I was nothing but impressed. My father was the most influential and powerful person I knew, but in that moment, she had all the power.

Bunny stayed with us for that entire summer, and her grandfather came back for her in late August. He didn't abandon her; he knew she was being well taken care of, and he was incredibly appreciative to my father, his boss, for that. Bunny's grandfather, Gino, was a menial laborer, and he was quite good with his hands, so my father hired him to work on our country home, which just happened to be in Gino's hometown, Reggio di Calabria. My father was familiar with some of Gino's relatives that still lived in the seaside city and recommended his services when my father said he was going to need to have extensive work done on our vacation home.

The day Gino had come back to get her, Bunny looked like a different girl. She had arrived with literally no clothes or bags, but she was leaving with two brand-new suitcases full of clothing. My brother Luca, a shopaholic, absolutely adored taking her on weekly excursions to the shops near Palazzo Vecchio to buy cute little outfits and shoes for her. My father would ask our housekeeper, Marta, to take Bunny to get her haircut, and by the time she left, her hair no longer looked like she cut it herself. It was styled in a way that made her look like a young lady. Even Michele's fiancée, Greta, got Bunny a little white soft purse shaped like, you guessed it, a bunny.

It took me weeks to make Bunny understand that she couldn't stay with us longer. She didn't want to go back to New York, back to being completely ignored by her family. She was indifferent there. She was a star here, the center of attention almost all the time. What she didn't understand was that it was going to be the same for me. I was going to go back to being alone, ignored. I was more myself when she was around, even though I was acting like a young child for most of that time. I absolutely loved being around her.

When Gino arrived, I was just finishing up the pizza that Bunny had requested as her final meal before she left. As she ate, I told her I was going outside. I put on a surgical mask and walked outside with the intention of talking to her grandfather.

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

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would be possible for him to bring Bunny with him next summer when he returned.

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

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

Gino smiled and said, "Do you mean Deloris? Yes, I can ask her parents if that would be alright. Her mother is my daughter, and I don't mind telling you that she all but ignores the girl. She had her first two daughters at 15 and 17 years old, and her two older girls are almost like her girlfriends. But Deloris? She doesn't really pay that poor girl much attention at all."

Her name was Deloris. Deloris. What a truly horrible name. Do you know what Deloris means in Italian? It means sorrow. I don't know why, I didn't know Bunny's mother, but I felt like she did that on purpose. I already disliked her. I felt as if I could hate her mother as much as I hated my own. So, no matter what, I was going to do everything I could to make sure that Bunny was with us that next summer.

3 CHAPTER THREE: BUNNY AT 5

It was late April, eight months since Bunny had left. I hadn't heard a word from her during that time, but I knew that was probably going to be impossible. She was just a little kid, and I assumed that her parents weren't going to help her send any letters to me. But I wrote to her every week. I wasn't sure if she was going to be able to read the cards and letters I sent, and I figured her family wasn't going to help her with that either, but I was hoping she had a nice teacher or aide at her preschool that would read them to her. In the end, I found out that it was a neighbor, Mrs. Styler, that would read my correspondence to her.

I also found out that that was where Bunny was getting dinner each night. I learned that Bunny's mother was overly concerned with her own appearance and only kept diet foods in the house—low-carbohydrate foods, such as hard-boiled eggs and cottage cheese. Bunny was not permitted to touch these foods, but her mother didn't stock any other food in the house for fear that it would tempt her to break her diet.

Her older sisters were able to eat at their friends' houses or would walk down to the avenue to get a pizza slice, but Bunny didn't have that luxury. Thankfully, lunch was provided to her at her preschool, and dinners were given through the generosity of the Stylers. Mrs. Styler was a lovely woman and would call "Deloris!" out her front door when dinner was ready. Bunny was usually playing outside (her mother often told her that she couldn't come back in the house until the streetlights had come on), so she almost always heard the call for dinner. Mrs. Styler wasn't a great cook, but she allowed Bunny to eat as much as she wanted. It was comforting for me to know that there were people looking out for her when my family and I couldn't.

By the beginning of May, I was becoming impatient. I bothered my father daily to try to contact Gino, but it wasn't always easy to reach him, as he didn't have his own telephone. My father could only reach Gino when he was

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at his place of business and only before his shift started. He was the janitor for a primary school in the city, and once his shift began, it would be difficult to locate him in the building. After several weeks' worth of calls, my father had finally been able to talk to Gino, but he didn't have good news. He said that he hadn't spoken to either Bunny or her mother since they had returned from Italy last summer. He did, however, offer to give us her phone number.

My father called Bunny's home, but no one answered. In the best English he could muster, he left a message, asking for "Deloris' mother or father to please return my call." Of course, they never called back, so my father tried every day. Then he tried calling twice a day. Then, it was three times. Finally, by late May, just before Gino was leaving the U.S. for Italy, my father finally got through to Bunny's mother. She was a rather cold woman, and my father knew right from the start that it was going to be a difficult conversation for him, not only due to the language barrier.

I sat next to my father, watching him as he listened to Bunny's mother speak, as she did most of the talking. Then, I could hear the talking stop on the other end of the phone, and my father stopped and thought. After a long pause, he took a deep breath and said, "Okay, I agree. One-thousand dollars. I will talk to the bank. Thank you very much."

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

He looked sad, but with a smile on his face, he said, "You have your wish. Bunny will be traveling here in four days with her grandfather."

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

My father looked at the ground and said, "No, my boy. Plane tickets are not nearly that expensive. Bunny's mother would not allow her to come here unless I paid her one-thousand dollars." My father looked sad. "Her mother will only let her daughter come here if it benefits her, if it lines her own pocket. I've never heard of such a thing. That poor child. So, I agreed to pay her the money."

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

I was incredibly excited for Bunny's arrival. I cleaned my room downstairs and organized the books we were going to read together and found new piano pieces I could teach her. But two days before her arrival, I got a sinking feeling in my stomach. I realized something terrible. I went into my father's study, where I found him working on some medical documents. I sat down on the opposite side of his beautiful, large desk, where his visitors would normally sit.

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

My father sat quietly and listened, letting me express all of my worries and fears. And once I was finished, he spoke.

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

Two days later, I was standing in the courtyard, waiting to see my brother’s car, as Giovanni offered to pick up Bunny and Gino from the airport. Gio called from there, saying that they would be at the house within an hour. I stood outside that entire time with my umbrella, trying to avoid the sun, as any sunburn would be incredibly painful to my already damaged skin. An hour passed—no car. I was so nervous, I was almost hyperventilating. My father came outside and waited with me, as did Luca and his current boyfriend, Piero.

We lived on a very busy street in the hills of Firenze, so we could not have a traditional driveway, as we would never be able to safely reverse out of it. Instead, we had a small semi-circular driveway that could snugly fit three Italian cars (probably only two American cars). The driveway had a gate on either side of the semi-circle, one for cars entering and one for exiting. There was a small driveway off to the side of the semi-circle that led to a garage where my father kept his prized Jaguar XJ6. There were six steps that lead up from the driveway to the courtyard, and I was waiting near the top step, hoping that being higher up would give me a good vantage point to see when Gio’s car was coming up the hill.

And then I saw it. Gio’s car pulled up to the gate, and it started to open slowly. The car just started to pull into the driveway when the back door popped open, and out tumbled Bunny, a bag, a blanket, a stuffed animal that I gave her last summer, a book, and some other items, all onto the driveway. She landed right on top of the pile. Gio stopped the car with a screech, trying not to run over the child.

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

She cried, “I missed you so, so, so much!”

I held her tight and looked over at my father. He said, “I think she

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remembers you.”

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

Bunny was not the same little kid who left us nine months prior. There was a toughness to her that concerned me and, well, frightened me a bit. After a few days, she started to open up, and I was able to coax out of her that her mother enjoyed pitting her two sisters against her and often encouraged them to torture her. Her mother instigated her older daughters to sit on Bunny, to tickle her until she couldn't breathe, and worse, to lock her in her hope chest, telling her she was dead and it was her coffin. The list went on. I couldn't bear to hear it, but Bunny told the stories like they were her badges of courage.

I contemplated asking my father to find someone that could help Bunny to deal with the abusive situation but changed my mind quickly when I realized one of two things would happen: 1) her mother would be angry that Bunny talked about the abuse and would never allow her to come here again, or 2) even worse—it could allow Bunny to heal only to be sent back to that home, to have it start all over again. No, after some thought, I decided that the best course of action would be to help teach her how to defend herself. Clearly this was something I would have to keep from my father. If he knew what I was planning on teaching her over the summer, he would not be pleased.

Bunny also showed up with a few bad habits, such as stealing. I understood—at home in New York, she was denied food and presents and treats, so she probably needed to steal. No one there was going to give her a candy bar, so she became very good at lifting items while going undetected. She was also much younger than the average thief. I don't think most people would suspect a five-year-old of robbing them blind.

The first summer Bunny stayed with us, we almost never left the house and property. Occasionally, she went off shopping or on little excursions with one of my brothers, but that was it. Now, she wanted to get out of the house all the time. It was like if she stayed in one place too long, something bad was going to happen. Maybe that was true for her homelife back in the States.

Our house was up the hill from Piazzale Michelangelo, which is across the Arno River from what is the touristy area of Firenze. If you have seen postcards of panoramic scenes of the silhouette of the buildings in downtown Florence, most likely that photo was taken from Piazzale Michelangelo. Getting to the Piazzale from our house was easy, as it was a straight shot downhill. Getting back home again was something else. Our home was well up into the hills, past any tourist spot. It would take a good two hours to walk back, with the walk down being only about 30 minutes.

Almost every night, Bunny would wake me up around 3:00 in the morning, and we would walk down and sit in the park for an hour. We never

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went during the day, as she knew that people would stare at me. So, in the dead of night, we would enjoy the view that thousands of tourists every year got to appreciate. She would bring snacks with her, usually a small bag filled with cheese, crackers, and grapes, and would pack a thermos of ice water or juice. We sat on the stone railing, eating our small feast, and it was the closest thing I had ever had to a picnic.

I felt normal, even though we were sitting there in the middle of the night. The police would drive by on a regular basis, checking the park for ne'er-do-wellers. The first time this happened, they stopped, shone a light on us, and drove over to where we were sitting. Bunny, who was afraid of nothing, went over to the police car and started talking to them in English. I don't believe either of the police officers in the vehicle were able to speak English, but somehow, she found a way to communicate with them. Bunny walked away from the vehicle, and the officers looked over at me and waved. I gave a very small wave back, a bit shell shocked that this small child could talk her way out of getting in trouble for being in a park that was closed to the public after sundown. She climbed back up onto the railing and continued eating, not even looking at me or acknowledging the stunned look on my face. I stared at her in disbelief.

Finally, she looked up and said, "What?"

I asked what she had told the police officers.

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

"They understood you?" I asked.

"I guess."

And that was the end of the discussion.

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

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

Bunny would always tell me the stories when she returned. She always remembered exactly where she lifted the treat from and would proudly tell me the story with all the details. She stole a lot of snacks and small toys that summer from all over Firenze. Yet, each and every time she did, I would

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make her copy a letter I had written to the store owner, explaining that she had “accidentally” taken an object from their place of business. Her letters were full of misspellings and were barely legible, but oddly enough, she would never fight me in writing them. In fact, most of the time, she told me what she wanted me to write, and all of her letters offered what I believed to be sincere apologies. When she would finish copying the letter, I would then also write a letter in Italian, below what she had written, and would include with it more than enough money to cover whatever she had taken. There was nothing I could do to deter Bunny’s stealing, as I was never there when she did it, but I would make absolutely sure that she admitted to it and that those establishments were reimbursed for her theft.

I did not condone Bunny’s behavior, but I never scolded her for it, either. I felt like it was her small way of taking control of her life. No one took care of her, so she was going to learn how to take care of herself. She didn’t want to depend on anyone.

I think she was waiting to get into trouble for what she had done, or, at the very least, for me to be angry with her, but that never happened. I could see that after a few weeks, she started to soften, and the angry, little girl that arrived was a bit more contrite. Bunny was not one to admit to wrongdoing and was always quick to blame something that was wrong on someone else—a technique I’m assuming her older siblings taught her. I am sure that she had been blamed for many things over the years that her sisters had done, and she was learning by example.

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

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

I was just waking up, so I was sure I hadn’t heard her properly. Plus, although my English skills were good, they weren’t perfect by any stretch, and there were often times I had trouble understanding the message she was trying to convey.

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

“No. I’m a Jehovah Witness.”

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

I said to him in Italian, “Do you know about...?”

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

She looked down, almost ashamed.

“Jehovah Witness” she said, under her breath.

My father blinked his eyes several times and stared off in a thoughtful

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way.

He looked up at me and said, “Testimoni di Geova.”

Papà had very rudimentary English skills, but as a doctor, he was familiar with Jehovah’s Witnesses. There were patients that would come into the hospital after accidents, desperately needing to be given blood. He knew of several who had died over the years for the refusal to be given any transfusions. Jehovah’s Witnesses are almost all universally opposed to it.

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

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

One week prior, Bunny told me the story of her mother getting very upset with her three daughters for not buying her nicer presents for Mother’s Day. Later, I would find out that Bunny’s mother also had the family celebrate her own birthday as well as her and Mr. Riddle’s wedding anniversary. So, Bunny had purposefully been given incorrect information about the rules and codes of the religion, and Mrs. Riddle falsely blamed the religion for her reluctance to buy clothes or presents for her children. Instead, Bunny’s mother, it seemed, enjoyed picking and choosing which days she wanted to celebrate. The outward selfishness of it all was quite unbelievable. It seemed she truly had no shame. The holidays that benefitted and honored Mrs. Riddle were the only ones that were acknowledged.

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

In our family, if my brothers or I saw an expensive toy that we wanted, we would usually be told by Papà, “Maybe you’ll get it for your birthday” or something else like “We’ll see,” and then we would find it under the tree at Christmas. That was not the case for Bunny. And, I knew this to be true. That year, when she had returned to us, the only clothing I found in her

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suitcase was the items we had purchased for her the summer prior, all faded and stained and too small for her. She didn't have anything in her suitcase that I hadn't seen previously.

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

Bunny Day was excessive. We boys were all a bit too old to still have birthday parties, and we didn't have a sister, so we took this celebration to a whole other level. And I loved those parties, not just because I was happy that Bunny got a day all to herself but also because it was probably the first thing that my brothers and I truly did together as a group.

We all sat down in early July and would plan out the event. My brothers came up with the idea of buying a whole assortment of Venetian masks that the guests could pick up at the front gate and wear at the party. By doing this, I could truly be a part of the festivities without anyone staring at me. I'm sure I would still get some looks, as some of the scars on my face would still be visible, but none of the guests would be recoiling back in horror seeing the empty space where a nose should be.

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

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

The event was well-attended, and there was a large pile of brightly colored presents for Bunny to open. She loved every minute of it, as any child would. And, the best part was that after that very first Bunny Day, she never had the desire to steal again. Her theft spree lasted just over a month and was gone by July 31st, never to return again.

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

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to the weird, deformed kid brother of his boyfriend was a good man, as far as I was concerned.

Piero was an incredibly good-looking man, and he was the only boyfriend that my brother ever had that was introduced to the family. Luca was probably the best looking of the four of us brothers. My three brothers were all on the thin side and all looked similar in terms of facial structure. They all had a bit of the aquiline nose and dark, wavy hair. But Luca was the only brother who devoted a good deal of time to his physique. He worked only part-time at a clothing store, so he had plenty of time to devote to sculpting his body, and he enjoyed the looks he received because of it. He used to always say that he wanted to have the body of David (Michelangelo's famous sculpture), and truthfully, I think he was fairly close to achieving it. Luca once told me that Piero was a former soldier in the Forze Armate Italiane and was currently part of the Carabinieri, the Italian military police force, yet he was probably as soft-spoken as I was. I liked him instantly.

Piero sat down next to me while everyone was playing *sedie musicali*, what I believe Americans refer to as "musical chairs." It was odd to me that my brothers' friends, some who were well into their 20s, were enjoying the game as much as Bunny. I guess the nine bottles of wine that had been consumed within the first hour had something to do with it. Piero looked at me directly, smiled, and looked away.

"You know, I didn't bring a present for Bunny today. I didn't have time to stop and get her something on the way. So, I had Luca ask her what she wanted for her birthday. I told him to tell her that I would do my best to get her whatever she wanted. I watched her reaction when Luca told her this. Of course, I couldn't understand a word of their conversation. Anyway, Bunny got a very sly look about her and said something back to Luca. And you know what? Your brother gasped and then laughed. I asked him what she said, and he whispered that he would tell me later. Up until that point, I couldn't care less what a five-year-old would want for her birthday. Now, I'm kind of dying to know."

I smiled. I had no idea what Bunny wanted and told him so. Piero continued to sit next to me, and we both watched in silence as the adults continued to play games meant for small children. Finally, when the 30 minutes that was set aside for games was over and the cake was being served, Piero called Luca over. Piero didn't even have to ask Luca what Bunny said, as the words were spilling out of Luca's mouth as he was walking up to us.

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

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

Piero laughed and said, "Okay. I'll make her a deal. I will come here once

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a week and will teach her some basic self-defense strategies. We'll market it to her as a course on how to beat the crap out of someone.”

I laughed. Bunny was going to love it.

Piero kept his promise and would come to our house every Wednesday morning that summer and would teach her a few basic techniques. I would sit and watch and take copious notes. Bunny stuck to the regiment and would willingly practice the techniques throughout the week. She would show off her perfected moves to him each Wednesday, and he would then add more routines to her list for the following week. I would set up weekly goals for her and chart her progress. Bunny was a beast. She was fierce and put all of her effort into it.

Between Piero's workouts and the walks each night back up from the Piazzale Michelangelo, Bunny was a tough, fit little kid by the time she left at the end of the summer. I later learned that Bunny never needed that training to use as protection from her sisters. That summer, they had both found boyfriends and were more interested in spending time with them than tormenting their little sister. But I believe those workouts helped Bunny in more ways than one. She had gained more confidence that summer and did not seem to carry around as much anger with her as when she arrived.

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

Two weeks after Bunny returned back to the States, I was devastated to learn that Piero was shot and killed in a call that he had responded to while on duty. The emergency was called in under the guise of a stated cardiac distress at a home. He and his partner rushed to the scene and were the first to arrive. As they entered the home, they probably knew almost immediately that it was an ambush. They were both shot and killed instantly, and their bodies were dragged into the home's bathroom. The other officers of the Carabinieri were able to diffuse the situation without any additional bloodshed, thankfully.

Piero was later hailed as a hero.

I didn't inform Bunny of any of this until many years later, telling her that next summer that the reason why Piero didn't come around anymore was that he and Luca had broken up. I didn't know what else to say. She had enough sadness to deal with in her life in New York. All I wanted was her life in Italy with me to be her safe haven.

4 CHAPTER FOUR: BUNNY AT 6

The next May, we still had not heard from Bunny's family again, and it was getting close to her usual arrival date. We knew her parents would never call us, as they wouldn't waste the money on an international call, especially when it only benefitted Bunny and not themselves. So, my father went through the same rigamarole again, calling and calling until he could get through to Bunny's parents. What her parents didn't realize was that my father was a very well-known and well-respected plastic surgeon in Italy, and his practice primarily focused on helping people with birth defects. (Lucky for me, right? I knew in a few years' time, I was going to get my nose, and it was going to look good.) So, here was this talented surgeon, wasting hours and hours of his precious time to call and call Bunny's parents to try to talk to them. I will give him credit—he did it, he made those calls, and he never complained about it. He knew how much it meant to me to have her there.

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

Bunny showed up with her grandfather the following week, but she wasn't her normal, jovial self that was getting out of Gio's car. Her grandfather Gino wasn't looking well. He looked very tired and frail, and I could tell Bunny was worried about him. She told me that she thought he was going to die on the plane ride over. So, we planned on Gino staying with us for a couple of months that summer to regain his health with my father treating him. But he started to feel better quickly and only ended up staying with us for a few weeks, as he wanted to get down to Reggio di Calabria to see his family. So, my father, the generous soul that he is, allowed Gino to stay in our vacation home that summer, the same home that Gino had

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completed renovations on the year prior. Bunny's grandfather was able to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

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

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

From that day forward, Gino's parents raised his children. Broken-hearted, he went and worked in the coal mines upstate six days a week to support his children and parents. He came home one day a week but was so exhausted that he slept most of the time. Gino's parents were not the kindest people and had no desire to raise three small children. So, Bunny's mother, resourceful as she was, got pregnant at 14 years old by a local Puerto Rican boy but claimed that the father was a different boy, a successful young man from a good Irish-Catholic family. Bunny's mother had the child, a girl, and within four months, got pregnant again to ensure keeping the meal ticket that was Bunny's father.

Bunny's two sisters looked nothing alike, and Bunny's father should have known fairly quickly that the first child was not his, if not for the fact that he worked 12-hour days at his job where he quickly moved up the ladder. By the time Bunny had come along, her father was making a very nice salary, and Bunny's mother was rewarded for all of her conniving and deceit with a beautiful house, a nice car, and the ability to lounge around the house all day, hanging out and going shopping with her teenage daughters when they arrived home from school. (Years later, Bunny's mother found herself a boy toy and divorced Bunny's father. There was over six million dollars that the couple were able to split between them, so they both were able to enjoy their golden years in comfort and wealth.)

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

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nice quality time to spend together.

Bunny was becoming more mature and independent, and her wanderlust continued to grow. She was pushing me more and more to venture outside of the house, especially to go bowling, of all things.

Bunny's only friend in New York was a girl named Theresa. Theresa lived two doors down, and the only reason she was allowed over was because Theresa's mother and Bunny's mother would study the Bible together. Theresa's parents enjoyed bowling, so they would take Theresa and Bunny with them when they went. The kids were spending almost every night at the lanes and quickly got to learn the names of all the workers there. Theresa's parents signed their daughter up for bowling lessons and paid for Bunny to go, too, knowing that Bunny's parents would never pay for something like that for her. So, every Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday afternoon, Theresa and Bunny would bowl for two hours. According to Bunny, after seven months of this, both girls got quite good. So, what do you think Bunny wanted to do for fun in the evenings once she arrived in Italy?

The closest bowling alley was over 10 kilometers away. My father wasn't going to permit us to go bowling, which was great as far as I was concerned, as I didn't want to go bowling anyway. I certainly didn't want to be in a public place during the day, and I certainly wasn't going to be allowed to bring a six-year-old with me to a bowling alley in the middle of nowhere at night. But Bunny was adamant. She decided that instead of heading for our nightly picnics at Piazzale Michelangelo, we should try riding my father's bike to the bowling alley near Livorno. She nagged until I relented. She always won.

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

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

We walked into the alley and almost no one was there. Bunny went up to the counter and spoke to the attendant. He was in college and was studying English, so he was happy to chat with her. He gave her shoes, and Bunny

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went and got herself a ball. I didn't bowl that first night and was happy to just sit and watch her.

Bunny was truly a terrible bowler. For all the hype, she had no idea what she was doing and often found her ball in the gutter. But she was thrilled. Any pins she was able to topple received a squeal of happiness from her. She played two games, and when she was done, she gave the lire that I gave her to the attendant to pay for her session.

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

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

We left the bowling alley that night at 1:55 a.m. I still had a 1.5 hour ride home, which meant that we wouldn't get back until close to 3:30. I was already exhausted from the bike ride over, and now I had to get back on the bike and do it again—except the ride back was miserable. Bunny kept falling asleep on the back of the bike. She would list from one side to the other, almost falling out of her seat. There was only a small lap belt, and the bike seat was made for a much smaller child, not a chubby six-year-old, so the thin strap basically wasn't helping much at all. I had to stop every so often and prop Bunny back up in her seat.

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

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

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

He looked quite amused as I struggled to get the bike up the six steps from the driveway to the courtyard. I appreciated him not pressing me any further. I took Bunny off the bike and handed the still-sleeping child to my father, saying nothing. I dragged myself downstairs to my room and slept until I was awoken at dinnertime that evening by Bunny. She was jumping on my bed, as happy as a clam, screaming, "Can we go again tonight? Can we? Can we?"

It was the only time in my life I actually considered smacking her. But, as always, I sighed and gave in. I said, "Sure."

Let's be honest, I needed those small escapes as much as she did. I didn't

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have enough money for us to take a taxi each way and to pay for her bowling, so we kept riding the bike there and back. However, I did rig up the seat so that she would be a bit more stationary on the ride back. I put a small pillow, a small blanket, and two of my belts in a sack and brought it with us each evening. Just as we left the bowling alley each night, she would hold the pillow against her belly, and I would wrap the blanket around her. Then, I would link the two belts to each other and wrap them around her and the seat back, securing Bunny, the blanket, and the pillow in the seat. When she fell asleep, she leaned against the pillow, not the belt, so she seemed to be quite comfortable. Within a few trips, she was an expert at knowing what to do, so all I had to do was lift her up, put her in the seat, and get the belt around her and the chair. It was like clockwork.

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

By the end of that summer, I had discovered two things: 1) that I was getting stronger and had built up enough endurance to get us both home in under an hour, even with her sleeping on the back of that bike, and 2) that the 2,000₣ (about 1 American U.S. dollar) we paid each night to bowl two games and rent two pairs of shoes was not nearly enough to cover the costs. I probably should have realized that early on, but with never having really been shopping or spending money on anything in my life, I was pretty much unaware of the cost of things.

It seems that on that first morning when Bunny and I arrived home at 5:45 after that horrific ride back from the bowling alley, it was fairly easy for my father to deduce that we were sneaking out at night. He asked my brother Giovanni to follow us in his car the next night. Gio sat in his vehicle down the street from our driveway and waited for us to emerge. He couldn't believe it, following behind us for over 10 kilometers to a bowling alley in a neighboring town. He waited in his car down the street from the alley, hiding his car as best he could so we wouldn't see him, which we didn't.

After Gio saw us leave the alley and ride off on the bike, he went up to the main door of the building and knocked on the glass, alerting the attendant. The gentleman motioned to my brother that they were closed, but Gio held up a cinquecentomila lire banknote (equal to almost \$300 U.S. dollars) to the window, and the man opened the door. Gio said that he was my brother and asked the attendant to use that money to pay for any games that Bunny and I played. He also said that he would continue to bring in that same amount of money each month, as long as the attendant didn't tell Bunny and me what he was doing. The attendant happily agreed. In fact, he would even give us food and drinks each night we went there to bowl, saying that it

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was left over from the day and that he would have to throw it out if we didn't eat it. Yet, Bunny and I never caught on to what Gio was doing.

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

5 CHAPTER FIVE: BUNNY AT 7

We assumed that the next summer would be a bit easier to get Bunny to our home, as my father clearly understood what Bunny's parents wanted. He called them and, as her parents never answered their phone, left a message in English that merely said, "I will be wiring to you 3,000 American dollars to the same account as last year. If there has been any change to your banking situation, please call me within the next 48 hours to let me know. If not, you will be receiving the money by Friday."

This time was different.

Within five minutes, the phone rang, and Bunny's mother was on the other end of the line. My father put me on the phone to talk to her. She stated in a very matter-of-fact tone that Bunny's grandfather, Gino, had died five months earlier and that Bunny would not be able to go to Italy any longer. She hung up the phone before I could respond and without saying goodbye.

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

I slowly hung up the phone and turned around to tell my father the news. He seemed almost as disappointed as I was. He sat sullen at his desk, his head down. Several seconds later, he forcefully slammed his palms on his desk and stood up quickly. He looked at me, shaking a pointed finger in my direction.

"I have an idea. A good one."

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

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sprang towards it to answer it. Turns out that Michele was already in the United States and was already in New York City for business. He was traveling with his father-in-law, who owned the financial company he worked at, and was shadowing him, trying to conduct face-to-face meetings with all of their clients.

My father does not overreact, so when he left that urgent message for Michele, my brother assumed that someone had died. My father spoke into the phone and explained the situation to Michele. He told him to find Bunny's family home and to bring the \$3,000 directly to them. He assumed that once Bunny's mother saw the money, she would gladly hand over her child to him, even though it was a man she had never laid eyes on before. He believed that she would surrender Bunny's passport to this stranger without a word and close the door.

My father was not wrong. Michele said that the interaction with Bunny's mother took all of 30 seconds. Bunny ran out the door the instant her mother had the cash in her hand. She didn't even bother getting a bag for her things. When we heard from Michele that she was not going to be traveling with any clothing or supplies at all, it was at that moment that we had decided that we were always going to keep a small cabinet in my room dedicated to Bunny's items. It didn't matter if she didn't have a suitcase with her from now on. Our home was her home, and she was going to have a permanent spot to keep her things.

Bunny stayed in New York with Michele and his father-in-law for several days before heading to Firenze with them. She was okay with staying in the hotel room alone while they went to their business meetings, and she spent the day watching television and drawing pictures on the hotel stationery. Bunny introduced the men to a store called Kmart, and they watched her shop for a few items to wear until she got to Italy. For as defiant and rambunctious of a girl that I knew that she was, according to Michele's father-in-law, she couldn't have been a nicer or more polite child.

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

She stopped in her tracks and said, "What?"

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

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

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gained a couple of kilograms and put on a bit of muscle mass every summer but would lose most of it during the nine months she was gone.

Our courtyard was not level. It was tiered. The house, garage, and pool were on the top level, then back a bit further was a grassy lower level, with several lounge chairs and the swing set my father had installed during Bunny's first year with us, then the bottom tier was an old garden that had become overgrown. The previous fall, my father hired workers to come in and clear everything out, as no one had really taken care of any of the plants down there in years. It had basically become unusable to us. So, they ripped everything out. Nothing was left—it was a large open dirt patch. My father asked me what I wanted to do with that area. I think he secretly hoped I would do something unique with the space or maybe even start a new hobby. But, in all reality, he should have guessed my answer.

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

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

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

No English translation was necessary. Even my father understood, as trampoline is *trampolino* in Italian. He gave an emphatic, "No!"

Bunny and I must have both been giving him the same look, the kind of look that combined pleading and desperation.

He turned away from us and said to himself, "Buon Dio, devo essere pazzo."

Bunny asked, "What did he say?"

I said, "He said we're getting a trampoline."

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

Same thing.

Within a week, we had a giant trampoline. I don't know if it was giant or not, as the only trampoline I had ever been on was the tiny one that was my mother's. My brothers told me that she had used it years ago for her exercises. This one looked nothing like that. It was immense. It was perfect. It was about 3.5 meters across with a large net around it and bright red padding covering the springs. As the worker was putting it together, I thought, "We are going to be out here jumping until all hours."

That was until I actually got on the thing. I jumped for about 60 seconds and was exhausted. Bunny, on the other hand, lived up to her name and could jump on it for up to an hour without stopping. There was an additional bonus for the trampoline, as Bunny could see over the concrete retaining walls into the neighbors' yards when she put her effort into it.

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

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

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She resumed her jumping and shouted, “Hey (jump) who’s speaking English?!”

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

Bunny panted, “Hey! (jump) You! (jump) What’s your name? (jump)”

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

Bunny replied, “I’m Bunny. (jump) I live here (jump) with my friends. (jump)”

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Miss Bunny. Is that your real name?” Bernard asked.

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

“I’m originally from South Africa. Do you know where that is?” Bernard asked.

“Yeah, (jump) of course! (jump) It’s in (jump) South Africa (jump)!” Bunny said.

I could hear Bernard laughing from the other side of the fence. “Well, I cannot argue with that logic!”

I stood up slowly and peaked over the fence. A beautiful blond-haired woman walked up next to Bernard. She smiled and waved at Bunny and said in a thick German accent, “Hello! I’m Brigitte! I’m Bernard’s wife.”

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

Both Bernard and Brigitte laughed.

“No, I’m not an actress, but I think you’ve now become my new best friend!”

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

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

Bernard and Brigitte looked at each other.

Brigitte said, “Really?”

Bunny said, “Sure!” offering to host perfect strangers in our home.

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

Bunny looked at me. I stared at her with wide eyes. She stopped jumping,

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giving me the same look back. She stuck her arms out in a “What?” kind of gesture.

I cowered and said, “Buonvicini, settantasei.”

Bunny said, “Bom maccini (jump), sabana say. (jump)”

I stood up to where they could see me and said, “Hello! We are at settantasei. Buonvicini, 76.”

The two of them, both as good looking as could be, smiled and Brigitte said, “Wonderful. Settantasei. Shall we say 8:00 p.m.? Can we bring some wine?”

I said, “That would be wonderful,” not knowing what the hell I was talking about.

“See you soon!” Bunny cried out to them.

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

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

“They were nice! And we don’t have any other friends. Don’t you want to have friends?”

Bunny looked like she was going to cry. I don’t think she had any idea of what she had done. She was just being kind. And those nice people behind us were happy to take this little child up on her offer. They were either the nicest people on the planet or just completely crazy.

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

“Oh, no. What happened?” he said with a slight chuckle, knowing the kinds of trouble she got into on a regular basis.

“She invited our English-speaking neighbors in the back over for dinner... tonight. 20:00. Tonight. And they speak English. Only English. Maybe some German.”

I had not anticipated his reaction. I thought he was going to be livid.

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

I pulled the receiver away from my head and stared at it. Was this my father that I was speaking to? Was there another Dottore Aceti at the hospital?

I put the receiver back up to my ear and said, “What? Seriously? I thought you’d be mad.”

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

And with that, my father hung up on me.

I was worried for nothing. Bernard and Brigitte Kuhmallo could not have been more lovely people, and they treated all of us at the table, especially me, with kindness and respect. I didn’t have to worry about explaining the surgical mask on my face. Bunny had told them my whole life story the instant they arrived at our home. Maybe it was best to just get it out of the way early on.

Bernard and Brigitte told us the story of them meeting each other in South Africa while Bernard was working on his Ph.D. in Political Science and Brigitte was doing her master’s work in Africana Studies. They married shortly after graduation, and they had spent the last eight years traveling and teaching at different colleges and universities all over the world. Bernard was able to secure a full-time teaching position at the Gonzaga University extension campus in town, and Brigitte was able to get a part-time teaching position at Villa La Pietra, New York University’s extension campus. Brigitte loved it, and often she would take the number 17 bus up above the campus to the small town of Fiesole before heading home each evening. My father joined in the conversation, too, and spoke better English than I knew he could. Either he had been practicing on his own, or Bunny was rubbing off on him more than he realized. I assumed the former. His English was too good for him to be emulating Bunny.

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

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

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

I let it go after the Kuhmallos walked out our gate and down the hill, out of ear- and eyeshot.

My father asked me why I was crying. I said, “She called me her friend.” He smiled and tears welled up in his eyes.

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He gave me a hug, something he normally didn't do, and said, "Yes. You did a very good job tonight. And you will make more friends as you allow more people to get to know you."

He let me go, stood in front of me, and grabbed my shoulders. "Now, my boy," he said, "you get to go and clean off the dining room table. Marta can do the dishes in the morning."

He kissed my forehead and went into the house. I stood there for a moment, thinking about what had just transpired. I smiled. I went into the house, entered the library, and pulled Bunny out from under the piano. I carried her downstairs and put her to bed. I then, very happily, cleaned up the dining room and library and washed all of the dishes so Marta wouldn't have to.

6 CHAPTER SIX: BUNNY AT 8

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

Bunny thought that was the coolest day ever, but when I told her that we don't celebrate Halloween in Italy, she was quite disappointed. All Saints Day on November 1st was celebrated, however. So, it was like having my birthday on the 3rd of July—not a big deal. So, it was up to my father to fly to the U.S. to go get her. My father didn't like to leave Firenze, no less to travel across the ocean to another country. In fact, he had never even had a passport.

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

According to my father, the flight to the U.S. was quite pleasing. He enjoyed his meal and slept most of the flight.

My father is not a dumb man; he planned everything perfectly to ensure that he would have no reason whatsoever to leave the airport terminal. He arranged for a colleague of Michele's, Jonathan, to go to Bunny's home and retrieve the child. He was also tasked with giving Bunny's mother her \$4,000 in payment, being sure to have Bunny's passport in his possession before the money left his hands. Jonathan was to be paid very handsomely for his time. Everything went perfectly. Or so it seemed...

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Jonathan arrived at the airport with Bunny and met my father at the predetermined spot, just outside the first-class lounge. As usual, Bunny had no luggage to speak of—just the clothes on her back—so Jonathan was able to get Bunny to the airport well before their scheduled meeting time. My father was there early, as well, and was almost as thrilled to see Bunny as she was to see him. Their flight back to Italy was going to leave in two hours, and they were both going to ride in first-class. Bunny's eyes grew big when she heard that. She mouthed "Wow!" without actually saying the words, according to Jonathan. Then, my father asked for Bunny's passport, and Jonathan stopped in his tracks.

He looked up at my father and said, "I forgot... I forgot to get the passport."

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

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

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

An hour and 27 minutes later, my father could see Jonathan running down the hall towards them, completely disheveled and dripping with sweat. My father grabbed Bunny's passport without thanking him and took off running down the hall towards the security checkpoint. Security checkpoints were a fairly new thing during that time period, and neither the guards nor the passengers quite knew what they were supposed to do. It took them 22 minutes to get through security and 12 minutes to run to the gate. By the time they got there, the door to the gate was closed, and there were no passengers in the waiting area.

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

My father looked down at Bunny. They had no clothes, no toothbrushes, no place to stay, nowhere to go. They were both hungry and tired. The only difference was that Bunny was enjoying every minute of it. They left their gate in search of a ticketing agent. My father was only able to get a partial refund on the plane tickets for the flight they missed, and to buy new plane tickets without any advance notice was ridiculously expensive. The good news: They had seats on the first flight out the next morning. The bad news: The seats were in coach. It was almost 20:00, and their flight was leaving at

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5:50 in the morning, meaning that they would have to be back to the airport by 4:00 in the morning to make their flight.

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

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

She replied, "Certo!" (meaning "Certainly!")

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

My father was awoken a few hours later by Bunny tapping on his face. She was screaming, "Hey, Papà, this lady said we need to get on the plane now!"

It was the gate agent, and she was trying to let my father know that the door to the plane was about to close. They were the last passengers to board the plane; the flight crew shut and locked the door behind them. They were on an American Airlines flight in economy class that had a 3-4-3 seat configuration, and of course, their two seats were right in the middle in the group of four at the very back of the plane.

Bunny and my father had to climb over a large, overweight man to reach their seats, but he was nice enough and was very happy to see that he was going to be sitting next to a child during that very long flight. He told Bunny in a joking manner that he was used to having people sitting next to him complain to the flight attendants about his girth spilling over into their seat. But he said he had a feeling that she wasn't going to do that to him.

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

She nodded her head yes.

He asked, "You sleep?" She shook her head no.

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

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

My father realized that if she was walking around while he slept, there was a good chance that someone might have stolen his money. He feverishly searched his body for his passport, Bunny's passport, and his wallet. He had them all and breathed a sigh of relief. The flight home seemed far, far longer for my father than the semi-enjoyable flight to the U.S. in first class. He stayed awake and let Bunny sleep, leaning against him. He could tell that he was starting to smell, as he hadn't washed or changed his clothes in two days.

As a physician, my father used to always tell his older patients who wouldn't bathe often enough, "If you can smell your own body odor a little,

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that means everyone else can smell you a lot.” He knew that he and Bunny had just about reached that point. The *pièce de résistance*, however, was when the large gentleman next to Bunny took out his baloney and egg salad sandwich and started eating it. If my father had eaten anything that morning, he said that he surely would have gotten ill from the stench.

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

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

Luca, Gio, and I were mad and exhausted with worry. My father was mad and exhausted from the situation. And, Bunny was thrilled, jumping from person to person, hugging everyone. Then, she ran over and jumped in the pool, clothes and all. We all looked at each other. Then, we boys all followed suit and walked over to the pool and jumped in, as well. The day had been long and stressful, but everyone was alright, and we were all together. I honestly couldn’t have asked for more.

It took my father several days to get back to normal. He got violently ill the day after he returned with Bunny, but I honestly think it was more about the stress of the situation than catching any kind of virus. He kept mentioning the smell of that sandwich on the plane and dry heaved a little each time he talked about it. Sitting at the table that morning, he couldn’t even muster the energy to drink his morning *caffè*.

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

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

Things were not as lively that year as they usually were in years past when Bunny arrived. This is not to say that things were bad. It just seemed that Bunny was maturing a bit. She was eight years old and still a child, but she was more comfortable and more sure of herself. I think she was finally starting to realize that she didn’t have to be the clown and entertain us constantly for us to still want her to be around. I’m glad she felt that way. It meant that we really were becoming more family and less friends.

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

Bunny also started to really enjoy reading at this point. She would go through my father's library looking for anything she could read, and my brothers would ask their friends if they had any paperbacks in English that they weren't currently reading. Within a week, Bunny had over 30 books for her to choose from, many of them classics. However, much to my father's delight, Bunny was most interested in reading about Galileo, both his inventions and his life. This probably stemmed from him taking her to the Church of Santa Croce to see his sarcophagus. He told her the secret of his daughter being buried in the floor right below him. Not many people knew that fun piece of information, as no name plate showed that she was buried there. Bunny absolutely loved obscure little facts such as that.

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

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

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

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

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

By this point, Bunny couldn't really speak Italian, but she understood

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quite a bit of what was being discussed around her.

Gio replied in English, "It's because Bastian is only our half-brother. We don't share the same father."

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

Gio looked a bit sad and glanced down at his plate. Without looking up, he said, "He's my father," while pointing at the man that I called Papà.

Bunny looked at me. "Then who's your father?"

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

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

Bunny asked, "What does that mean?"

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

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

I gestured toward my father.

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

The room went silent. Bunny, remaining calm and continuing to eat her gnocchi, paused for a moment and looked around the table.

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

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

She rebutted, "Says who?"

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

"Well, your mother was a fucking liar. She's not a doctor. How the hell did she know?!"

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

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

My father replied, "No, no, but your mother specifically told me..."

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

My father and I sat quietly at the table. Bunny had continued to enjoy her dinner, blissfully unaware of the giant tempest she had just created. She actually was humming as she was eating. Luca came back in the room with gloves on, carrying two still-sealed vials, one in each hand, each containing a long swab. Gio came into the room carrying a brand-new, unopened box of surgical gloves.

Gio looked at me and said, "I made sure that everything is sterile so that

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there is zero chance of cross contamination from either one of us.”

He opened the box of gloves and then walked to the kitchen to wash his hands. He then grabbed a pair of gloves from the box and put them on, careful not to brush up against anything around him. He then asked Luca to hand him a vial.

Gio opened the vial, grabbed my chin with one hand, and placed the swab in my mouth with the other, vigorously brushing it over my gums and the inside of my cheek. He did this for about 15 seconds. This was overkill, but he wanted to ensure he got a good sample. Gio then placed the swab inside of the vial, sealed it, and removed his gloves. He handed the vial carefully to Luca and took off the gloves he was wearing. He then grabbed a new set of gloves and put them on. Gio then took the other vial from Luca and proceeded to do the same to my father—the same motions and the same vigor. He then placed the swab inside the second vial, sealed it up, and removed his gloves. He took both vials from Luca and placed them each inside their own plastic bag which were gently placed inside a carrying case.

Gio said, “I’ll return when I have an answer.”

That was at 20:45. Giovanni was completing his final year of medical school and was finishing his residency at the same hospital my father practiced at, so he had the same access to the labs that all of the doctors there had. I knew that if Gio didn’t run the tests himself, he was going to vigilantly watch whoever did. He wasn’t going to allow for any mistakes.

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

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

“You did nothing wrong,” I said. “We’re just trying to figure some things out. Why don’t you go downstairs and wait for me in my room? I’ll be down in a bit.”

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

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

Before taking it, my father looked at the envelope and asked, “Do you know the results, Gio?”

Gio nodded his head yes.

My father then asked, “Did you verify them? How many times did you

check?”

Gio said, “I ran the test three times, and I had a fellow resident run it twice. The results are accurate.”

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

He said, “Let Bastian see the results first.”

I didn’t want to see them. Either result was going to be bad, as far as I was concerned. If I wasn’t his son, that would make me feel even less like I was a part of this family. It would be official. If I was his son, I would have spent my entire life feeling like an outsider for no reason, feeling like my father was doing me an enormous favor by raising me, thinking I was the bastard child of his cheating wife. I was positively sick to my stomach.

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

“Open it, my boy.”

I looked up, and he smiled slightly. “It doesn’t matter what the results are. You are my son.”

I scoffed and shook my head no.

Papà continued, “You are the only one of my sons that I blessed with my name—a German Christian name. Your mother didn’t name you—I did. Your mother was pure Italian, so she gave your brothers all Italian names. It was I who asked to name you. I wanted to give you my name. Your middle name is my first name, and my middle name is your first name. You already know that. But why did I do that, Bastian? I did that so that you would always be tied to me.”

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

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

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

“99.997987 per cento.”

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

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

My mother was wrong. She didn’t have to try to abort me. I didn’t need to be disfigured. She didn’t need to kill herself. Her family was intact. All four of her children belonged to her husband, a man that continued to devote

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himself to her long after she made a mockery of their marriage. I suppose that is what all-consuming guilt will do to a person.

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

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

I dreamed of my mother that night. Clearly, I didn't remember what she looked like, but my mind constructed an image of her based on the photographs around our house. In my dream, I remember running towards her—she had her arms stretched out to give me a hug. In this dream, I was whole and had a nose and no scarring on my face and upper torso. In fact, I think I looked very much like a younger version of my father. As I got closer to her, I realized that she wasn't a person but just a big pile of wet mud. The wet mud began to develop a rancid smell, and I was shocked to learn that it was just a big pile of shit.

I woke up the next morning, feeling angry at the world. I laid in bed for quite a while, trying to process it all. From a distance, I could hear two faint voices talking, one certainly belonging to Bunny. Curious, I got up to get a little closer to listen. Walking down the hall, I could hear that it was coming from the kitchen. The other voice belonged to my father. I leaned against the railing of the spiral staircase, not wanting them to know I was there. I heard what sounded like Bunny teaching my father some phrases in English. I smiled a little bit.

My father never disliked Bunny, but I believe he would have rather not had her stay with us that first summer... or any summer thereafter. But I think their shared travel experience forced my father to really get to know Bunny a bit better, and I think he was starting to enjoy her company. Of course, none of us boys were allowed to know that information, and he would have denied it vehemently if we ever confronted him about it, so I never let on that I knew about their little language lessons.

For the next few days, I pretty much stayed away from everyone, including Bunny. I got myself into a kind of funk and found myself happy to just wallow in my own misery. What should have been happy news for me made me angrier at the world, maybe more than I had ever been. Everything bad that had ever happened to me was because of one erroneous piece of information. At that moment, I hated life and everything about it.

Bunny did her best to try to coax me out of my room. Nothing worked, so she spent a lot of time on the trampoline, bothering the Kuhmalos. They didn't seem to mind. In fact, they actually called my father one day and asked

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if they could take Bunny on a little trip. They were flying to Denmark to go to Bakken, the world's oldest amusement park, built in 1583. Brigitte loved going on roller coasters, and they thought that Bunny might actually like the chance to go.

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

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

And, honestly, I didn't. I had no feeling about Bunny at that moment. I had no feelings about anything. I started to wonder why I was even hanging out with a child. I was almost 18. All of a sudden, it seemed a bit creepy that I had an eight-year-old as a friend.

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

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

I heard my father go outside to speak with them, and then I overheard Bunny thank them quickly. Then, I could hear her little footsteps running straight towards the outside stairs that led to the hallway to my room. She was running straight towards me. I was still lying down (I had been lying down for days), and I didn't even have time to sit up before I felt a good 45 kilograms of weight land right on top of me.

After studying the English language for over 12 years and speaking primarily English for five consecutive summers, you would think that I would have been able to understand most of what an English speaker was saying. However, for the next five minutes, I understood virtually nothing. I could comprehend a word or phrase here and there ("fast," "gigantic," "so much"), but that was about it. In actuality, I don't think even a native speaker could understand much of what Bunny talked about, as I could say in all honesty that I had never heard anyone speak faster. It was a mile a minute.

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

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

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

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as she gathered and organized her stash. She had two of everything—two sweatshirts, two giant lollipops, two pinwheels, two ridiculously large pencils with the name Bakken on each side of the hexagons, and two snow globes with a tiny roller coaster in each one. Everything was identical with the exception of two small rolls of paper—one was pink and the other blue. She made two piles, keeping one pile in my lap and pulling the other pile closer to her. She looked up at me, closed her eyes, and smiled a big, toothy smile. I swear I could see every single tooth in her head.

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

I held up each item to look at it. She got us each a sweatshirt, both the exact same size. Hers would have been a bit large on her, but I think mine was going to fit well. The last item I inspected was the pink scroll of paper. The scroll was long and thin. I unraveled it, and there was a cartoon of a rollercoaster with a letter inside of each car. There were seven cars, and the letters spelled out M—I—C—H—A—E—L. I laughed. Of course, this was not my name, but it’s what she called me, and in honesty, she probably didn’t even remember my real name.

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

She unrolled her blue scroll and held it up for me. Again, there was a cartoon roller coaster, but this one only had five cars. B—U—N—N—Y. I sat and watched her as she played with her stash. She went on a trip to a country 1,500 kilometers away, but, in a way, brought me with her. Over three days, she purchased these items, and each time, she thought of me. It was worthless stuff, utter crap, but I loved each and every item. Bunny started to get up off of the bed, grabbing my scroll with her as she did. She went over to my desk and got eight push pins. She grabbed a chair, stepped up on it, and proceeded to pull everything that was on my bulletin board off of it, carelessly throwing it to the floor, and pinning up my scroll and then hers below it.

She looked at me, still standing on the chair, and said, “Don’t ever take this down, okay?”

I nodded my head yes.

“Make me a pizza?” she asked.

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

As we walked up the spiral staircase to the kitchen, my father was just walking in the door from the courtyard. This was the first time I had seen him since that night. He stopped and stared at me with a kind look. He opened his arms, and I half-ran to him, collapsing in his embrace. I cried and cried.

After about a minute, I felt Bunny pull at my shirt. I let go of my father, snot and tears covering my face as I neglected to put on a surgical mask that

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morning. I looked down at her, and she had a look of indignation on her face.

“Umm, my pizza?”

I looked at my dad and shook my head. We both smiled. That narcissistic, self-centered little imp could irritate me to no end, yet she was the thing I most loved on the planet.

7 CHAPTER SEVEN: BUNNY AT 9

It was early April, and we were making plans for Bunny's arrival late the following month. I had my new nose, and I loved it. The prior summer, I had a dream that I had a nose and looked much like my father. My dream was accurate—I looked very much like him. My father and I had similar physiques, as well. I was the shortest of the four brothers, and my father was only slightly shorter than me. We were both thin and weighed about the same, as well. I always wondered: If we had waited to see what I was going to look like with my nose, would we have needed that paternity test at all?

My father was the head surgeon for my procedure, with my brother Giovanni and another surgeon assisting. They did an excellent job. It wasn't an unusual procedure for my father, actually. Many people from all over the world had come to him for the same issue. Some lost their noses to accidents, and others lost them for health reasons, such as autoimmune disorders. My father was a plastic surgeon for many years but chose to focus on nasal transplants and reconstructions after my birth. He had 18 years to develop his skills, and although my father is not one to readily show emotion, he was almost excited to work on me.

The procedure went well, but like many other operations, there were a few complications. The surrounding tissue was having trouble fully adhering properly, and I had to be incredibly cautious not to hit or damage that area. By early April, it was decided that I was not going to be able to fly to go get Bunny. Although I wanted to see her and to have her see my new face, I couldn't risk it. Plus, exposing myself to that many people in a short amount of time through airports and the airplane ride itself would give me a much higher risk of contracting a virus or infection, such as staph. No, unfortunately, I just couldn't risk it.

When Luca heard this, he told my father that he would be willing to go get Bunny. This was huge, as Luca still didn't speak English very well. His

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language skills were better, but they probably weren't good enough for him to go to the U.S. on his own to get Bunny. So, my father contacted Michele and asked him if he thought Jonathan would be willing to help us out again. Michele wasn't too sure about that; even though my father paid Jonathan well for his help the previous summer, he was still terrified of him. Papà told Michele that Jonathan wouldn't have to deal with him that year and also to tell him that Luca was a much nicer person than he was. My father also told Michele that he would be willing to pay Jonathan double what he received the last time, providing that he didn't forget to bring Bunny's passport with him. Jonathan agreed, which meant that Luca, like my father the year prior, would not have to leave the airport.

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

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

She was silently sobbing when Luca leaned in to give her a hug. Luca looked up at Jonathan, and he gave a confused look. I found out later that Bunny had looked so different that Jonathan wasn't sure he was bringing the correct child to the airport. Luca thanked Jonathan and gave him his payment.

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

Bunny shook her head no.

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

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

At lunch, Luca gently pressed Bunny about why she was crying and about her looks, but Bunny didn't say anything. In fact, Bunny didn't even eat, which was incredibly concerning to Luca. He watched her many times inhale an entire pizza with ease. This was not the same child.

After lunch, Bunny and Luca walked over to their gate. He told Bunny to wait there so he could use "the toilet." She nodded her head slightly to signal that she had understood but said nothing. Luca passed the men's room entrance and walked over to a bank of pay phones. He pulled out the international calling card that his father gave him before he left, dialed the number and passcode, and heard the line ringing on the other end. It was I who answered the phone. I could feel my face smile as I said "Pronto!" thinking it was Bunny calling me.

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Luca, without saying hello, said in a somber tone, “There is something really wrong with Deloris. I want you to know this before we get there so you can prepare yourself. I don’t know what it is, but she has changed. It’s not good, Bastian. It’s not good. I need to get back to her. I just wanted you to know so you weren’t shocked by her appearance.”

Luca hung up his end. Her appearance? Did someone beat her? Did she have bruises or broken bones? I had no idea what he meant by that, and for a moment, I thought about calling the airport to have Luca paged to tell him that I didn’t want her to come that year.

I know this sounds awful and completely selfish, but Bunny’s visits were for me. To make me happy. To entertain me. To give me companionship. I didn’t want to have to deal with a depressed nine-year-old. This was the best time of my entire life—I had a new nose, a new face. I could go out in public, and no one stared, and no children were frightened of me. I learned that my father really was my father. No. No. This was my time, and Deloris was not going to spoil it for me. I started to search for the phone number to the airlines. I had to call Luca to let him know.

My father entered the room and saw me frantically search his desk for Luca and Bunny’s flight information. He came over next to me, touched my arm, and said, “Calma, Bastian. What are you doing?”

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

Papà spoke over me. He said, “Calma! Calma!”

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

I took a deep breath. My voice was quivering. I told my father everything. I told him about Luca’s phone call. I told him that I didn’t want Bunny to spoil everything. My father sat quietly, listening to me, his hands clasped together by his face, his two index fingers were pointed and touching his lips. I looked at him for a long moment and said quietly, “I’m a horrible human being.”

He gave a small smile. He said, “I think you are worried to see your friend hurting.”

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

I looked up. “Yes, you’re right, I am terrified to see her broken.”

“Ah, now we are getting somewhere. So, do you really want to send Deloris back to what was causing her to be so sad, or do you think we should try to help her here?”

“Of course. She should come here.” I felt like an ogre.

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

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

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

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

Luca stepped out of the taxi first and then Bunny. The smile on my face disappeared, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Had I seen this child on the street, I would have assumed I was passing a very ugly teenage boy. Bunny stood in one spot, her head so far down it rested against her chest. I could see her shoulders shaking a bit, signaling that she was crying. She looked up trying to find me but looked past me twice when she didn't recognize me. We didn't recognize each other. It was crazy.

She was still standing in the driveway, so close to the taxi that the driver was afraid to leave. I walked down the six steps from the courtyard to the semi-circle and reached down and grabbed her hand. I gently pulled her up the stairs, through the courtyard, and over to the outside steps leading to my room. I turned and looked at my father. He blinked hard and nodded his head in an affirming way. I led her down the stairs and she immediately walked into my room, but not in the fun, jumping, bounding way. She walked like a zombie.

She went straight to my bed, laid in a tight fetal position, and began to half-scream, half-cry. She did that for about 10 minutes and slowly started to drift off to sleep. For about 20 minutes, she was gasping and shuddering in her sleep, her body still trying to calm itself. When I was convinced she was completely out, I walked over to the bed and sat down next to her.

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

I got up and sat on a chair on the opposite side of the room, watching her sleep, and thought to myself, "Christ, I am an absolute monster." I knew what kind of homelife she had, and it had clearly gotten so bad that my brother had to call and give me a warning to brace myself for what I was

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about to see. But what did I want to do? I wanted to send her back to that. Was this really who I was? Was I really that evil?

Bunny slept for two days, only waking to use the restroom and get a drink of water. She didn't even eat. In those two days, however, Luca contacted several of his drag-queen friends and explained the situation. They arrived at our house the next afternoon and went into my room to wake up a still-sleeping Bunny. The child was completely confused, having six men standing around her, pulling her off the bed and examining her hair, her face—pretty much everything. They brought her into my bathroom and kicked me out of my own room, asking me to go upstairs and wait. For an hour, there was no word about the activity going on downstairs. Finally, a very beautiful lady, who I knew was a man but looked very much like a woman, came up the spiral staircase.

She looked at my father and me and said, "Which one of you is Michael?" I raised my hand.

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

She immediately headed back downstairs after delivering the message.

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

I assembled the pizzas, and my father tended to the oven. After sliding the third one in, he asked, "Do you know why we have this pizza oven?"

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

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

Just then, a whole herd of people started heading up the spiral staircase and into the kitchen. They all said hello to me and completely gushed over my father, pinching his cheeks and giving him kisses on the forehead. I honestly don't know if my dad knew that they were men. I watched him, but I couldn't say one way or the other. The group then sat down on the benches of our wooden kitchen table and began to whoop and drum-roll on the tabletop.

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

Bunny came up the stairs in a slow, semi-seductive way that the boys had taught her. She had on a sequin dress (which looked lovely from the front but was held together with clothes pins in the back), a pink feather boa, and the largest blond wig I had ever seen in my life. In all honesty, the wig was larger than my torso. But Bunny looked good, and she was smiling. She looked like a beautiful young lady. Bunny did a few small twirls on her way

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to the table but stopped once she saw her pizza waiting for her.

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

The queens stayed and chatted with Bunny for over two hours. By the time they left, Bunny was a changed girl. I could see that she had a sparkle in her eye, and I knew she was going to be okay. Of course, as they were leaving, all of the queens fawned over my father once more. Luca thanked them profusely, and they each promised to come back and help with Bunny's hair growth over the summer. Once everyone was gone, I sat down across from Bunny at the table, and she looked at me for the first time since she arrived.

She smiled and said, "Hey, you got your nose! It looks so good."

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

"No, I'm not." I said, cringing and feeling quite uncomfortable by the compliment that I perceived to be disingenuous.

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

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

I thought about her question. I could not think of a single time she had not told me the truth. Even during her thievery streak when she was five, she still told me everything that she stole and where she got it from. No, she was right, she had never lied to me. I looked up at her and shook my head no.

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

She then gave me a wicked smile, gave me a soft kick under the table, and said, "Idiot."

And, there it was. That was us.

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

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

She gave me a look of disgust and said, "Screw you."

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

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

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

Bunny couldn’t try on many wigs, as the scabs on her head still hadn’t healed completely, but the ladies did a great job finding a wig that looked nice and was much more appropriate for a girl of Bunny’s age. It gave her long brown curls, much like what her hair would look like if it hadn’t been butchered. After they fit it to her head, they brought her to the back and sat her in the hairdresser’s chair. One of the women brought out a pair of scissors. Bunny looked at me, frightened.

“She’s not going to cut my hair, is she?”

“Excuse me, ladies.” I said to the room. “Deloris would like to keep the wig at that length. Would that be okay?”

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

“Yes, thank you.”

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

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

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

She said, “I know exactly where we should go!”

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

“Here. This is where Gio takes me to get cioccolato. It’s my favorite thing on the planet.”

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

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

Indeed, it was expensive. The prices to sit outside in a sectioned-off, chained area in the Piazza della Repubblica were exorbitant, but I obliged. The waitress came to our table. She was an older woman, probably close to my father’s age, but she spoke both English and Italian, as most of the staff there did. Bunny knew this and took full advantage.

“We’ll have two pieces of Grandmother’s cake, two pieces of Sacher cake, two cioccolatos and two bottles of Pellegrino.”

And with that, she handed the menu back to the waitress. Bunny knew that had I ordered, I would have gotten half that amount of cake and no

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cioccolatos. But I let her have her fun. It would be interesting when my father received his credit card statement the next month and would see that we spent over 70,000 lire at Gilli.

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

Our order arrived, and Bunny flipped back her brand-new hair, careful not to get it in the cioccolato. I picked up my fork and grabbed a bit of the Sacher cake. I put it close to my mouth and felt a sharp jab to my elbow. I missed my mouth completely and ended up having most of my dessert in my nose. I was not happy.

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

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

The rest of the summer was quite enjoyable, as Bunny was becoming more and more independent and didn't need as much attention from me. I still needed to study for my medical school courses, so Bunny found ways to entertain herself during that time. One day, as I was reading, I heard harsh guitar strumming coming from the adjacent room. I walked in to find Bunny hunched over my father's prized instrument. He never even let me play it, and I was quite adept at the guitar.

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

Defiant child as she was, she looked up at me still holding the guitar and strummed forcefully against the six strings. As if on cue, my father walked in. I folded my arms and leaned against the door jam, waiting for him to give her the business. Instead, my father sat down next to her and showed her how to hold the instrument properly. I could feel my mouth drop open. Had he caught me at nine years old playing his guitar, I guaranteed the reaction would not have been the same.

Bunny spent hours and hours that summer practicing both the guitar and piano, and by the end of the summer, she sounded pretty good. She couldn't read music very well, but she was pretty good at playing by ear, trying to mimic basic Italian song melodies she heard on the radio.

In the evenings, I will admit that I left Bunny at home a lot while I went out with my brothers. They would take me to different bars each night, and I loved that they included me. I came home almost every night completely wasted on a combination of alcohol and marijuana. My father wasn't pleased,

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but he didn't reprimand me, either. I was 18, legal drinking age in Italy, so there wasn't much he could say.

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

It had been almost two months since her arrival that summer, and she was scheduled to go back in three weeks. I hadn't pressed Bunny about what had happened to her when she arrived, and she never brought it up, but I thought it was something that needed to be addressed. She was sitting at the piano upstairs, just fiddling around, when I asked her to follow me downstairs. I turned to walk out the door of the library and towards the spiral staircase in the kitchen.

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

I turned around and gave her a quizzical look.

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

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

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

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

"Bunny, please. This is important."

"Really? It's important? It's so important for you to hear about how much my mother hates me? She hates me. She thinks I'm totally disgusting. You wanna know why my hair looked the way it did when I got here? It was because I got my first period. She said that now that I was 'fertile,' whatever that means, she didn't want the boys to come 'sniffing around me.' So, she made me look like a boy."

She took a deep breath, trying not to cry. "She cut my hair, and when I tried to stop her and take the scissors away, she got even angrier and ripped it out instead."

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

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

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

"What am I going to do, Michael? I have no friends because my mother scares them away, telling me that I can't associate with kids who aren't Jehovah's Witnesses. I can't even go to my friends' homes or to their parties. I am a total freak because I'm all alone. I can't celebrate Christmas or

Halloween.”

She put her head on my shoulder. “Every year, she comes into my classroom on the first day of school and tells the teacher that I can’t salute the flag because I’m a Jehovah’s Witness. From the first day of school, the kids look at me like I’m a freak. Whenever any of them bring in cupcakes for their birthdays, guess where I have to go? To the library. I have to go to the library and write a book report while all the other kids have fun.”

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

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

I must have had a terrible look on my face because she said, “Don’t worry. It’s okay.”

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

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

She said, “Can everyone come here for dinner? I haven’t spent one night with everyone since I got here.”

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

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

Marta, my father’s housekeeper, made steak, potatoes, and salad for the meal and picked up a cake for Bunny, as well. It was nice to see Marta, as I hardly ever saw her lately. Now that I was an adult, she had been strictly verboten from going downstairs near my room, as I was keeping some “adult-like” items that I didn’t want her to find while cleaning.

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

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

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

“No, it’s not.” Bunny said. “No one’s been in it all summer. I sneak in there all the time.”

My father was about to reprimand Bunny, but Gio stopped him by

placing his hand on my father's shoulder.

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

"There's a small side gate, behind the kitchen."

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

It was almost sunset, and it was getting dark, but there was enough light for Bunny to show Gio how to get onto the adjoining property. She was right. There was a path next to our house, just behind the kitchen. No one ever went back there, as the space was a tangled mess, filled with spider webs and overgrown foliage.

Bunny showed Gio how she squeezed herself behind the condensing unit and around a protruding tree trunk. Low and behold, there was an old, rusted iron rod gate that had no latch. She pushed it open, and Gio, Bunny, and I were at the back of the old, abandoned church. The three of us walked around the building. Gio was smiling.

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

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

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

Gio said, "I'm calling first thing tomorrow!"

He looked down at Bunny. "Thank you, tesora." He gave her a big kiss on the cheek and said, "You're a good girl."

By October, Gio and Papà were able to get a 25-year lease on the property for 1,000 Lire (about 50 American cents). The agreement was that they would provide all of the upkeep of the building and land, as well as devote 10% of their surgeries as non-profit procedures. In addition, the Catholic Church of Florence would decide which children would be chosen for the pro-bono treatments. It was a win-win. My father could practice right next door, and after some extensive renovations to the building, they were able to house two surgery theaters and three recovery rooms in-house. Gio lovingly named the children's recovery room La Gabbia del Coniglietti (The Bunny Hutch).

8 CHAPTER EIGHT: BUNNY AT 10

The beautiful wig that we got Bunny last year was hanging on a nail in my bedroom as we were planning for her arrival this year. However, we did send Bunny home last summer with another wig. That one was awful, consisting of short dark brown hair with tight, unattractive curls. It was something I could easily see an 80-year-old woman wanting to wear. We did this so that Bunny could wear it while around her mother and keep her own hair safely tucked underneath, allowing it to grow and her scalp to heal. As long as she looked ugly and unbecoming, her mother would be happy and would hopefully leave her alone.

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

At the end of the school day, the process was reversed, and Bunny would re-don the ugly wig and the clothes she wore to the school. Bunny's mother would never buy her clothes, but Bunny's friend Theresa would often give her any clothing that she was getting rid of. Theresa was much thinner than Bunny, but invariably, Bunny always found at least a few outfits she could keep and wear to school.

That summer, Bunny was now 10 and able to fly unaccompanied, providing that my father paid the extra Unaccompanied Minor Fee. This meant that they would hire an airline employee to help Bunny get to her seat, pay extra attention to her during the flight, and to hand her off to the designated person upon arrival. The fee was not cheap, and I was so appreciative to my father for paying for all of it. My father loved all of his sons, but I doubt he would have paid this amount of money to continuously fly in any of my brothers' friends.

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I was listed as the person on the airline's form as the person who was designated to retrieve Bunny once she arrived. I asked my father to go with me to the airport, just in case there were any issues. We walked up to the gate, and we saw the attendant prop open the door.

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

Bunny was the first person off of the flight. She walked down the ramp, holding the stewardess' hand but broke away and ran towards me once we made eye contact. She was a big girl now, about 150 centimeters tall and 61 kilograms. I think she wanted me to pick her up, but there really wasn't any chance of that happening. I had to let go of her when the stewardess asked to see my identification, so she turned to my father to hug him. I heard her whisper, "Hi, Papà" in his ear.

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

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

"Luggage?" I asked.

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

Her mother was pawning Bunny off for a year in order to make money from some poor international students. I felt bad for them—if her mother didn't care about making sure her own child got fed, I highly doubted that those students would be catered to. And, she was sending her own daughter away to England, no less. I guess that was a half-decent choice, as she wouldn't have to learn a new language, but she was only 10. It just didn't seem right. But Bunny didn't seem to have an opinion on the matter either way. She was not joyous talking about her upcoming adventure, nor did she express fear about the uncertainty of it all. It just didn't seem to matter to her, which kind of bothered me. I felt that she was probably hiding her true feelings.

As she was talking while we waited for her luggage to come around on the baggage carousel, I stared at her. She was no longer a child. She looked older than her years and could probably pass for a 16-year-old schoolgirl here. Her hair looked lovely, too. That hideous wig we sent her home with served

her well, and her hair was growing back nicely. It was still several inches shorter than she wanted it to be, but it looked quite pretty, and the soft ringlets framed her face nicely.

That summer we spent together was the busiest one for us but probably the best one we had up until that point. We didn't do anything special, but I felt as if I was able to relate a bit more to her. This wasn't unusual—we were both growing up.

Papà and Giovanni decided to group all of their pro-bono cases during the month of July, so as to not overload their practice the rest of the year, and we all were expected to help out in any way we could. Every other day for the entire month of July (except for the weekends), they would perform a surgery on a child. All of these surgeries involved some kind of facial reconstruction, but most of them were cleft palate repairs. By doing only three surgeries per week, the rotation schedule for the three recovery rooms would permit a patient to stay with us for a full week, getting optimum post-surgery care. I would help in the surgery theaters, acting as a technician and emergency back-up if they needed a third set of hands. Bunny took over doing almost everything else.

During normal operating months, there would be a staff of five that would disinfect the surgical tools, clean the surgery theaters and recovery rooms, launder the sheets and towels, as well as any clothing from the patients or their family members, take out the garbage, bring meals to the patients, and complete all of the paperwork. Bunny and I split those tasks, with her taking the lion's share. In addition, most of the patients at the regular practice did not stay in recovery for a full week, with many of them opting to go home after one day to recover. And, most of our usual patients did not bring family members with them, either. They usually chose to be on their own after surgery, and the only time we usually saw any family members or loved ones was when they were picking up the patient to take them home.

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

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

Bunny had a way with the patients and their parents. She wore a pair of

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bunny ears every day, saying it was her name tag, and she did the majority of the communication with the families as more of them could speak English over Italian. Our neighbor Brigitte also came over and helped, especially with the families that hailed from Africa, as her master's degree was in Africana Studies. Of course, during the times when we didn't have patients from Africa, she still came over to help, usually during dinner time.

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

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

Bunny also cleaned up the children and the rooms when they would get sick or vomit and never complained about it. She changed the sheets on the beds, scrubbed the bathrooms, and mopped all of the floors every day. This was not a small feat, as it was a large building and there were two floors of the church.

The bottom floor had the reception area and waiting room, Gio and Papà's offices, a kitchen area and break room, and the two surgical theaters. A large elevator was located down the hall, and it was big enough to accommodate a hospital-sized gurney. The upstairs floor had all three recovery rooms, the large closet for the medical supplies, the utility room for the cleaning products, a seating area for the families to relax and watch TV, and a small kitchenette that had to be continuously restocked. Bunny was responsible for all of it, including unloading and putting away everything from the weekly deliveries. Food and cleaning products were delivered right to the practice, but it was my responsibility to go into town to get the medical supplies each week. Luckily, we did not need to worry about any anesthetic, as we hired an anesthesiologist to come in three times per week for the surgeries. It was his summer break, too, so he was paid quite handsomely for his time.

We truly worked like dogs from dawn to dusk, but it was good, meaningful work, and we were all happy to do it. My father rewarded himself for all of his hard work in the month of August with two months at our home

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in Reggio di Calabria, the same home that Bunny's grandfather had renovated years before. Since Papà wasn't going to return until late-September, he said goodbye to Bunny then, got in his car, and left. He didn't even say goodbye to me. He was exhausted, and I had a feeling that in the few years, Gio was going to be doing the majority of the surgeries with me assisting.

It almost seemed shocking going from working 16-hour days to having nothing to do. My medical studies weren't starting back up until September, and it was still three weeks before Bunny had to leave for Burton-Upon-Trent, a small city right in the middle of England, halfway between London and Liverpool. Normally, I would question why a mother would want to send her 10-year-old child to a foreign country to live with a family that she had never met, but then I remembered that she willingly sent her daughter to stay all summer with us, people she had never laid eyes on. I smiled when I thought that the closest thing Bunny's mother has seen to who Bunny stays with every summer was Michele, my brother, who actually lived hours away from us. It's ridiculous, really, when you think about it.

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

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

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

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

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happened to know of one that evening.

We walked into the church and up the center aisle to the middle row. When we all sat down, she leaned over me to tell the Kuhmalos that Luca had brought her there a few times for concerts after a few of their shopping trips downtown. He always made sure that they sat in the center row, as he believed it was the best spot to sit. She was telling this information to the Kuhmalos, assuming that I had already known it. But I hadn't. I had no idea that Luca took her to concerts, educating her in a way that her parents never did. It was my very first time in Chiesa di Santa Margherita in Santa Maria dei Ricci, and I was doing my best to not let on how excited I was to be there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the 10-year-old returned.

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

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

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

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

That was partially the truth. I had realized that I did not want to be on my own. Traveling with her to a foreign country for the first time was less terrifying than being all alone.

"Sure. I would love that, actually."

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Bunny called the phone number to the Jamesson home, where she was going to be staying, and spoke to Mrs. Jamesson, her host mother.

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

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

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

I hesitated and said, "Yes. Yes, of course I will. But do you think I could take a plane home?"

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

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

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

We boarded the train together in Firenze at 14:30. It was my first time leaving the city, and for some reason, I had no fear. The trip was not going to be an easy one, as we had to switch trains in Torino, Lyon, London, and Derby to reach Burton-Upon-Trent. In addition, the trip was not a restful one, even though we were just sitting the entire way. The trouble was that we had to switch trains every few hours, and I was so worried that we would miss our stop, I never really fell asleep. For those two days, cat naps had to suffice.

In reality, had I known how exhausting the trip was going to be, I probably wouldn't have gone. That's a lie—of course, I would have gone. The one really intelligent thing I decided to do before we left was mail Bunny's two big, blue suitcases ahead one week before she left. This was before even I knew that I would be joining her on her journey. Bunny is a strong kid, but having her try to lug those large cases on and off of trains for two days did not sound pleasant. It wasn't cheap, but it was money very well spent, and Bunny only had a large backpack and rabbit-shaped purse to carry during the trip.

Bunny had told Mrs. Jamesson what time our train was scheduled to arrive in Burton- Upon-Trent, so she told us to look for her son, David, and that he would be holding a sign with Bunny's name on it. Mrs. Jamesson was not wrong, and soon after we debarked the train, we saw a young man, close to my age, holding a sign indifferently, it listing slightly to one side. It

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displayed the name Deloris Riddle in big, black letters.

“Hey, are you David? I’m Bunny.”

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

“Ey up. I’m Jack. David is dead. Bunny, eh? What ‘appened to Deloris?” he said with no affect.

“What?! David died?! Oh, my God, I’m so sorry!” Bunny cried.

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

“Nah, lil’ one. Me name used to be David. I now wan’ be called Jack.”

“Ohhhhh. Got it. Okay. Well, I’m Bunny. Deloris is dead,” Bunny said with a smirk.

Jack looked slightly amused. “Aye. So that’s how it’s gonna be, eh?”

He looked over at me again and said, “Cheers, mate, I’m Jack” and stuck his hand out for me to shake. To this day, I don’t know how to shake a person’s hand. I know my handshake is very limp and squishy. I’ve just never perfected that art. So, when I went to take Jack’s hand, it was one of the first times I had ever shaken another man’s hand. It was bad. I could see it on his face.

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

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

“Look, Lil’ Mama, you’ll start barking like us cool Brits soon ‘nuff.”

Bunny looked back at me, thinking that I would help her translate. I frowned and shook my head. I bent down and whispered to her, “This is your language, not mine.”

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

It was a short ride in Jack’s van from the station to Bunny’s new home. Jack explained to me that he was a musician and played gigs all over London, which is why he needed to drive such a large vehicle. The van was quite disgusting on the inside and smelled like a combination of old, sweaty gym socks, cigarette smoke, and beer. There were only two seats, and they were in the front, so Bunny had to climb into the back and sit on the floor as we drove. Jack did his best to take every curve as sharply as he could and laughed when he heard Bunny tumble all over the back of the van. For a moment, I was concerned, but Bunny was laughing hysterically, so my worry dissipated quickly.

I asked him what instruments he played, and he said “Piano, primarily,

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

I looked up quickly and stared at him. He said, "I know, I know. The Royal Academy of Music, eh? I look a wazzerk, but I got a brain in me 'ead."

I was relieved when we were pulling up, as the house seemed lovely. It was a rowhouse with a small garden out front. It looked to be in the poorer area of town, but it seemed as if everyone on their block did their best to take care of their homes. It was obvious that Mrs. Jamesson liked roses, as the garden was filled with only rose bushes.

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

Jack parked the van in front of the house, and Mrs. Jamesson was already standing outside, waiting for us. She looked like the quintessential British mother. She was a tall, plump woman. She wore a polyester work dress with tiny blue rosebuds on it. An apron covered her dress. It also had tiny rosebuds on it, albeit in a different shade of blue from her dress. Her gray hair was pulled back in a bun, and she had a delightful smile that made one feel right at home. She introduced herself right away, hugging both me and Bunny, and pulled us into the house. It was still so foreign to have people be warm and kind to me. I was still thinking people were going to react in the manner that they had when I did not have a nose. I was still always expecting everyone to recoil in horror.

The front door of the house walked right into a hallway with rooms on either side. I found it fascinating, as it was very different from our house in Italy which had much more of an open concept. I hadn't had the opportunity to go to other people's homes very much, so this was incredibly interesting for me. I loved how every room, even the kitchen, was its own room with a door. The first room on the left we encountered had the door cracked just a bit. A man I assumed was Mr. Jamesson was sitting in what was the living room, watching television.

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

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

Bunny popped her head into the room and shouted, "That's not football! That's..."

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

"But..."

"Don't!"

She glared back at me. I knew she was going to be disrespectful by telling

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Mr. Jamesson that it was called “soccer.” Bunny was my family, but she was American through-and-through, and sometimes, she could be outright boorish and obnoxious. She always thought she was right. It could be very exhausting conversing with her at times.

“Come this way, my dears!”

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

“Sit! Sit!”

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

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

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

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

She nodded her head yes, a big pout across her face.

Mrs. Jamesson said to Bunny, “David told me that you don’t like to be called Deloris. Is that correct? He said we should call you Bunny.”

She said, “Yes, please” and smiled.

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

She looked at me and said, “This way, Michael.”

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

I followed Mrs. Jamesson up the stairs, and she led me into what I assumed to be Jack’s room, as there were rock posters all over the walls, including one of The Clash. There were two twin beds in the room, one against each wall. I heard Jack call up the stairs, “Don’t worry, mate! I’m staying at a friend’s house tonight. The space is all yours. Terrah then!”

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

“Sit for a moment, love.”

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

“I am so embarrassed to ask you about this, but... I need to speak with Deloris’ parents. Do you know how I can get in touch with the Riddles?” I thought in my head, “Yeah, good luck with that, lady.”

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She continued, “Bunny’s parents were supposed to pay for her room and board months ago, but we still haven’t received any payment.”

“How much were they to pay you?” I asked.

“It is to be 1,500 pounds for the school year, about 170 pounds per month. It was supposed to be paid in full by the 1st of August, but we haven’t received anything yet. I’ve tried calling the number that I was given, and I have left messages, but they haven’t gotten back to me. The agent who set up the exchange said that she can’t get in contact with them, either.”

I looked at her with a kind face and said gently, “I hate to say it, but I’m honestly not surprised. Don’t try to contact them again. Let me see what I can do. Could I possibly borrow your phone? I have a calling card, so the cost of the call won’t be on your phone bill.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

She showed me the phone in the hallway, and I called my father at our vacation home in Reggio di Calabria. I was shocked when I got through to him on the first try. He sounded great, like he was truly rested.

“Hello, my boy! You caught me at the perfect time! Renata and I just came back from the beach to clean up before we head off to dinner with Signore and Signora Ferro. What can I do for you?”

I paused for a moment. “Renata?”

Papà laughed. “Oh, so much to tell you, but that is for another time.”

“Clearly you are preoccupied, Papà, so I will make this quick. Bunny’s parents never paid for her...”

He cut me off. “How much do you need?”

“Fifteen hundred pounds. I think it’s about 3 million lira.”

“Go to the bank tomorrow. Use the credit card I gave you to take out a cash advance. We will talk about the rest when I get home at the end of the month.”

“Thank you, Papà. I love you.”

“Love you, too, my son. Call me if there are any issues.”

And he hung up the phone.

I shook my head as I hung up the receiver. There wasn’t much that my father wouldn’t do for me... or for Bunny. By the next day, Mrs. Jamesson had her payment in full, plus an additional 100 pounds for her trouble. It was worth every penny. I knew I was leaving Bunny in a home where she would be looked after. In fact, I don’t think I could have picked a better family if I tried. Oh, I knew she was going to irritate Mr. Jamesson something fierce, but still, everything was going to be fine.

I left the following evening with Jack. Bunny looked sad as I went to walk out the front door. She hugged me hard, putting her head against my chest, and said, “I love you more than anything in this whole world, you know.”

She kissed my chin three times quickly and hugged me tight once more.

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She held my hand as we walked outside and watched as I got into Jack's van and drove off. I glanced in the side-view mirror and saw her getting smaller and smaller. She stayed outside watching us drive off, until we were completely out of sight.

Jack was driving back to London and was willing to take me to the airport for my flight. I was a bit shocked when it only took me two hours to get from London to Firenze by plane. The two days on those trains were awful. Why did I not fly us up there? I learned I will never make that mistake again. That was September 3rd.

On December 1st, there was a phone call at 3:30 in the morning. It was Sunday, and I had stayed up late, drinking and playing chess with Michele. He needed to be in Firenze for a meeting first thing Monday morning, so he chose to arrive a few days early to spend some time with Papà and me. When the phone rang, Michele and I looked at each other quizzically. Who on earth would be calling us at that hour?

Michele got up from the table, walked across the room, and answered the phone. Almost immediately, he said, "Un momento! One moment, per favore!" into the receiver. He looked over at me and said, "You need to take this. I cannot understand the woman on the other end of the line, but it is clear that she is very upset."

I got up slowly and answered the phone by saying, "Hello?"

"Michael? Is this you? This is Mrs. Jamesson, Deloris' host mother. Oh, Michael, something terrible has happened. I think you should come here right away."

"What has happened?" I asked.

"Deloris is in hospital." she said.

"Is she hurt?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe very badly."

I paused for a moment to catch my breath. "Is she dead?" I asked softly.

"Oh, honey, I'm not sure. I don't know. All I know is that it's bad."

For some reason, I remained calm, mostly because I thought there was some mistake.

"Which hospital is she in?"

"Mayday Hospital. I believe it's in Beckenham, just outside of London." I could hear someone talking to her on the other end. "No, no, that's not correct. I'm being told it's in Croydon."

I said, "We will be there as soon as we can" and hung up the phone.

"What's going on?" Michele asked.

"I honestly don't know," I said. "But I need to go wake up Papà."

My father, who hates to travel, contacted the answering service for the travel agency that the hospital used. They were able to get us flights to London that would leave first thing in the morning. I chose to not sleep that night. I went to my room, took a shower, put on a dress shirt, dress pants,

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and a sweater. The only luggage I was bringing with me was my leather overnight bag with just one change of clothing in it. I highly doubted that it was going to be more than an overnight trip. In fact, I was pretty sure that I was going to be back home, sleeping in my own bed, the following night. It was 4:30, and the taxi would be there in 30 minutes to retrieve my father and me. If all went to plan, we would be at the hospital in Croydon no later than noon.

I was a bit perturbed getting on the plane, as I truly believed that there had to be some kind of mistake. I had just received a postcard from Bunny the previous morning. The card was written in tiny letters and discussed how she wanted a pickle from a fish-and-chips shop and went up to the counter to ask for “a pickle” and the lady behind the counter said, “A pickled what?” and Bunny was totally confused and said “I don’t know. A pickled pickle, I guess.” Bunny wrote that the woman’s reply was, “Oy, get your arse out o’ me store.” The last line of the card read, “Never got my pickle. Miss you bunches! SWAK.”

The SWAK on the postcard didn’t make much sense to most, but I knew what it meant: Sealed With A Kiss. It was something that Gino used to put on the back of the envelope when he used to send letters to Bunny. For a moment, I got even perturbed, as the choice to add the SWAK was ridiculous. There is nothing to seal on a postcard, so no “S” is needed. Dumb Bunny. And then I remembered that she was only 10. I should have just been happy that she sent me a card. I remember thinking, “God, what is wrong with me?” as we boarded the plane.

The flight was uneventful, and my father and I barely spoke. We landed in London, exited the airport, and found a taxi fairly quickly that could take us to Croydon. Again, we sat in silence during the ride to the hospital.

We entered Mayday Hospital and began to look for someone to help direct us to Bunny’s room. But Jack was sitting in the lobby area and had seen us right away. I introduced him to my father, and he half-fell into Papà’s arms, which I thought was odd, and kept saying, “I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault.”

He led us to the elevator and pushed the button for the 2nd floor. Jack wasn’t talking much, nor was he looking at me. We walked down the brightly lit hall with the light blue walls. He stopped in front of room 219 and motioned for us to go in. I asked if he was going to join us.

He shook his head no and he softly said, “Only two visitors are allowed in at a time.”

My father pushed open the door to the room. I couldn’t see Bunny at first, as a curtain was blocking my view, but my father, who was in front of me, could. He put his hand softly up to my chest to stop me from walking into the room any further. He then put his hand up in front of my face, indicating for me to stop, and said, “Let me look at her first.”

I waited behind the curtain, not being able to see into the room, but I

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heard the various machines buzzing and whirring, I knew that anyone who needed that much armamentarium would not be doing well. I just shook my head; there had to be some mistake.

A minute later, my father came back around the curtain. He said to me, "It is Bunny. You need to prepare yourself. She does not look well. She does not look like herself."

I blinked hard a few times, trying to comprehend what my father was telling me. The warning he gave didn't help much. I came around the curtain and looked at the person that was lying in that bed. They looked more like a bloody pulp than a human being. I wasn't completely sure it was Bunny. This person's face was so swollen that I had trouble locating her eyes. I couldn't really see any other facial features, either, due to the respirator mask. Her hair was a mess: parts of it matted down with some kind of gel, parts of it shaved off completely. It was clear that her head was now a bit misshapen. Upon closer inspection, I could see several long lines of post-surgical stitches across her scalp. There were marks and cuts and bruises everywhere. But I still wasn't upset by the scene. My brain could not register that this was Bunny.

I said to my father, "Let's go. I don't want to be here anymore."

At that moment, the patient's blood pressure monitor started to beep more rapidly, and a small alarm went off. Two nurses ran in the room and were punching buttons on various machines. One nurse leaned over the bed and said sternly, "Deloris! Deloris, you need to calm down!"

I wanted to tell her that if you wanted her to calm down, calling her Deloris wasn't a good way to start. It was clear that the patient was quite agitated, and every time the machines were reset, the alarms would spring right back to life.

Without even thinking, I walked quickly to the side of her bed and said "Bunny, stop! It's okay. I'm here. We're here. Papà is right here, too. We're not going anywhere, okay?"

The machines slowly started to go quiet. My father and I sat with her, and after a few minutes, I lightly stroked her forearm with my pointer finger.

Once she was fully calmed down, I said to her, "Bunny, I'm just going to go outside to talk to Jack, okay? I'll be right back."

I stood up and turned to leave the room, and the machines slowly started blinking and beeping again.

"Okay. It's okay. Papà will go outside and talk to Jack. I will stay here. Please just try to remain calm, or the nurses will make us leave." I was actually kind of surprised they hadn't already asked us to leave.

Bunny never moved once during this whole interaction, but she was incredibly successful in manipulating the situation to get her way. Yet, in all honesty, I still wasn't 100% sure it was her, but if my being there was calming down whoever was in that bed, then I wasn't going to go anywhere, at least for a while. I motioned to my father to go talk to Jack. I wanted to have some

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facts, some information right away.

My father said, “I do not speak English. I won’t understand. You need to talk to him. I will send him in.”

“No, Papà,” I said. “That’s probably not a good idea. It is clear that on some level Bunny can understand what is happening in the room. I don’t want Jack to come in and have her hear the details. I’m sorry, but it looks like it’s going to be you talking to him.”

My father sighed a big sigh, looked towards the door, got up, and started to walk out. Just before he reached the curtain, he looked back at me and said, “I will try my best.”

I nodded, and he pulled open the door and left.

I looked down at the hands of the person who was lying in that hospital bed. They did not look like Bunny’s hands. I had looked at those hands almost as much as I looked at my own in the last few years, between teaching her the piano and the guitar. But it looked like almost every finger was either broken or disjointed. The wrists were definitely broken, both of them, and this person would need extensive surgeries on both just to be able to use them again.

The things that made Bunny distinctive were gone—her hair was shaved off or matted down, her big toothy mouth and smile were covered, her eyes were swollen shut. I couldn’t even hear her voice. Yes, her reaction to my being there made me think that it may have been her, but that person could have been happy just to hear any voice that didn’t belong to a hospital worker. So, I sat there, next to a person I hoped was not a stranger.

My father walked back into the hospital room about 20 minutes later.

“Papà, what happened to her?”

“No, not now. Not today. Maybe I will tell you tomorrow. It was difficult enough for me to hear it. I will sit with Bunny for a few minutes. Go and get a cup of coffee with Jack. He’s not doing well.”

I looked over at Bunny. The machines didn’t start to whir and beep, so either she was resting peacefully or she was okay with me leaving for a few minutes as long as Papà was there.

I met Jack in the hallway, and we walked in silence together to the hospital cafeteria. I wasn’t going to press him. If anything, I didn’t want to hear what happened to Bunny. Most people, I believe, would have been incredibly curious to know how she ended up like that. But after assisting with all of those surgeries last summer on those kids, I could see how long their road to recovery was going to be. Most of those children were going home after one or two surgeries; Bunny would have to endure countless ones. Who knows how many she endured already? Just putting her skull back together was a feat, I’m sure. And who knew how much brain damage she suffered. No, I didn’t want to hear it. If Jack and I just sat downstairs, drinking a cup of coffee in silence, that would be for the best.

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And, that is what we did. For almost an hour, we sat and didn't talk or look at each other. Honestly, I believe it was the best thing for Jack. I'm sure he had to tell the story over and over again—to his parents, to the doctors and hospital workers, to the police, to my father. I can imagine that he would have thought I was going to walk up to him, grab him by the collar, and scream, "What did you do to her?!" in his face. Sitting here alone with me, not communicating, was the first time since we arrived that I didn't see him covered in sweat. In fact, he jumped a little when I finally did speak.

"How old are you, Jack?"

"I'm 24." He paused. "How old are you?"

"I'm 20. Are you the youngest, the oldest?"

"I'm the youngest of three brothers." Yes, I knew that. Bunny told me that. "You?"

"I'm the youngest of four brothers, although sometimes I feel like I was an only child with my brothers being a bit older than me."

Jack shook his head slowly, still looking down. After a few minutes, he finally spoke.

"I honestly don't know what to tell you, man. I do and don't know what happened to her. I swear."

"It's okay. It's okay. Are you able to tell me what you do know?"

He took a very deep breath and began. "It's all so crazy, man. Okay. Okay. A few weeks ago, me mam was going away for a weekend to visit her mam up in Liverpool. She didn't want to bring Bunny with her, as there would be nothing for her to do, and she didn't want to leave her with my father, as she was sure he would all but ignore her. So, my mother said that she would give me some money if I took Bunny for two nights. That was back in November.

"I live with my girlfriend, Lauren, in London. We rent a bedroom from a friend of mine. He's got a nice place, a three-bedroom apartment, so when Bunny stayed over, she slept on the couch in our room. Lauren was pretty mad about having to have a kid stay with us for two days. She wasn't nice to Bunny. She was really mean. And I didn't stop her. I probably should have, but I didn't.

"Anyway, that first morning Bunny was there, my girlfriend woke up first. She looked over to the couch and saw that Bunny had started her period during the night. I never saw it, but I guess there was a bit of blood on the sheets that she let Bunny use. I was still half-drunk from the night before when I heard Lauren shouting at someone. I heard the front door slam and came into the living room. I asked her what the hell was going on. She pushed passed me, went over to the couch, and held up the sheets. 'Do you see what that little cunt did to my sheets? I threw her ass out and told her to not come back.'

"I said 'You did what?!' I was stumbling around, trying to get my pants

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on. I grabbed my shoes and my shirt and ran out the door to look for Bunny. She was nowhere to be found. That was on a Saturday morning. I didn't see her again until Sunday night, when I found her waiting by my van, asking to be taken to my parents' house. She was still wearing the bloody pajamas that she had on when Lauren kicked her out.

"Michael, she had nothing with her for two days—no shoes, no clothes, no backpack, no money. I tried to apologize and talk to her on the ride back, but she said nothing. I don't know where she was for those two days. I dropped her off and watched her walk in the front door. I didn't stay, as I didn't want to deal with me mam. I waited for days to get the dreaded call and have me mam scream at me for what 'appened. But the next time I spoke to my mother, she thanked me profusely for taking such good care of Bunny. I don't know what Bunny told her, but it wasn't anything close to what the truth was."

Jack stopped for a moment to take a few calming breaths and then continued.

"I stopped by the house the following weekend to see if I could talk to Bunny. I brought her to the fish-and-chips place up the street from my parents' and got her dinner. I told her that no apology was ever going to make up for what had 'appened, so I wanted her to tell me how I could make it up to her. After a long time, she finally asked me if I was still with Lauren. I said that we had broken up and that she was never going to have to see her again. She then said that there was one way I could make it up to her, and that would be to take her with me when me band played at The Three Tuns Pub that following weekend. I told her that that would be impossible, that she was far too young to be allowed in. She said that if I listed her as part of the band, they would have to let her in. She pleaded with me, promising that she would stay hidden backstage. All she wanted was to see us play.

"I finally relented, even though I knew me mam would kill me if she found out. I lied and told me mam that my friends and I were going to take Bunny out for dinner and a movie that night and that me mate Robby would be by to pick her up shortly after school. Robby got her and they took the train into London. We piled into me van, instruments and all, and drove to the pub. We got there early. Our set began at 21:00 and finished at midnight. Bunny loved it. She did. She was super-charged that night.

"As the boys in the band were finishing packing up the instruments into me van, Lauren showed up. I guess she had been there the whole night, watching the show. I'm a little unclear as to what 'appened to Bunny next as I was inside talking with the manager of the club and getting our payment for the night, but me mate Robby said that Lauren told Bunny that she needed to talk to me, so she asked Bunny to wait around front of the pub, and we would pick her up there. I heard that Bunny tried to get my attention, but Lauren got in her face and told that if she didn't wait out front, she was going

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to tell me mam about going to the pub and how she was going to get into huge trouble and be sent back to the U.S. Robby didn't see Bunny after that.

"When I finally walked out the stage door to get in the van, I saw Lauren there. I didn't want the rest of the band to wait around for me, so I gave Robby the keys and told him I would get a ride back with Lauren. I'll be honest—I drank during the entire set and was pretty wasted, and she looked really good that night. When I asked Lauren where Bunny was, she told me that she had gotten a ride back with a friend of hers. I called Bunny's name a few times to see if she was still hanging around, but when I didn't see her, I just assumed that Lauren was telling the truth. But she wasn't, and I left a 10-year-old kid on the street in the middle of the night with no money, no jacket, nothin'.

"I honestly don't know what happened after that. The police told me that they thought that Bunny started to walk home on her own, but where they found her was in the opposite direction of where she was supposed to head. A police officer doing his rounds found her near the train tracks, bloody and barely alive. The doctors here said the only thing that kept her alive was that it was really cold that night. It was actually snowing a bit, and she was left on a concrete slab. So, according to the ER doctor, she survived because the cold slowed her heart rate, so she didn't bleed as quickly. She was barely clinging to life when they brought her in."

Jack stopped talking long enough to look up at me to see my expression. He looked back down again and continued.

"Did you talk to the doctors yet?"

I stared at him intently and said, "No."

He said, "It's bad, man. It's really bad. This happened on Friday night. Me mam thought Bunny was with me, and I thought Bunny was home with me parents. We didn't call the police until late Saturday afternoon. By the time we got to the hospital last night, we were told that we should say our goodbyes, as they didn't think she would survive the night."

I closed my eyes, feeling like I needed to vomit. I ran my fingers partially through my hair, stopping midway to just hold my own head in my hands. I didn't look up, but I could hear Jack starting to sob again.

"She's going to die, isn't she? No little kid can survive that. Me mam got so upset last night after we got home that we had to call an ambulance. They believe she had a stroke. The worst part is that she doesn't even want to see me. Mam is going to die, Bunny is going to die, and I will never be able to apologize to either of them."

I let Jack cry for a bit, not concerned about the others in the cafeteria staring at him. I then stood up quickly, pushing my chair back, and said, "Let's go."

I picked up his arm and halfway dragged him out of the room. I asked an orderly in the hallway where I could find the chapel and he pointed us in

the direction. I pulled Jack into the chapel and was thankful no one else was there. I sat him down in a chair, and I went up to the altar. I sat and prayed, out loud, in Italian. I'm fairly certain Jack understood none of it. I was mad at God, mad at the world, and the Good Lord was going to get a piece of my mind.

"Lord, if you exist, if you are up there, I am ready and willing to cash in my chits. All of them. I have had a horrible life. You, out of anyone, know this. The only two things I have ever asked you for was a nose and for Bunny to stay with us that first summer. Nothing else. I am not like those horrible people who pray to you to have their soccer team win or for their baby to be born a male, not wanting a beautiful, healthy girl. I have been a good steward, helping my father and brother heal those broken children.

"But, now, now you need to help me. You need to come through for me now, and I promise, the slate will be clear for us. I will never be mad at you again for making me be born a freak or for letting my mother kill herself or denying me from loving my father the way I should have because I thought he was just my guardian and not my parent. I won't be mad for all those times I wanted to kill myself and for all of those years I stayed in that underground prison, denied of any love or companionship. YOU. OWE. ME. Heal Bunny. Give her a long and healthy life, or at least as healthy as it possibly can be. And heal Mrs. Jamesson. Do not punish Jack for something that his wretched girlfriend did. She caused this. And if Bunny survives, if you bring her back to us, I promise I will not take a scalpel to Lauren and dismantle her piece by piece."

I was absolutely panting by the time I was done. My face was wet, a combination of sweat and tears. I felt like I had ridden my bike to the bowling alley in the middle of the night with a chubby six-year-old on the back again. I was spent. And, I had just realized that I had left my father upstairs in the room all alone with what we assumed to be Bunny. If it was Bunny, and if she was awake, she was not going to be pleased with me that I wasn't there.

Jack and I left the chapel and headed towards the elevator. He stopped suddenly in the middle of the hallway, which made me stop as well.

"I still haven't called Bunny's parents to let them know what happened. I wasn't sure what to tell them. I..."

I cut him off mid-sentence. "It's alright. I will take care of it."

I surprised myself by offering to do this. But I liked Jack, and I knew he wouldn't be the best person to speak to Bunny's parents. He was too emotional to explain things properly, he didn't really understand what was going on with her medically, and with all of the apologizing he kept doing, I was afraid that her parents would take advantage of that and sue the Jamesson family. They were kind people. That was the last thing I wanted to see happen.

We reached the elevator, and I said to him, "Just go home, Jack. The

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hospital will call you if anything changes. But for right now, the best thing you can do is get home and get some sleep.”

I could tell that he had been awake for days. He looked sad but shook his head vigorously in agreement. He looked up at me with tears in his eyes and said quietly, “Cheers, mate. I’m gonna stop by and see me mam first. I hope she wants to see me.”

I watched him walk down the hall and then got onto the elevator by myself. I got back to Bunny’s room, and it looked like both Papà and Bunny were sleeping. I went down the hall, pulled out my calling card, and found a private booth where I could call Bunny’s parents. The phone rang and no one answered, so I left a message. I tried to contact them every hour after that, for seven hours. Finally, on that last phone call, Bunny’s mother picked up.

“You need to stop calling us. We are not sending Deloris any more money.”

“No, Mrs. Riddle. I—”

“Yes, yes, I know. I heard all of your messages. Deloris is in the hospital. I was very clear with the agency that Deloris was not to receive any blood transfusions, as we are Jehovah’s Witnesses. I have contacted a lawyer, and we will be suing both the homestay agency as well as the Jamesson family. You people think you can do whatever you want.”

I took a deep breath in, trying to maintain some calm before I spoke again.

“Deloris is in hospital now. She is very hurt, and she needs someone to make medical decisions for her. Will you or your husband be flying here? I can meet you at the airport.”

“We are not flying there, and we will not be paying any hospital bills.”

“You won’t need to pay any hospital bills, as England...”

I heard the phone hang up on the other end. I was very clear in my messages that there was a chance that Bunny wouldn’t survive this. It didn’t matter. My father and I were on our own in terms of making medical and financial decisions for her.

I got back to the room and saw that my father was still asleep. I gently woke him and said, “I finally got through to Bunny’s parents, and...”

He cut me off. He said, “I don’t want to know,” while waving his hand in front of his face, as if shooing off a gnat that was bothering him.

The day after we arrived, the doctors decided to put Bunny in a medically induced coma. She had been sedated up until that point, but the pressure caused by her injuries led to brain swelling, and her doctors were getting concerned about the amount of oxygen that was getting, or not getting, to her brain. Bunny stayed in that medically induced coma for over two weeks.

Almost three weeks after her attack, although she still didn’t look good, Bunny’s vitals were much better and the internal and external swelling had

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gone down considerably. Her doctors, including my father, felt that it was safe to start reversing the process. Slowly, the drugs keeping her in her coma were reduced, and her vitals and brain activity were very closely monitored by the team. Considering the condition she was in when she first arrived at the hospital, everyone seemed cautiously optimistic about her prognosis.

My father stayed with me in England for those three weeks, having Gio take over for him with some patients at their clinic and completely rescheduling procedures for others. Papà was incredibly skilled, and his patients were willing to wait for his return rather than to try to find another clinic to have their work done. So, with knowing that there were two doctors in our family with a third on his way to becoming one, Bunny's medical team wanted to sit down with Papà and me to discuss her options. Dr. Barker, a very intelligent and competent surgeon, led the team and called us all into her office.

"I'm glad we could all meet. I understand that Deloris' parents have elected to no longer make any medical decisions, and the hospital has received the necessary paperwork to indicate that. Doctor Aceti here has agreed to take over as her medical proxy."

I snapped my head up quickly and looked over at my father. I was shocked that he willingly put himself in that position. I was Bunny's best friend, and I don't know if I would have done the same. That was a big commitment.

Dr. Barker continued, "As Deloris begins to become conscious, I think it's best that we have a plan in place that we can all agree to. I will speak freely—I do not necessarily think that England is the best place to continue her recovery. She has a long road ahead of her, and I think she would do better being surrounded by people who love her and can help care for her. The Jamesson family, as lovely as they are, will not be able to do so. Mrs. Jamesson has her own health issues to deal with at the moment.

"I received two calls in the last few days, one from a Renata Cavazzuti and the other from a Bernard Kuhmalo, checking on Deloris' progress. Renata stated that she is retired now but had worked as an occupational therapist for many years. She has offered to help Deloris, free of charge, at least three days per week."

I realized that Renata Cavazzuti must be the same Renata that my father was spending time with in Reggio di Calabria. Was my father keeping in touch with this woman while we were in England? I can only assume the answer was yes. And now, she was in Firenze? Was this my father's new girlfriend?

Dr. Barker continued. "Dr. Kuhmalo said that neither he nor his wife work in the medical field but that his wife would be willing to help Deloris every day with any therapy—speech therapy or physical therapy—or exercises she needs to complete, and that he would devote two hours per day to helping Deloris complete any schoolwork as part of her homeschooling.

Deloris may or may not pass her 5th-grade studies this year, but she should at least continue to try to learn and gain some knowledge in addition to skills.

“The road ahead will not be an easy one. Deloris’ hands and wrists are so badly damaged that she, certainly initially and possibly long-term, will not be able to feed herself or use the restroom on her own. Daily bathing and grooming will also be issues. And this is aside from any brain damage she has incurred, as the full extent, we do not know.

“So, now that we all know what the facts are, where should Deloris go? Dr. Aceti, is it even a possibility to bring her back to Italy to be with you and your family?”

My father leaned over and told me to ask how Mrs. Jamesson was doing. I repeated my father’s question to the group but in English.

“Thank you for asking, Dr. Aceti. Mrs. Jamesson is doing remarkably well. She is still bothered by the facial paralysis on the right side, but she is now able to walk, with assistance, and communicate her needs. Her middle child, Paul, has moved back into the family home and is helping her on a regular basis. So, yes, that situation has been solved.”

My father spoke up. Very carefully, in his slow, broken English, he said to the group, “Deloris is family. We would like to take her to Firenze. If we did this, what would the...” He turned to me and said, “Linea del tempo?”

I addressed the group and said, “My father would like to know what the timeline for this would be.”

Dr. Barker replied, “Dr. Aceti, I believe that we need to get Deloris where she needs to be right away. Wherever she starts her therapy is where she will need to stay for a while. Consistency is key.” I translated all of this into Italian for my father, but I truly believe he understood almost everything.

My father spoke again. “Va bene. So, paperwork? Travel? How do we get her to our home?”

“We are looking into options for you now, Dr. Aceti. I will be honest—either way, it will be expensive to get Deloris back to Italy, whether it be by an ambulance service or by a private Medevac.”

My father nodded his head in agreement. He made a good salary every year, but between the cost to start his new clinic with Gio and all of the renovations needed at the church, in addition to losing almost a month’s worth of clinic time and surgeries while in England, money was starting to become an issue. I shocked myself by having a good solution to this issue. The meeting was adjourned, so my father went back to Bunny’s room. She was not yet completely conscious, but she was stirring a little bit, and we were sure she knew that we were there. I, however, stayed behind to talk to Dr. Barker.

I explained to her about the charity work that my family did during the month of July. I was hoping that she might consider contacting the Archdiocese of Florence to ask if they would be willing to help transport a

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child from England to Firenze to get the necessary surgeries and therapies she needed to help her recover. I gave her the name of the contact person that I knew of, as well as the phone number to the main office there. I wasn't sure if this would work, but I prayed on it, something I had started doing more and more since our arrival.

We received good news and bad news. The good news was that the Archdiocese had a donor that would be willing to cover the cost of the Medevac. The bad news was that they would only allow persons with their passports in hand to fly on it. I had been flying and traveling in and out of England using only my state identification card from Italy. That is all I thought I needed. But the rules were becoming a bit stricter in terms of traveling between countries, and in order to get on that helicopter, I was going to need my passport. Even though we paid a large amount to get the application expedited, the passport didn't arrive until several days after the scheduled Medevac flight. So, my father rode back to Italy alone with Bunny while I was forced to take a commercial flight back.

By the time my father and Bunny arrived from their Medevac flight to the private ambulance to our house, it was fairly late. I arrived at our home mere minutes before the ambulance pulled into our driveway. Bunny was awake, with her eyes opened slightly and a small smile on her face.

Bernard and Brigitte were at our home, and they had spent a good portion of the day helping Gio bring a hospital gurney over from the clinic next door and setting it up in my father's library. My father had organized it all without me even knowing it. I had assumed that she and I would have stayed at the clinic to sleep and for her rehabilitation, but my father knew that Bunny would be far happier at home.

The medics from the ambulance wheeled Bunny into the house and into the library, carefully transferring her from their gurney to ours. My father walked them out, and for the first time since September, Bunny and I were alone in a room together.

She looked at me and said weakly, "Hi." She had a small, sweet smile, and for the first time, I noticed that several of her teeth were missing. It was the first time she had not been wearing the respirator mask, so I could better see the damage that had been done to that part of her face. I stood next to the gurney and stroked her hair, careful not to touch the areas that were still healing.

"Hi," I said back.

She swallowed hard and winced a bit. "What happened to me? Papà wouldn't tell me."

I said, lying to her face, "You got into a bar fight... and won."

Bunny closed her eyes and gave a little smile. She whispered, "Really? So cool."

She kept her eyes closed and the smile disappeared. She swallowed hard

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again and said, "I'm so, so tired. Will you stay with me while I sleep?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here when you wake up."

Her eyes were already closed, and she was drifting off quickly. I had thought that she was already asleep when I whispered to her, "Thank you for not dying and leaving me all alone," but I saw another faint smile come across her face.

9 CHAPTER NINE: BUNNY AT 11

I'm not going to tell you about the next four months. Let's just say that they were horrible. Bunny had to undergo so many procedures, and she was either recovering from surgery or in therapy. Had she not been 10 years old and in good health when this happened, she probably would not have survived. Ten-year-olds are quite resilient.

Bunny's birthday is on May 31st, and this was the first time that we got to celebrate the actual day with her. She was still hurting quite a bit, but she was looking forward to the day. She got a cake and presents, of course, but she also got what she specifically asked for, and that was for everyone, including Michele and his family, to come for dinner and watch movies together. I know she loved me very much, but I could tell she was getting a bit tired of hanging out with just me. I wasn't insulted by this; I completely understood. It's no fun to spend all of your free time with the same person who was forcing you to do all kinds of painful exercises and therapy every day.

I wish I could tell you more about that summer, but there is nothing really to tell. It was more of the same— sleeping, exercising, therapy, resting, eating, all in different rotations each day. By the end of the summer, I was terrified thinking about sending her back home. She was still in so much pain, and I knew she wouldn't get the care and attention she needed.

However, one thing of interest did happen that summer. My father, who had always been vehemently against any animals in the house, got Bunny a dog. Let me rephrase that: Renata convinced my father to get Bunny a dog, and he gladly obliged. Renata had a tiny, little Miniature Pinscher named Princess. The dog hated everyone, including my father, but Renata loved it more than just about anything. Princess went everywhere with Renata— literally everywhere—and even had her own wardrobe. So, if Renata went to go play tennis, Princess would show up in her tennis whites. If she were going

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to a pool party, Princess would don her own bathing suit. The only place Princess was not allowed was the beach, as Renata was concerned about her “baby” getting overheated. So, because Renata loved Princess so much, she was sure that a dog would help Bunny recover more quickly. How? I do not know.

Two weeks later, Renata walked into our house with the tiniest puppy I had ever seen. It was a teacup Miniature Pincher, which meant that he was about half the size of regular Min Pins. It also meant that he would have double the number of medical issues and twice as large medical bills. But I did have to give Renata credit. She was right. Bunny literally felt no pain when that dog was around. Bunny named him Snickers, due to his dark brown coat and light brown underbelly. If Bunny were in horrible pain, all any of us would have to do is call “Snickers!” The dog would bound into the room and onto Bunny’s lap, and she would instantly forget about any discomfort she was experiencing. It was magic. Truly.

It was two days before she was to leave to go back to New York when we received a fax from Bunny’s parents. It said that she was to fly to Los Angeles instead of New York.

When I told her about the fax, she said, “Are they getting rid of me? Am I living with a new family in California?”

She tried calling her parents to find out what was going on, but not surprisingly, no one answered the phone, and no one returned her calls. Two days later, she was on a plane with no understanding of why she was traveling to the other side of the country.

As Bunny was climbing into the taxi with Gio to go to the airport, she was practically sobbing. “Take care of Snickers! Tell him I love him every day!”

She looked up at me and stopped crying a bit. “I love you, Michael! I’ll miss you, too. A whole bunch.”

“I’ll take care of him for you. He’ll be right here when you return next year.”

I didn’t hear from Bunny at all that year—no cards, letters, or phone calls. I tried calling her home number, just to see if she made it back safely, but when I did, a stranger answered the phone. It turned out that the Riddle family had changed their phone number. At that point, all I could do was hope and pray that Bunny was okay and that she would reach out to me if she were in trouble.

10 CHAPTER TEN: BUNNY AT 12

That next year, we were surprised when I received a phone call from Bunny's mother in early May, telling me that she was sending Bunny to us. She didn't ask for money or for funds to pay for a plane ticket. I was thoroughly confused. But when Bunny arrived that summer, I understood why.

Of course, I had pictured in my mind that she was going to do what she always did: Jump out of the taxi, run up the stairs to our courtyard, and hug us all. However, I was given quite a shock as her taxi pulled up and she slowly exited the vehicle. It felt like a ton of bricks had hit me. Bunny looked awful.

She was hunched over, walking like a very old person. My father ran down the stairs and grabbed her arm, helping her get up each and every step. I couldn't move. I just stood there and watched. It was one of the saddest things I had ever seen. No wonder her mother didn't want her around.

Bunny made her way over to me and straightened up as best she could. She smiled and said, "I'm a stone-cold fox, right?"

I let out a kind of laugh/cry sound.

I started to help her walk into the house, and between her labored breaths, she said, "Pizza. (gasp) I need pizza."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, "Just as soon as we get you settled inside."

Snickers came running out from my room downstairs. He jumped up on Bunny's legs, but she couldn't even bend over enough to pet him. "Snickers! Oh, you're so cute! I missed you so!"

My father had disappeared to the garage for a moment and returned half-running with an old wheelchair. I was about to tell my father no, that she didn't need it, but she surprised me with saying, "Oh, thank you, Jesus," under her breath and plopped herself down in it. Snickers thought it was the best thing ever, as he could ride around in her lap all day long.

As I got Bunny situated in the wheelchair, my father said that he would make the pizza so we could sit outside for a bit. Bunny looked at me with an

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enormous frown. She didn't really like the way my father prepared her pizza, but she would never let him know that. It really wasn't surprising; after seven summers of perfecting her exacting standards, I was the only one who Bunny wanted to make pizza for her.

I rolled her and Snickers over to the seating area under the trellis. For nine months, I was so curious to know where she had been and what was waiting for her in California upon her return. Not surprisingly, it was not a happy story.

It turned out that during the time Bunny was in England, her father got a promotion and was transferred to a new branch on the west coast. The family packed up and moved right after the school year was over for her sisters. By the time Bunny visited the house in California for the first time, the other four members of her family were completely moved in. Bunny's room, however, contained an unmade bed and 20 boxes. No one bothered to help her get set up.

The worst part, according to Bunny? She never got the chance to say goodbye to her one and only friend, Theresa. That clearly didn't matter to Bunny's mother; she had never liked Theresa to begin with. Mrs. Riddle had a very good friendship with Theresa's mother but thought she was weak because she couldn't have children of her own. Theresa and her sister Jamie were adopted from Afghanistan. Theresa's parents were only going to adopt one child, but when they saw the two beautiful girls together, they couldn't possibly leave one of them behind. So, Bunny's mother tolerated Theresa and her sister, but it was clear that she never liked the idea of Afghani children running around her pristine-white neighborhood.

Bunny's parents bought a beautiful, five-bedroom home outside of LA. Her father had an hour-long commute to work each way, but it was worth it to keep Bunny's mother in a home that she could be proud of. I, however, thought it was odd that they bought such a lovely home, when it was perfectly clear to me that Bunny's mother had no friends and despised having people over. I knew this about her even though I had never even met the woman.

After Bunny told me about the new house and her new school, she got really quiet. She looked up at me and said, "Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure, within reason," I said.

"Wanna go jump on the trampoline for me?"

"You want to watch me while I jump on the trampoline?" I asked, trying to get clarification.

"Yes. That would make me very happy," she said in a sad tone, which confused me a bit.

I walked down the steps to the bottom tier of our yard and climbed onto the trampoline. I never liked jumping on it, and I wasn't enjoying myself at that moment, either. I heard Brigitte shout from behind me, "I see that Bunny has arrived!"

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I turned around and said, “Indeed, she has. She is making me do this.”

“Yes, I deduced that. Good for her!”

Just then, my father called us over for lunch. I wheeled her and Snickers back under the trellis, and even though she could barely hold each slice of that pizza, she consumed her meal in record time.

She stared at me for a moment with sad eyes. “I can’t play the piano anymore. Or the guitar. Or the drums.”

She looked at her hands. “They hurt all the time. They hurt from the moment I wake up. I can’t bathe myself. I can hardly use the bathroom. And my mother is furious with me all the time because I’m not helping with the cleaning or the laundry. I try to stay out of the house as long as possible every day, and when I am home, I try not to talk to anyone. I’ve become quite good at being invisible.”

“We’ll work on that this summer. I’ll help you get better. And, yes, you need to play the piano and guitar. You need to exercise those muscles in your hands, or they will start to atrophy.”

I picked up her left hand. “Look, it’s already started.”

“My mother has always told me that all I ever do is create problems. I used to be mad when she said it, but I think she’s right.”

I looked at her with my eyebrows raised. “Really? You’re going for self-pity? And you expect me to bite?” I shook my head. “Nope, not gonna happen. If you could see yourself, I think you would be disgusted. This is not the Bunny that I know. Maybe I should just start calling you Deloris.”

“Oh, that’s not cool, man.” She still had tears in her eyes, but she smiled at me. “Okay. I get it. I’ll try harder. I’ll do better.”

“Good girl. That’s what I wanted to hear.”

There is not much more I can say about that summer. Bunny slept about 12 hours a day, which was fantastic, as she needed the rest, and the other 12 hours consisted of about 6 hours a day of therapy and 6 hours of fun. I realize that 6 hours of therapy a day sounds like a lot, but it clearly was masked as fun, or she would have never agreed to do it. She relearned to play the piano, this time with fingers that seemed bulky and foreign to her. She couldn’t hold the drumsticks, so I configured a pair of gloves with small, long pieces of wood along the fingers so she could still hit the drum heads. (She beat on them like she was playing the bongos, but it worked.) She would play with Snickers and throw the ball for him to fetch. And, yes, even bouncing on that trampoline was worked in. I couldn’t believe how hard she worked. She wanted to get better, and I was so proud of her for giving it her all. She returned to the U.S. that September a new girl.

As for me, that summer was difficult, as I was still trying to figure out who I was. On one hand, I so admired Bunny for being true to who she was and for being so tough and such a fighter, but on the other hand, I was embarrassed by her. And I didn’t know why.

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I was finally able to be part of society and desperately wanted to fit into the social norms, but I knew I never would. My life experiences had molded me into someone that would always be, on some level, a freak. It didn't help that Bunny seemed to do everything in her power to not follow social norms. I was so torn. I loved that about her but also hated it. I didn't understand her. I didn't understand myself. It took years before I finally started to figure out why.

11 CHAPTER ELEVEN: BUNNY AT 13

It was early May when my father received a phone call from Bunny's mother. She was back to her old ways, demanding a price before she would send Bunny to Italy. But Papà had had enough. He had paid for all of the expenses he and I incurred during our three weeks in England, in addition to paying the 1,500 pounds for her homestay with the Jamessons. So, that summer, my father put his foot down and decided that he wasn't going to pay Mrs. Riddle a fee just to have Bunny come and stay with us. He felt that she should have just been happy that he paid for her round-trip ticket and clothed and fed her all summer.

Bunny's mother was not happy with this change of heart on my father's part, and she called him repeatedly regarding her payment. He ignored all of her phone calls. So, it was not a complete shock when Mrs. Riddle called and said that she was not going to allow Bunny to travel to Italy that summer. It was tantamount to extortion—pay up, or I will not send you my daughter. My father was incredibly apologetic but adamant. He was not going to pay that woman another cent, and I agreed with him. Of course, I wanted to see Bunny, but I understood why he couldn't go against his principles. So, we were not going to see Bunny that summer. I hoped and prayed that she was going to be okay.

It was late-June when the phone rang late one night. I answered it, and on the other line was Bunny. She was a bit frantic.

"Michael, I need your help. Please help me. Please."

"Bunny, are you okay? What do you need?"

"I need to come see you. Now. Please. I'm at a travel agency. I'm going to put an agent on the phone with you right now. She will need you to pay for two tickets to Italy. Please just do it. I promise I will explain everything when I get there. Please."

She spoke in a whisper into the phone, "This is life or death."

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I could then hear Bunny pass the phone over.

“Good afternoon. Is this a Mr. A-see-tee I’m speaking with?”

“Yes, A-cheh-tee.” I said slowly.

“Yes, I apologize. Mr. Aceti. Thank you. Well, I have a Ms. Riddle here that wants to purchase two tickets to Italy for herself and Mr. Garza. I will be able to book these tickets once I receive a credit card number from you.”

“Okay. Please hold a moment.”

I walked into my father’s office and opened up the center drawer where I knew him to keep the credit cards he didn’t use on a regular basis. I grabbed one and walked back to the phone. I gave the agent the credit card number and waited.

“Excellent, Mr. Aceti. An amount of \$1,621.00 has been charged to your account. Thank you for your help. Goodbye.”

“Wait! Wait!” I called into the receiver. “When will Miss Riddle and Mr.—”

“Garza.”

“Yes, Mr. Garza. When will they arrive?”

“They leave tonight and will arrive in Florence, Italy by 7:00 p.m. tomorrow evening, your time.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

And with that, she hung up.

A Mr. Garza? I had never heard of a Mr. Garza before. And what was so life-or-death about this situation? I was perplexed, to say the least, but I was looking forward to seeing my girl. I was not, however, excited about telling Papà about the credit card bill. Still, even with the cost of the extra ticket, it was still cheaper than what my father usually gave to Mrs. Riddle each summer.

The taxi from the airport pulled up to our house the next evening, and my father, Gio, and I walked out into the courtyard to greet Bunny and the stranger she brought with her. Bunny climbed out of the car with her head down and walked quickly over to Papà and Gio to hug them. She never looked up.

“This is my camp counselor, Bobby.”

Bobby looked terrified. He stood there, waiting at the bottom of the courtyard steps, without saying hello. Gio, wanting to break the silence and cut through the awkwardness of the situation, quickly walked down the steps to Bobby and said in English, “Hi, Bobby. I’m Gio. Nice to meet you.”

Bobby introduced himself in Italian. I was so confused. Before I could introduce myself to Bobby, Bunny grabbed my hand and dragged me downstairs to my room. She said nothing until the outside door and the door to my room were both shut and locked. She looked up at me with giant eyes, breathing hard.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

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Bunny ran over, grabbed me around my waist, and started to sob. I walked us backwards slowly and guided her gently over to the couch. Snickers came running into the room to see his girl, but Bunny couldn't even stop crying to give him attention, so he just curled up next to her. We sat there for about ten minutes, her sobbing the whole time. Soon, she started to drift off to sleep.

I slowly got myself out from under her and grabbed her favorite pillow and soft blanket for her. I thought it was funny that this same blanket and pillow had been hers since that first summer she was here. They were old, and the blanket had one corner that was shredded from getting caught in the washing machine, but they were the ones she always wanted to use on her return. I left her there and went upstairs to introduce myself to Bobby, but I only found Papà in the house.

"Gio took Bobby out for dinner. They seemed to hit it off right away. So, how does Bunny know this Bobby fellow?"

I shook my head and raised my shoulders, signaling that I had no idea.

"What did she tell you when she arrived?"

"She locked the door and cried for 10 minutes until she passed out."

A look of deep concern came over my father's face. "Gio invited him to stay the night."

"I don't know who Bobby is, but I don't believe she would have brought him here if he were a danger to us."

My father looked relieved. But I later found out from Bunny that I probably should have been concerned.

Bunny slept through the night, and she had a huge smile on her face when she woke up and saw me. Then, she sat up with a snap.

"Is... Is Bobby here?" She looked terrified.

"Yes. He spent the night. Gio invited him. What's going on, Bunny?"

She put her head back, looked at the ceiling, and took a deep breath in. She had a look of horror on her face. She looked like she was in agony when she said, "I guess you could say that Bobby kind of kidnapped me."

I was unaware of the word "kidnapped," and my face clearly showed my expression.

"Abducted."

Still, I had no idea what she was saying. The Italian word for abducted is "abdotto," but for some reason, I still couldn't make the connection. I went over to my bookshelf and took out my Italian-English dictionary. I read the definition and looked up at her incredulously.

"You were abducted? And you brought your—" I looked at the dictionary again— "...abductor here to Italy with you? To our home? Are you insane?"

She took a deep breath and started to sob again.

"Oh, God. I'm so, so sorry. I just wanted to come here so badly this

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summer, but my mother... You know my mother. Ugh. So, of course she didn't want me to stay home all summer and spoil any of her plans, so she sent me to this horrible Charles Taze Russell camp out in the middle of the desert for the summer. It was horrible—hundreds of JW kids talking about the Bible and the 144,000. When I got there, the camp counselors realized that I had been put in the wrong house. My mother put on the application that I was 10 years old. The bitch doesn't even know how old I am. Unbelievable.”

I thought to myself that that was not a mistake. Without ever meeting this woman, I just knew that Mrs. Riddle had done that on purpose.

Bunny continued, “So, while they were trying to find a place to put me in the house with kids my own age, all my things were put in the storage closet. For three days, I was just roaming around, literally. I was just basically living out of my backpack. I had some books in it and some snacks and a water bottle. A few days ago, I walked up to a small pavilion near the main road. When I got there, Bobby was already sitting there. I thought he was one of the other campers, so I said hello to him and sat three tables away from where he was. About 10 minutes later, Bobby got up, and I thought he was going to walk back down to the main building. He walked behind me, and that was the last thing I remembered until I woke up in the passenger seat of his truck. His dog was in the car seat next to me, growling. We were in the middle of nowhere. He saw me wake up but said nothing to me. I was going to open the door and jump out of his truck, but there was no door handle or window crank. I was stuck.”

She looked over at me to gauge my reaction. Clearly, it was calm enough for her to continue.

“He said nothing to me the whole drive. We pulled off onto the side of the road so he could go to the bathroom, and he told me that I could try to get out of the car and run, but there was nothing around for miles and that I would probably die out in the hot sun. He was right. There was nothing around. I was terrified. We drove for hours. I finally decided to try to talk to him, but he said nothing. He only glared at me. I asked him if he was going to kill me. He looked at me and said, ‘Probably.’”

She paused for a moment and swallowed. “Can you get me something to drink?”

I brought her a bottle of her favorite, San Pelligrino Aranchiata. She took a big swill, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and started again.

“When it got dark, he pulled over, pulled the keys out of the ignition, and got into the back of his truck and went to sleep. I was starving and still had my water bottle in my backpack and some food, so when he was finally asleep, I fed myself and the dog. The poor dog honestly didn't look like he had anything to eat in days. He stopped growling at me after that. I didn't know what to do, and there was nowhere to run to. I stayed up watching

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Bobby all night. I kept thinking if I fell asleep, he was going to reach around from behind me and slash my throat. I had no idea what kinds of weapons he had on him.

“At the break of dawn, he climbed out from around back. He got back in the car, started it, and we were off driving again. We were about an hour away from where we had stopped for the night when his car started sputtering. We were able to drive for a bit longer, but it finally died on the side of the road. He looked enraged, and I didn’t say a word, thinking “This is it. This is when he’s going to kill me.” He got out of the car and kicked his front tire about a hundred times. He then got back in the driver’s seat. A car was coming from the other direction. I still had no way of getting out of the car, but I prayed hard that they would stop and ask us if we needed help. Bobby lifted up his shirt to show me the gun that was tucked into his pants. He said, ‘One word, and you’re dead.’

“It was a local police officer. I was thrilled. Bobby got out of the car to talk to him, looking back at me the whole time. The police officer walked over to his car and called something in. I thought, “Oh, my Lord, I am saved!” Then, the police officer came back over to the truck, waved at me and the dog, and continued to talk to Bobby like nothing was wrong. I didn’t know what to do. If I made a commotion, would this guy shoot both me and the cop? I was frozen. I just sat there.

“A tow truck showed up about 20 minutes later, and the driver hooked up Bobby’s car. Then, all three of us—Bobby, me, and the dog—loaded up into the cab of the tow truck and drove about 20 miles to a gas station in the middle of nowhere. It was this tiny oasis, with the station, a small store, and a diner—that’s it.”

Bunny finished her drink and asked for another one.

“Oh, and get me some of those cookies I like.” I returned with them, and she resumed her story.

“So, at this point, I have no idea what to do. None. I’m thinking ‘Do I try to get a message to the tow truck driver now?’ or ‘Should I make a run for the diner?’ ‘Was he just going to assassinate everyone here if I said anything?’ I literally had no idea what I should do. So, I just sat down. Stupid, right? I just sat in the chair inside the garage. Bobby was in the garage, too, pacing back and forth. After a few minutes, they got his truck off of the tow truck and into the garage. The mechanic looked under the hood for a few minutes and then came back over to talk to Bobby. I heard him say, ‘Well, your fuel pump’s shot. And your truck is past inspection. And it won’t pass unless you have those two front tires replaced.’ The mechanic starts pressing on the keys of his calculator and says to Bobby, ‘Looks like it’ll run you about \$300.00, I’m afraid.’

“At that point, Bobby’s whole disposition changed. He walked over and sat down in the seat next to me. He looked totally dejected. His dog went

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over to him, and he gently patted his head and rubbed his ears. Then he looked at me with tears in his eyes and gave a small laugh. I told him I needed to use the bathroom and got up. I knew he wasn't going to stop me. The bathroom was around the back of the garage. I went in and washed my face, not knowing what to do next. And, then, I did something totally crazy."

I spoke up. Of course, I knew what she did. "You gave him the money. You wouldn't be sitting here if you didn't."

She looked at me with big eyes. "Yes! Exactly! I gave him the money. I had almost \$700.00 in my backpack, sewn into the lining. I ripped it open quickly, really quickly, so that I wouldn't change my mind, and took out \$300.00. I walked back into the garage. Bobby was still sitting in the same spot, rubbing his dog's head. I sat down next to him, grabbed his hand, put the money in it, and closed his fist around it. He stared at his hand for a long time and then looked up at me. I then said to him, 'The dog and I will be across the street at the diner' and got up, took the dog by his collar, and left. "I went across the street to the little store first and got a leash for Kuni—you know, Kuni, the Buddhist god of love. That's what I started to call the dog, as he was such a sweetheart after I fed him. Anyway, I got him a leash and a bunch of snacks and dog food. I even bought a couple of cute doggy bowls for him and a gallon of water. Then I walked the dog over to the diner.

"No one was in there, and there was only one waitress and one cook. I held up a \$20.00 bill to the waitress and said, 'This is yours if I can bring my dog in.' She laughed and said, 'Fine by me, hun.' Kuni and I walked to the far end of the restaurant. I didn't even look at the menu. The waitress walked up, and I said, 'I'll have a burger and fries and onion rings and a salad and a Coke, and my friend here will have pancakes, 4 sausage links, and four pieces of bacon, please. Oh, and can you please fill up his water bowl?'"

"The waitress couldn't have been nicer and gave belly rubs to Kuni every time she came over to check on us. Halfway through my meal, Bobby showed up and slid into the seat across from me. He looked different. It was weird. He looked like a child, almost scared and embarrassed. He took out the change from the mechanic—I guess it cost less than \$300—and slid it across the table to me. I slid it back towards him and said, 'Get yourself something to eat.' The waitress came over, and he didn't say anything to her. I said, 'He'll have the same as me.' By this point, Kuni was out cold on the floor. I'll tell you, at that point, if Bobby had laid a finger on me, I think that dog would have killed him.

"Anyway, I said to Bobby, 'I need to get to Italy. I need to see my family there. So you are going to drop me off at the closest travel agency. Do you understand me?' He looked at me and said quietly, 'You have family in Italy? Where?' I told him you were in Firenze, and he said he hadn't been back to Italy in years.

"I then said something really stupid to him. I said to him, 'I'll make you

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a deal. You help me get to a travel agent, and I will do my best to get you a plane ticket to Italy.' Why did I say that? But it did the trick. We got his truck, drove into a town called Pahrump and got the plane tickets, thanks to you. Then, we drove four hours to Los Angeles, dropped off his truck and Kuni at his friend's house, and went straight to the airport. And now you are all caught up."

I stopped and stared at her. I said, "You not only bought a plane ticket for this criminal with my father's money, you also thought it was wise to bring him to our house? Does he still have the gun? Will we all be killed tonight?"

Bunny shut her eyes and closed them tight. She was rubbing her wrists, and I could see that she was in a bit of pain.

"I know. I know. I really messed up. I'm so, so sorry. I honestly didn't know what else to do. I had no one else to call."

She opened up her eyes and looked at me. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to be here. I knew I would be safe if I were here. It's the only place in the world I wanted to be. I made a mistake. A big one, I know. I'm sorry..." She started to cry again.

I hugged her. "It's okay, Bunny."

But it wasn't okay. I was livid. I was angry with her for putting us all in this situation, and I was angry at this Bobby, who actually thought it would be okay to come here.

"You need to stay here. I need to go talk to Papà."

I walked across the courtyard. My father was in his room, getting ready for work. It was Saturday, but Papà went into the hospital every fourth Saturday to do rounds. I sat down on the edge of his bed.

"I think we need to talk."

My father looked in the mirror and began to work on knotting his tie. "No, I don't think we do. Bobby talked to me this morning while I was having my coffee. He told me."

Incredulously, I said, "What exactly did he tell you?"

My father looked directly at me, his tie only half-finished.

"My boy, I know everything. He is overcome with guilt. He has had a lot of troubles in his life, and he did something stupid and impetuous. He could be sitting in a jail cell right now, but your Bunny showed him kindness when he really didn't deserve it."

He looked back at himself in the mirror and continued working on his tie. "You know, if you think about it, he isn't much different than how Deloris was when she showed up on our doorstep. She might have ended up with the same fate as Mr. Garza had she not had you trying to convince me to let her stay."

I let that sink in. I couldn't even imagine who Bunny would have grown up to be if she didn't have this place to call home each summer.

"So, you're letting him stay here?"

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“Yes, for the time being. He’s going to help out at the clinic every day as the janitorial staff. He’s happy to do it, and Gio is going to pay him a small salary in addition to the room and board that he is getting here.”

He picked up his briefcase, and I stood up and followed him into the kitchen. He turned one last time to talk to me.

“For the time being, I’m going to let Bunny stay in your room with you. Bobby and Gio are working on changing over Gio’s office in the church into a bedroom where Bobby can stay, but until that is ready, I don’t think it’s good to have Bobby and Deloris staying in the main house together. Just please behave. Don’t disappoint me.”

I clearly knew what he meant by that. He would not have to worry.

Even though Bobby was there, Bunny and I still went over and worked at the clinic each day. Bobby did his best to avoid Bunny, and the only time they spoke was when one would need something from the other. We were incredibly busy that summer, still keeping with our three-procedures-per-week schedule. But word was starting to get out, and parents that had stayed with us previously were telling other parents how well we treated them, so more and more family members started to show up with the patients.

Brigitte still came over three times a week to help Bunny with meals, and she enlisted Bernard to help, as well. The children loved Bernard and his low, booming voice. When he would come to their rooms with a bag full of books, asking them if they wanted to hear a story, you could hear the “Yaaaay!” in most of the building. He was quite entertaining, and I would often find myself standing outside of the patients’ recovery rooms, listening to him read, smiling. What a truly lovely man.

By mid-July, my father asked to speak to both Bunny and Bobby separately for a half-hour each day. After a couple of weeks, he would have them both come in at the same time. It was a safe environment for them, and I believe my father helped them understand each other. They didn’t grow to exactly like each other that summer, and I would have never coined their relationship a “friendship,” but in a weird way, they realized that they needed each other. Bobby needed her to be able to come to Italy and have a sense of normalcy for a short while, and Bunny needed Bobby to help her get to Italy and also to get back to her parents’ home in Los Angeles.

As far as her parents knew, Bunny was still at that camp. And the camp probably never knew she was missing, as her items were still probably in that storage closet. There was no empty bed each night, as she was never assigned a bed. So, in order to get her home without her parents being the wiser, Bobby was going to have to take her there, acting as one of the camp counselors.

Bunny and Bobby arranged to have Bobby drop her off at 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday, when the family was sure to be at the Kingdom Hall. It was good planning, as when she arrived home, no one was there. She was able to get

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the hidden key and sneak up into her room without anyone noticing. No one ever knew the wiser.

And I was lucky, as I got a summer with her that I never thought I was going to have.

12 CHAPTER TWELVE: BUNNY AT 14

From the day Bunny left the summer before until the next spring, I was miserable, suffering from severe depression. That last summer was hard, and Bunny seemed a bit off having Bobby around. She always seemed a bit on the defensive. In addition, I had turned 23 years old a month after she left to go home, and my brothers and father kept pushing me to become more of an adult, meaning I needed to move out of my father's house and find a woman to date and eventually marry.

My family thought it was cute that Bunny was kind of my “girlfriend” when she was little, but the fact that she was starting to look and act a bit more like a young lady made our relationship a bit creepy. In fact, everyone at that point thought it would be best if I tried to discourage Bunny from visiting that year. I think Luca and Michele were still upset that she brought Bobby to our home, and although Gio tried his best to defend the two of them, it was still a sore topic amongst all of us. They all thought it would be a better idea if I spent the summer going out with them, having them take me on trips and to pubs and concerts and events. They even wanted to bring me to the dance clubs where many of the American exchange students hung out. I spoke such good English, maybe finding an English-speaking girlfriend would be more interesting and exciting. In reality, none of it sounded appealing, and I had no idea why.

I still agreed to have Bunny come that summer. I didn't see any reason why I couldn't do both—hang out with Bunny during the day and go out with my brothers in the evening. She certainly was old enough to stay on her own. However, by the time she had arrived, my feelings had changed.

I felt so bad for Bunny, as no one seemed truly happy to see her, including me. My father was pushing for us to not spend time together, especially alone. I guess he was worried about what would happen if a young 14-year-old under his charge were to get pregnant. But as much as I loved

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Bunny, I was not attracted to her, not in that way. I wasn't attracted to anyone, actually, and Bunny knew that. I felt safe with her, and she with me. No one understood our relationship. Hell, I really didn't understand it completely myself. How could I possibly explain it to them?

Bunny had arrived three days prior, and I had barely said anything to her. She wandered around the courtyard on her own, still sometimes jumping on her trampoline that was slowly starting to fall apart. She ate meals on her own or with my father. She would call my name over and over again from the top of the steps, either at the spiral staircase in the kitchen or the outdoor steps in the courtyard. I wouldn't answer her. She would sit and read books outside under the veranda, waiting for me to come out. I never did. She couldn't understand how I could be depressed with her being there, as we always had so much fun together. In all honesty, I couldn't understand it myself. I was so confused about so much.

By day 4, Bunny had enough. She stood at the top of the stairs in the courtyard and yelled, "Michael, I'm coming down, ready or not."

I started to hear her run down the steps, but I noticed my door was ajar. I couldn't get over to it in time to lock it, and she barged in. She would have bashed my teeth in had my face been anywhere near that door.

"What the fuck is the matter with you? What have I done for you to treat me this way? If you want me to go home, fine, I will go home. But at least have the balls to tell me to my face."

I was pissed. How dare she come down here and yell at me. Even my own father would never do that. This was my space, and no one was allowed in it when I wanted to be alone. I could feel my face getting hot. I looked at Bunny and marched towards her. I placed my hand on her chest near her neck and gently began to push her out of my room. I thought she was going to go willingly, but I flipped a switch in Bunny that I had only seen once before—when she was four years old. My brothers would make fun of me on purpose, just to see this child get riled up. She would become so angry that she would threaten their lives. They called her "La Diavola della Tasmania" (the Tasmanian Devil). Well, by attempting to push her out of my room, I re-awoke that beast. She came at me with everything she had.

Bunny grabbed my arms and was pulling me towards the door, growling, "You are coming out of this dungeon right now."

I was enraged. I was shoving her out my door. My plan was to push her up the stairs and then run back downstairs, locking the door behind me. Unfortunately, only part of my plan worked. I successfully pushed her up the stairs into the courtyard, but when I tried to run, she wouldn't let me go. She held onto my clothes, my hair, anything she could get her grubby, little hands on, so that every time I tried to push her down, she would pull me down with her. I lost my balance, and we were rolling around on the ground in the courtyard.

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My father ran out of the house, screaming at us to stop. I was trying to push her down, but her hand met my fist and pushed it back up. Somehow, my fist got loose from her grip, and before I knew what was happening, it came down upon her face with such a force, I knew I had done damage. I stopped, as I could see her writhing in pain. I was still sitting on top of her, straddling her hips, when I checked to see if she was okay. I had my face close to hers and was about to apologize when I felt a hard punch to my throat. Bunny couldn't see very well, as my punch had landed right in her eye, and although I don't believe she was aiming for my throat, she seemed pleased with the target she did hit. I gasped and gasped. I couldn't find the air.

I felt like I was choking to death. Bunny was not concerned in the least. With one eye bleeding and starting to swell, she pushed me over, jumped on top of me, and started to pummel me with all her might. Had Luca not been there at the house at that moment to pull Bunny off of me, I don't want to think about how that would have ended. Luca was strong, and he was able to pull Bunny straight up by her arms and literally toss her to one side.

Luca was not concerned about Bunny in the least, even though she was hurt. He was worried about me—more specifically, my nose. He knew how precious my nose was—the torture of not having one, the painstaking hours of prep and surgery for my father and Gio, the months of healing I had to endure. As Luca was checking me over, I could see Bunny get up and run past my father and over to the back of the house, behind the kitchen. She was going next door to the church.

I waited for over an hour before I went over to check on her. My father went into the house and upstairs to her room. From there, he could look out the upstairs window into the church yard. There was a small area between the trees that had the perfect view of the sunset over the hills surrounding Firenze, so my brother put a bench there. There were many nights he and I would sit out there with a couple of beers, chatting and drinking after a hard day of work (for him) and school (for me). My father could see Bunny sitting quietly on the bench, looking out. According to my father, she sat very still for a long time, not moving a muscle.

I grabbed an ice pack, an old towel, and two bottles of Pellegrino, walked to the back of the house, and climbed through the ivy and the gate that led to the church yard. It was interesting to me that even though Gio, my father, and I all worked next door, none of us used that gate to get to the church. We all walked out our own front gate, up the sidewalk, and through the church's front gate. That back entrance was all for Bunny, and we coined it The Rabbit Hole.

Bunny was still on the bench, and when I sat down next to her, she didn't move. We sat quietly together for several minutes. Then, she said softly, "If you're looking for an apology from me, you're not going to get one."

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I paused for a moment and said, “Okay.”

She took a deep breath and began again, right away, with a bit more strength in her voice, “Why is it that every time I leave, it takes us days or even weeks to get back to the way we were? What changes when I’m away?”

I paused, and without looking at her, I said softly, “We do, Bunny.”

“Sorry, but no. I’m not buying that.”

“Bunny, I’m 23. I should be off doing things that 23-year-olds do, shouldn’t I? I definitely should not be hanging out with a kid, a teenager. My family thinks it’s weird and creepy, and, you know what? So do I.”

“Do you?” she snapped at me. “Do you think it’s creepy? Or are you just saying that because that is what your family wants you to think?. You know what? I’m going to tell you something that you won’t like, but here goes... You’re not 23, you big, fat idiot! You’re 14, just like me. That first summer, you were not 13 when I was four. We were both four years old together. Don’t you get it? We’ve grown up together.”

She got up from the bench, and I could see how horribly bruised and swollen her face was. It reminded me of what she looked like in the hospital when she was 10, and I felt dreadful for doing that to her. I was sitting at the other end of the bench, and she came over to me, bent over, and put her face near mine.

She growled, “You’re 14, motherfucker. You can try to fool everyone else, but you will never fool me.”

She stood up and walked back to the house through her gate. I watched her go.

I looked back at the view, watching the sun go down, pondering what she had just said. I still had the ice pack and the bottles of Pellegrino, having neglected to give them to her. I put the ice pack on my throat. I was able to breathe fine, and there wasn’t much of a bruise there. I had learned that day that there is no such thing as a “small” punch to the throat.

I opened a bottle of water and drank it slowly. I thought to myself, “My Lord, she’s right. I was 14. At least emotionally. And probably mentally, in many ways. I was 23 physically, but I was so behind in my emotional growth. It all made sense to me now. I was four when she was four. I *was* four when she was four.”

I was starting to understand why it wasn’t weird that we were friends, and why it wasn’t odd that there was nothing sexual going on between us. No one could have understood our relationship. How could they? I was just starting to understand it myself. And would it even be worth it to try to make everyone understand? I would look mental. I was so exhausted. I just wanted to find myself. Most 23-year-olds had found themselves by the time they turned 23. But that wasn’t me. I just needed to give myself a bit more time.

I sat on that bench and watched the sun go down. I then headed back over to the house, coming in through Bunny’s side gate, and when I entered

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the courtyard, I saw Bunny lying in the dark on one of the lounge chairs in the courtyard. I walked over and sat on the chair next to her, handing her the other bottle of Pellegrino that was only partially cold at that point. She took it, opened it immediately, and guzzled down the entire bottle. She didn't look over at me. We both sat in the chairs, facing the Kuhmalos' backyard.

"You're right. I am only 14. We are the same age," I said quietly.

I looked over at Bunny. She didn't look over at me but nodded her head over and over slowly in agreement. Then, she looked over at me and slowly leaned towards me to tell me something. She opened her mouth, and the largest, most-disgusting burp emanated from her body. She then looked at me, nodded her head once, and leaned back again in her chair. A 23-year-old man probably would not have found that funny. I thought it was hilarious.

The next day, Bunny concocted a plan that I truly did not think was going to work: She was to pretend as if she were still mad at me and that the summer had been ruined.

That morning, she went to my father and told him that she and I still hadn't made up and that she wanted to return home. According to her, my father almost seemed relieved that she was leaving. She avoided me completely the rest of the day and made a big to-do, pretending to call the airlines to change her plane ticket for the next morning. And, at 6:30 the next morning, a taxicab had been summoned, and, for all my father knew, Bunny and her bag were off to the airport. The crazy thing is that she predicted exactly what was going to happen next.

Bunny said that she thought that my father did not want to be in Firenze for the summer but was doing it for me. He didn't want to leave Bunny and me alone in the house, so he stayed behind, even though he desperately wanted to be in Reggio di Calabria. So, by 9:00 that morning, just two and a half hours after Bunny supposedly left, I learned that Bunny was correct. Renata had pulled up in our driveway in her little Volkswagen convertible, and my father ran out of the house carrying his bags. He put them into the trunk of her car and then noticed me standing off to the side while he was slamming the trunk shut. He dug into the pocket of his designer shorts and threw the keys to his car to me.

"Take good care of her," he said as he got into Renata's car. By "her," my father meant his car, who he loved almost as much as any of his children.

At 15:00 that afternoon, the phone rang. Before I could even say hello, Bunny said, "Is he gone yet?"

She didn't wait for me to answer. "I'll be right there."

Within five minutes, a taxi was pulling up. I opened up the gate for her, and, pulling her bag out of the back seat of the taxi, she said, "Oh, please tell me that he left the Jag."

I smiled, pulled the keys out of my pocket, and held them up.

She said, "Great! Get your things."

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“What? Where are we going?” I asked.

Without looking at me, she said, “Anywhere. Everywhere.”

Over the next hour, we packed our clothes, food, toiletries, a first-aid kit, and Snickers’ bowls and canned food into the trunk and filled the back seat with blankets and pillows. We put Snickers in his crate and smooshed the carrier in between the blankets. Had there been a horrible accident, chances are Snickers would have easily survived the crash, thanks to all of the padding surrounding him.

Bunny and I got in and buckled our seatbelts. As she was stroking the dashboard, she looked over at me, thinking I was going to have the same excited expression, but I didn’t. I was worried. I had driven a bit but not a lot, and to take such a beautiful car on a long trip was concerning. I was also worried about my father returning home at the end of the summer and seeing hundreds of extra miles on the odometer.

Bunny thought I was crazy and told me that one of two things would happen. Either he a) would not notice that any additional mileage had been put on his car, or b) would notice that I had put mileage on the car and assumed that I took a trip on my own, possibly with a beautiful Italian woman in tow. According to Bunny, there was no way I could lose.

I took a deep breath. “Okay. Where would you like to go?” I asked.

Without hesitating, she said, “San Gimignano.”

San Gimignano was not far, just about an hour’s drive southwest of Firenze, on the same road that goes to Siena. I think she chose that place as I had told her previously that it was somewhere I had always wanted to go. It’s called the “Manhattan of Italy” due to the number of “skyscrapers” it has, and since she was originally from New York, I wanted to see it for myself.

We got to the town, but there weren’t many places for us to park, so we found a lovely hotel just on the outskirts, one that permitted dogs. I was somewhat shocked when the woman at the registration desk told me that she had a vacancy, as it was the height of tourist season. She said that most tourists stayed in Firenze and took day trips out to San Gimignano.

When we had pulled up to the hotel in the car, I initially told Bunny that we could only stay for one day, but when the woman behind the counter asked me the checkout date, I said, “We’d like to stay for three nights, please.” She looked quite pleased.

We brought Snickers and our smaller bags up to our room, which was lovely. Small, but quaint. We had our own toilet and sink in our room, but we had to share the shower that was located down the hall.

As soon as Bunny sat down on the bed, I said, “Don’t be mad, but I just paid for us to stay here for three nights.”

Her eyes got big. “Three nights? Umm, okay.” She looked pleasantly confused.

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I pulled a chair over to talk to her. “Look, you know I haven’t left Firenze much. I have been to our home in Reggio di Calabria several times, and I stayed that one night at the Jamesons’ house with you. But the only time I have ever stayed in a hotel was when my father and I were in England for you. This is really hard for me, and I want to do it, but I probably will need to take baby steps. Please, just be patient with me.”

“Yeah, sure. Sounds good to me. Let’s go walk Snickers and then find something to eat.”

That was so much easier than I thought it was going to be. Had I had that discussion with my father or brothers, they would have been pushing me to get out of my comfort zone. It was nice to have someone hand the reins over to me.

The only thing we did in San Gimignano that first day was eat in a restaurant at the town square. Getting to that town square is much easier said than done, as it is at the top of a very steep hill. It wasn’t located far from our hotel, but the effort it took to get up there was immense. The meal was lovely, and Bunny took some sips of my wine when no one was looking. The walk back, although it was downhill, was almost equally as difficult. It was a very warm and humid evening, and by the time we got back to the hotel, we were both dripping with sweat.

There were two showers at the end of the hall for all of the guests on that floor, so Bunny quickly grabbed her towel and a change of clothes and said, “I’ll be right back!”

Before we left to go to the restaurant, she put on a bit of makeup, including eyeliner and mascara, which I noticed that she had left on the desk. I stared at them for a moment. I then walked over to the door, opened it, and looked down the hallway—she was just closing the door to the shower behind her. I walked back to the desk and picked up the mascara, having an indescribable desire to put it on. I slowly took the wand out of the long tube, stood in front of the long mirror, and began to carefully apply it as best I could.

Bunny burst back into the room, muttering something about forgetting the shampoo, and saw what I was doing. She stopped and stared at me. I panicked and turned away. I was completely ashamed and could feel tears well up in my eyes. She walked over and gently grabbed the mascara out of my hands.

She looked up at me and said, “It’s never a good idea to put makeup on a dirty, sweaty face. Go take a shower and scrub your face really well. Then, I’ll show you how to apply it properly.”

I said “Okay” quietly, grabbed my towel, pajama bottoms, and a t-shirt, and ran out the room. Did I understand correctly? Was Bunny going to show me how to apply makeup? I certainly didn’t want her to do that. She completely misunderstood. I was going to tell her that she was confused

about what had happened.

After my shower, I came back into the room. Bunny was sitting on the bed in her pajamas, a line of makeup products in front of her.

“Look, I don’t want to put on makeup. I was just curious.”

“Okay. That’s fine. Can you just try it for me, then? Just for fun? If you hate it, you never have to put it on again. Deal?” she said.

I sat still as Bunny applied makeup to my face. I couldn’t see what she was doing, as I had my back to the mirror. She pulled back my shoulder-length hair into a bun high on my head and worked on me for about 30 minutes. Then, she told me I could turn around.

I looked in the mirror and gasped when I saw my face. I didn’t recognize myself. For reasons I didn’t understand at the time, I burst into tears.

Bunny immediately said, “No, no, no! You’ll ruin your makeup!” and quickly showed me how to dry my tears by blotting the corners of my eyes.

When I stopped crying, she grabbed me by my shoulders and kneeled on the bed behind me. She gently turned me towards the mirror again.

“Look at you” she said softly. “You look so beautiful.”

That was the moment. That was it. Bunny could see me. She could see me.

If my father or brothers saw me like this, they would be furious. But Bunny? She told me I was beautiful. And you know what? I was beautiful. I liked who was looking back at me in that mirror.

I was shocked at the job that Bunny did. She was able to highlight my best features and soften and conceal the scars and other areas that needed them. I found that to be so funny, as I always thought she was kind of terrible at putting makeup on her own face. It looked like she didn’t care, and I realized at that moment that it was because she didn’t. Putting makeup on herself was not important to her. Putting makeup on me was very important to her. Everything was starting to become so clear now. I started to think that in some ways, I was more feminine than she was. What a revelation. Inside, at times, she was the scruffy boy to my inner girl.

It all made sense in that moment. My father always worried about us being inappropriate with each other. He was thinking of us as a 23-year-old man wanting to have sex with a 14-year-old girl. He was worried I would be thrown in jail for deviant behavior. What he and I both didn’t realize was that I was completely asexual at that point, and in all probability, so was Bunny.

Bunny and I were loving to one another. We would hug each other and snuggle on the couch while watching movies, but it never occurred to us to rip each other’s clothes off and make out. We were both going to sleep in that same hotel bed together that night, and I knew that neither one of us was thinking about sex. We were just so happy to be exactly 100% who we were with each other. To me, that was way better than sex. That was the definition of intimacy.

THE BUNNY TRAIL

Bunny still slept with braces on her wrists each night. If she did not wear them, she would wake up in excruciating pain. Even when she did wear them, she would still wake up in agony, but with the help of meds, the discomfort was tolerable. So, when I woke up after sleeping very, very well in our hotel bed, I saw Bunny standing next to me, dressed and ready to go, wearing her wrist braces.

She said very matter-of-factly, “Come on! I know what I want to do today.”

I got up, took my shower, and got dressed quickly while Bunny took Snickers out for a walk and fed him. He was such a good dog, and for as petite as he was, he was a big and positive presence. It was amazing the tiny spots he could find between us to sleep in.

I would guess that Bunny had spoken to a worker at the hotel who had given her directions, as she knew exactly where to go. We walked halfway up the hill on the road that led to the town square and stopped in front of a beauty supply store. With her arms stretched out and while shaking her hands, she sang, “Ta-Da!”

We walked in, and I was amazed at how much was packed into this small store. The women at the shop all spoke a small amount of English but not much, so Bunny had me translate. She asked to speak to someone who knew a good deal about makeup and applying it. The older woman that was helping us went to the back and called for “Carla.”

A woman who I presumed to be Carla came out, and she was a busty, Italian vixen. I looked at Bunny, and she lifted her eyebrows twice in quick succession. I could feel myself smile big.

Bunny began speaking, and I translated.

“Hello, Carla. My name is Bunny, and this is my cousin, Michael. I was involved in a terrible accident a few years ago and have lost much use of my hands.”

She held up her hands to prominently display the braces for full effect.

“I’m 14 now and want to start wearing makeup, but there is no way at this time I can apply it myself. So, my wonderful cousin here has agreed to help me this summer. Whatever makeup you use to show him how to apply to my face, we will buy. We’re prepared to spend thousands and thousands of lire here today, Carla. Can you help us?”

At first, I felt like an idiot repeating what Bunny was saying, and Carla clearly thought we were a bit odd. But Bunny didn’t seem to care, so neither did I. But as Carla was a professional and was working on commission, she took almost two hours with us, showing me exactly how to apply the makeup to Bunny’s face. I always wonder what Carla would have thought if she knew that all of this makeup was going to be for me. I don’t know—maybe she already knew it.

We left the store with bags and bags of makeup, brushes, applicators,

and a silver carrying case for it all. I was positively giddy walking back to the hotel with our stash. But, as we neared the hotel, I realized that I had just paid for all the makeup with my father's credit card. Of course, he was going to see the statement.

I stopped in my tracks and said to Bunny, "I just bought makeup. My father is going to murder me when he sees the bill."

Bunny said, "Are you crazy?! Papà is going to be over-the-moon when he sees the bill!"

"What?! No. No, he won't!" I cried.

"Don't you get it? You bought all of this for your 'girlfriend.'"

Bunny lifted up her hands while still carrying the bags and did awkward air quotes while saying the word girlfriend.

"Let's see—what should we call her? I think she looks like a Bianca. Yes, Bianca! Perfect! You have liked this Bianca for a while, so you took Bianca on a trip to San Gimignano and bought Bianca some things she wanted. You're going to tell Papà that you are sorry that you used his card, and you will pay every cent back. And do you know what Papà is going to say? He's going to be thrilled that you have yourself a little girlfriend named Bianca, who, by the way, is the same age as you, don't you know?" she said with a sly, little laugh.

"Oh, I love Bianca so much! I. LOVE. BIANCA! Bianca is going to get us out of so much trouble on this trip!"

She let out a little "whoop!" and continued walking towards the hotel.

Even though we were back to the hotel by mid-morning, we didn't leave our room all day, other than to walk Snickers. I spent the entire time putting on makeup, washing it off, and doing it again, loving every minute of it.

Sitting on the bed reading a magazine, Bunny said to my back, "You know, there is a reason why I called your imaginary girlfriend Bianca. I think that should be her name."

"Her name?"

"Yes. Her name. I think her name is Bianca."

She walked up next to me as I sat in the chair at the desk. She kissed my forehead, grabbed my chin so I would look up at her, and said, "I love you, Bianca. Almost as much as I love Michael."

I smiled and turned back to look at myself in the mirror. I said softly, "Nice to meet you, Bianca."

I played with the makeup for hours that night. When I was done, I carefully put it all away in the large case that Bunny chose. Bunny leaned over me and slipped a folded piece of paper into the case, just as I was closing it. I opened the case back up and looked at the sheet. It had names on it that I couldn't understand.

Bunny sat back down on the bed and continued eating, which she had done for most of the evening. I held up the small piece of paper and gave her

a quizzical look.

She shoved an entire handful of potato chips in her mouth and said while chewing, “That’s what you bought today. It’s the names of all of the products. I wrote them down before I threw the boxes out. Keep that in a special place so that you will know what to re-order in the future.”

She grabbed the list out from between my two fingers and reread it, making sure she didn’t forget anything.

I was standing over her, looking down at the top of her head, and said, “I love you so much.”

She looked up at me and smiled, potato chip remnants all over her mouth, and replied, “Duh.”

For dinner, Bunny ordered pizzas to our room, and we watched TV in bed, eating and snuggling with Snickers. I kept the makeup on all night and even wanted to sleep in it.

Bunny gave me a disapproving look and said, “This is the second night in a row that you’re sleeping in makeup. I wouldn’t do that if I were you. It’s going to fuck up your complexion.”

I did it anyway. I loved how it felt. It was paradise, and I was having the time of my life.

The next morning was our last morning in San Gimignano. We walked back up to the town square after feeding and walking Snickers. We had two hours before we had to be back at the hotel in time for checkout, so we went to grab some breakfast from the cute, little coffee shop that was right in the center of town. Unfortunately, it didn’t have any outdoor seating in the square, which I was hoping for, but it did have beautiful overstuffed leather chairs inside.

It seemed to be a popular place, so there wasn’t much available seating. Bunny and I got our food and caffè and sat down together in the same chair, as it was easily big enough to accommodate the two of us. Bunny put her meal down on the coffee table in front of us and noticed some kind of puzzle that someone had started. She picked it up and inspected it.

“No way!” she said. “Look at it! It looks like some kind of cipher.”

My father had taught Bunny about cipher codes not long after her “accident.” He was trying to get her to exercise different areas of her brain, and she was a master at decoding them. Papà wasn’t sure if she was so good at them because she liked them or because the brain damage she had suffered enhanced certain areas of her math and reasoning skills.

Before she even ate, she asked for a pen from the barista, sat back in the chair, and completed the cipher. She completed it in about 90 seconds, put it back down on the table, and picked up her croissant.

Several minutes later, a large, well-dressed gentleman walked up to the table. He looked at us quizzically.

I said in Italian, “Pardon us. Were you sitting here, sir?”

THE BUNNY TRAIL

He stopped and thought. “Io—Io sono...”

“You speak English?” Bunny half-asked, half-stated.

“Yes, yes, I do. Sorry, I was sitting there and left something on the seat. Did you happen to see it?”

Bunny said, “There was nothing on the seat, but this was on the table.”

She passed the paper with the cipher on it over to him.

The man glanced down at it, then looked again, hard, really studying it. He looked up at us, then looked around the café.

“Did you see who wrote on this?”

“Yeah, I did. Sorry. I just thought someone left it there,” Bunny said with a mouth full of croissant.

He gave her an incredulous look. “You completed this, young lady?”

“Yes, I did.”

The man gave her a quizzical look.

“What? You don’t believe me?” Bunny said with a sassy tone.

He looked at me. “Did you see her finish this?” he asked me.

“She asked the barista for a pen. She was writing something on it. My father taught her about ciphers a few years ago.”

The man looked surprised when I said the word “cipher.”

I said to him, “You know, Americans didn’t invent ciphers. They were created by an Italian.”

The man smiled. He said, “How long will you two be sitting here for? Would you be willing to wait here for about five minutes? I want to get something from my hotel.”

“I guess,” Bunny said sarcastically. “But it’ll cost ya.”

The man looked at Bunny and said, “I’ll make you a deal, young lady. I’ll go get another cipher. If you can decipher it, I will buy you a dozen croissants.”

“Chocolate croissants, and you got yourself a deal, mister.”

The man left, and as he promised, he had returned about five minutes later. He handed Bunny a cipher someone had already started.

“Don’t you have a new cipher? One that hasn’t been written on? I don’t like trying to solve ones that other people have started. It messes me up,” Bunny said.

“Just give it a try. I’d like to see what you can do.”

Bunny looked at the paper, got up, and walked over to a nearby table. She sat down and hunched over the cipher. She didn’t move for a while.

The man was watching her every move.

I said to him, “I don’t want you to be disappointed. She’s good, but she’s probably not going to be able to solve it. I just don’t want you to think that...”

And with that, Bunny walked back to where the man was sitting and placed the paper and pen on the coffee table in front of him. He stared at it

with his mouth ajar for 30 seconds.

“How on earth...”

“Whoever started this messed up right at the start, but most of it was correct. Do you see this? It should have been a 1, not a 7. Once I corrected that, the rest was easy.”

“Unreal,” the man whispered. He looked up at her. “Tell me a little bit about yourself.”

Bunny looked at him and said with a condescending tone, “No.”

He laughed and introduced himself.

“My name is Louie. I own a consulting firm in New York City and have clients that need ciphers decoded. And you, little lady, figured out a code to something I have been working on for days.”

While still looking at her croissant, Bunny said, “Well, you ain’t that good, then, mister.”

I was horrified, but the man didn’t take offense to what she was saying. Clearly, I was missing something in the translation, as it seemed to me that Bunny was being incredibly rude and disrespectful.

Louie looked over and saw my face. He said, “No, no, she’s fine. She tells it like it is. I like that.”

Louie looked back at Bunny and asked her how old she was. She didn’t answer. She just stared at him.

Uncomfortably, I said, “Her name is Bunny, and she’s 14.”

I didn’t mind telling Louie her name, as it wasn’t her real name.

Louie looked impressed. He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a card. He handed it to her, saying, “Here is my card, Bunny. When you are 18 and have graduated high school, let me know. I will gladly give you an internship at my firm. And, if you are smart as I think you are, I may even pay for you to go to college.”

I could feel my eyes widen. I looked over at Bunny, motioning for her to accept his card. She didn’t move, so I reached for it and put it in her hand.

“Thank you,” Bunny said quietly, looking down at the card, not sure what to make of the whole exchange.

“Oh, and one more thing...” Louie opened up his wallet and pulled out a stack of the bills from his billfold. “I promised you some chocolate croissants, I believe.”

He tried to hand the money to Bunny, but she wouldn’t take it from him, so he laid it on the coffee table in front of her.

I looked at the large stack of bills and said to Louie, “Sir, that’s very kind, but she doesn’t need that much money to buy croissants.”

I pulled out one bill from the pile. “This would be more than sufficient.”

“It’s okay. I’d like her to have it. She completed a lot of work for me today, believe it or not. Plus, I’m on my way to the airport right now—I’m flying back to New York tonight, so I won’t need lire.”

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Louie turned to Bunny and bowed his head. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Bunny. I hope our paths cross again one day."

She just glared quizzically at him. Louie turned and shook my hand and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

I looked at Bunny, then at him, and said, "I'm Michael."

"Take care, Michael."

And with that, Louie walked out of the café.

I looked at Bunny. "Why were you so weird? You were kind of mean to him."

Bunny scoffed. "He's a con artist, through and through."

I picked up the money Louie put on the table for her. I counted it, and it came to 5,450,000 lire, just over \$3,000 U.S. dollars.

"Five million lire. Still think he's a con artist?" I asked her.

She looked at me with no expression and said, "Hey, don't spend the ones with Caravaggio on them. He's wicked cool. I wanna save those."

13 CHAPTER THIRTEEN: BUNNY AT 15

The previous summer had been so much fun that I knew this summer was not going to be able to top it. Our trip around central Italy lasted four weeks, and we went to San Gimignano, down to Siena, over to Livorno, up to Pisa, with our last stop being the Cinque Terre before we headed back home to Firenze. We stayed for days in each city, just eating and walking and enjoying each other's company. The Cinque Terre was absolutely beautiful, but we only stayed there for one day, as neither of us enjoy the beach or sunbathing. Bunny, however, did enjoy sitting with Snickers on the patio outside our hotel room, reading her books on the lounge chair under the umbrella.

While Bunny was gone that year, I spent my time trying different makeup styles and techniques, and I was getting quite good. I was brazen enough to stop off at the same wig shop where Bunny had gotten her wigs years earlier and purchased two wigs for myself. I told the saleswoman that I needed them for a play I was in. She didn't ask any other questions, thankfully.

I almost never got mail from Bunny while she was in the States. It wasn't surprising, as I knew she had to keep much of her life here in Italy a secret. I don't think her mother even knew our address, and Bunny wanted to keep it that way. But I did get a box from her in the mail. I opened it and found inside a pair of red sparkly high heels in my size. They looked like what Dorothy wore in *The Wizard of Oz*, but with a heel. They were gorgeous.

When Bunny arrived that year, she looked so different. Gone was the baby fat, and she had developed a lovely figure. Her hair was finally the length she wanted it, and it was thick, long, and curly. I don't know how her mother didn't hate her for it. Bunny told me that at home, she wore sweatshirts and sweat jackets so that she could hide most of her hair inside her shirts, making it look like her hair was much shorter than what it was. She also dressed in very baggy, boyish clothing around her mother. In reality, even though she lived with her, it sounded like her mother had no idea what her daughter truly

looked like.

Bunny had just arrived, and after she greeted my father in the courtyard, she went over to the stairs down to my room and chucked her bag as hard as she could down the steps. Then, she started heading over to the trampoline.

She turned and saw that I was still standing there and said to me, “You coming?”

She climbed through the door of the net enclosure and laid down on the trampoline. She motioned for me to do the same. “Okay, now tell me everything.”

“Everything?”

“Are you gay? Are you bisexual? Are you a drag queen? What? What are you?”

“I... I don’t know.” I laughed. I was shocked by the question.

“Okay, this summer, we will figure out what you are.”

“I don’t want to figure out what I am. I’m just happy doing my own thing. Look, I love dressing up and putting on the makeup, but I don’t think I’m gay or transsexual or even bisexual. I’m just happy being on my own. I don’t want a relationship.”

She looked displeased. “Damn. That’s too bad. This summer would have been so much easier for us to hang out if you were gay. Ugh. Now we’re going to get weird looks from Papà all summer long.”

She looked at me again and smiled. “Are you sure you’re not gay? Really sure? It’s totally okay if you are.”

“Bunny,” I said sternly.

“Okay, fine. Ugh. You’re so boring,” she said with a smile.

She stood up on the trampoline and screamed, “Popcorn!”

She started jumping as hard as she could, bouncing me up and down until I was almost sick. I grabbed her legs and she fell on top of me. We laughed hard and sat up, only to see Papà staring at us. He had watched our entire conversation up to that point. Thank goodness he was too far away to hear what we were discussing. Still, the way he looked at us was like he wanted to know what was up.

We got off the trampoline and sat at the table under the trellis. Papà brought out some iced tea and biscotti for us.

“Oh, I have something to tell you!” I was almost shouting at Bunny.

She looked at me incredulously.

“Brace yourself—Bobby is now a police officer.”

“What the hell? Seriously?” Bunny said, looking totally confused.

“Yeah. Turns out that he and Gio still keep in regular contact. He finished the academy last fall and is now an officer in New York City.”

“New York City?”

“His mother died, so he moved to New York to be closer to his father and half-brother.”

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“I didn’t even know he had a brother. Wow. Well, good for him.”

I didn’t tell Bunny that Bobby had come for Christmas and spent two weeks at the clinic with Gio. She would have probably been pretty upset at my brother for that. But it really was her own fault, as she was the one who invited him into our house and our lives. I did not like him and still felt that he was a danger to Bunny and my family, but Gio and my father seemed to believe that he was a good man, deep down.

It pained me to believe that he probably was Gio’s best friend at that point. I tried to see my father’s point of view: Bobby made one really bad decision. It could have led him down a very different path, but I am happy to know that in a do-or-die situation, Bunny knew the right thing to do.

I always thought about how she pulled out that \$300.00 to give to Bobby at that critical moment. I wondered how much money Bunny now had sewn into the lining of that old backpack. I would venture to guess that she never spent a cent of the money I would always give her, nor any of the funds that Louie gave her last year. If that were the case, she would have saved up thousands of dollars at that point, all of it tucked away into the seams of that dirty, old backpack. I think having that money gave her peace and sanity. She always knew that if something happened, she would have enough on her at all times to at least get her to safety. She certainly couldn’t rely on her parents for that.

Bunny and I always started each summer planning what we were going to work on for those three months, outside of our clinic work. Each year, we would try to do something different, but that year, Bunny wanted to concentrate on her music. She told me that back in the U.S., she would try to practice on the piano as much as she could and actually carried around a folding cardboard cutout of a full piano keyboard to practice on. She also bought her own guitar, keeping it at school in one of the band lockers that a friend wasn’t using. She kept nothing that she loved at her parents’ house, nothing of value to her. Any photos of us, any presents I gave her, went with her in the backpack that she took everywhere.

Bunny told me that she had a job cleaning offices in the early morning. She would get up around 2:00 and sneak out of the house, bringing her school clothes with her. She would scrub those offices for four hours and get to school by 7:00, where she would take a shower and get ready for school in the gym. She ate both breakfast and lunch at school, fraudulently filling out the applications for the free lunch program herself. Her father made a half-million dollars a year at his job, but Bunny lied on every form she could to get free help, food, and services at school. One organization even gave her a free winter coat every year. The best part was that if anyone ever discovered the misinformation on those forms, it would come back on her parents and not her.

Any income Bunny made continued to be sewn into the lining of her

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backpack, as she couldn't get a bank account without a parent's signature. She certainly wasn't about to ask either parent to do that. On numerous occasions, Bunny had gone with her mother to the bank and had seen her take money from her sisters' accounts. That was not going to happen to her.

That summer she stayed with us, it was very important to Bunny to learn as much as she could about music. She said that she had a bunch of songs flying around in her head like butterflies. She had to get them out and "set them free," as she would say. We took turns switching off playing the piano, the drums, and the guitar, and we often had little "jam sessions."

One afternoon, after we were done with our clinic work, we were pleasantly surprised when Dr. Kuhmalo walked into our home, dragging a cart behind him. He said that he heard us playing and wanted to "join in on the fun." He lifted up the cloth covering the small cart to reveal that he brought his own electric guitar and amp with him. He sat down and started playing, almost as if he was auditioning for us. It was a lesson in master class. He was, by far, the best guitarist I had ever heard live. Bunny and I knew we were going to have to up our game in order to play with Bernard, so we practiced even more than ever. By the end of July, the three of us sounded like we actually knew what we were doing.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of August, Brigitte received a call from family in Germany. Her mother had died. So, Bernard and Brigitte needed to be in Germany for the rest of the summer to take care of her mother's affairs and sell her home. We were so sad to lose a member of our trio, and it wasn't the same playing without him.

We didn't practice as much with Bernard gone, and our clinic work had come to an end, so we had to come up with something else to do with our time.

One night, Bunny looked at me and said, "Hey, you wanna dance with me?"

I had no idea how to answer that one. Yes, of course I wanted to dance. No, I didn't want my father or brothers to see me dance. I could only imagine the comments I would get. And, holding Bunny next to me while we're dancing? My father would conjure those dance moves into a whole host of sexual positions that we were doing with our clothes on. If we danced, it would have to be in secret.

Papà had taken on a few weeks of clinic work at the hospital, so he wouldn't leave with Renata for their two months in Reggio di Calabria until late August, about the same time Bunny was scheduled to fly home. So, at 9:00 each morning, Papà would leave and wouldn't usually return until close to 16:00. That month, I did some paperwork with Gio at the clinic from 10:00-13:00, so Bunny and I would have three hours in the afternoon where we would have the house to ourselves. The only room that would be big enough for us to dance in without rearranging all of the furniture was the

formal dining room. No one hardly went in there, and we could push the table and chairs over to one side easily.

For sources of inspiration, I knew exactly where to go. I got the step ladder and climbed up into the crawl space to locate the big box containing Luca's old VHS tapes. Most of the tapes consisted of taped segments from old American TV dance shows from the 1970s and early 1980s: Soul Train, American Bandstand, Solid Gold, etc. Luca taped them when he was an exchange student in Boston for a year in high school and brought them back to Italy with him. We watched each of them, looking for the most difficult routines, and took pieces here and there to make our own. What we had put together was only two and a half minutes long, but it was a complete workout, and training was exhausting.

One afternoon, after several weeks of practice, Bunny and I just finished practicing our routine when we walked into the kitchen to get something to drink. My father had arrived home early from work that day, and he and Gio were there. Papà looked at us and became furious. I had only shorts and sneakers on, and Bunny was in a tank top, bikini bottoms, and high heels. It probably looked like we were doing something we weren't supposed to be doing.

Papà pointed at Bunny and said in English, "You! You are going home now!"

He then looked at Gio and said in Italian, "You take care of it. I can't stand to look at either one of them."

Papà left to go upstairs, and Gio waited to talk to me until he was out of earshot. When the coast was clear, he grabbed my arm and said, "What the hell is the matter with you? Papà made it very clear to you that this was not okay."

"He has no idea what we were doing," Bunny said under her breath.

Gio was livid. He pointed at Bunny and said, "You, go pack. Right now."

I clearly didn't want Gio to see me dancing, but at this point, I really didn't have much of a choice. That pretty much was going to be the only thing that would calm the situation down. I knew that if Bunny left, my father would never allow her to come back again.

"Gio, we were dancing."

"Yeah, I bet you were."

"Come on, Gio. We'll show you. Come on."

He scoffed, shook his head, and followed us into the dining room.

We put on the song that we had played over and over again ("Grooveline" by Heatwave) and started to dance. We were 15 seconds into our routine. Gio put his hand up in a stop motion, got up, and walked out of the room. We turned off the music and looked at each other. Shit. Were we now in trouble for dancing? Bunny looked mad, and I was worried and confused.

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Several minutes later, my brother walked back in the room again with my father reluctantly in tow. He motioned for Papà to sit in the chair he had just gotten up from and then stood next to him.

Gio said to us, "Please start the music again. Papà needs to see this."

We looked at each other for a moment, and then Bunny walked over to the boombox. She rewound the tape and started the music, and we began the routine again. In the two minutes we danced, I could hear Papà and Gio audibly gasp at several of the moves we did, especially the ones where I had to swing Bunny around like a rag doll. We finished the routine, and the song continued to play in the background. Bunny and I were both breathing hard.

Bunny said, "That's it. That's all we have, thus far. We're still working on it."

She wiped the sweat from her brow.

I walked over to the tape player and turned it off. I was still panting a bit when Papà stood up and looked up at me, a small smile on his face.

"I'm actually very impressed. That was beautiful."

Bunny said very matter-of-factly, "So, you're not mad?"

My father shook his head no.

"Really? Are you sure? Do you mean it, Papà?" Bunny asked with a harsh tone.

He replied, "Yes, I do," seeming a bit agitated.

I knew what she was doing and smiled.

Bunny pressed further. "Do you really mean it? You liked it? A lot?"

He looked directly at her and said impatiently, "Yes, I liked it very much."

She turned and started walking towards the wall. She looked over her shoulder and said, "Well, I hope you liked it as much as you say you do, because..."

There were two planters with a large plant in each one, side by side, against one wall. Bunny moved each one of the large plants away from the wall to reveal a large hole. She went up to the wall and matched her body up to the indentation to show how that hole was created. Papà laughed, hard. So did Gio.

Bunny looked at him and mouthed, "Sorry."

Even though the mood was still light, I looked at Papà seriously and asked him if we could go outside to talk. He looked at me, and the smile disappeared from his face. He nodded. He understood it was important to me.

We walked through the kitchen to go sit outside under the trellis but not before Papà grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses. We sat outside, and as he poured, I told him everything. I told him that emotionally and mentally, I was a mess and was not operating at what a 24-year-old man should be. I told him that I was unaware of my sexuality and that at that point, I was still a virgin. I told him that Bunny was probably as sexually confused as I was. He

stopped me right there.

“Bunny is not confused. She is still having issues medically from her ‘accident.’”

He paused for a moment. “She will need at least one more reconstructive surgery before she will safely be able to have any kind of relationship with a man.”

I didn’t know that. I was completely unaware. Bunny hadn’t told me. I was asexual, and she couldn’t have sex. We were quite a pair.

“That is why I have been so concerned about you two. I didn’t want her to do anything that could affect her surgery and recovery.”

My father looked at me and gave a small smile. He then informed me that Bunny was going to be having the surgery when she got back to California but before she went back to her parents’ home. He said that he asked one of his good friends from medical school, Dr. Rafaelo, who was then living in the U.S., to oversee the surgery and her post-operative care. Papà said he was going to cover the cost of it all. He shook his head and took a big gulp of wine.

He looked at me for a long time and said, “Are you okay? I mean, are you truly okay?”

Looking down, I said, “Yeah, Papà. I’m good.” I looked up and looked him in the eye. I said, “I’m really good.”

I just told my father something that I thought was going to devastate him or cause him to be ashamed of me. Instead of getting mad, he acted like it was information he already knew. No judgement. So, yeah, I was good.

14 CHAPTER FOURTEEN: BUNNY AT 16

Bunny went back to the States and got the surgery she needed. According to Dr. Rafaelo, the procedure couldn't have gone better, and Bunny recovered quickly. As far as we knew, that was the last surgery that Bunny was going to need for a while. It was too bad I couldn't have celebrated that milestone with her.

Two summers prior, when Bunny and I were on our tour-of-Italy trip, a family from Iceland had moved in next door. The family was very quiet and very private, and they were all physically beautiful people. Each and every member of the family looked like a model, but the daughter, Anja, was truly gorgeous. She was tall and thin, with pale complexion and long, blonde hair. Even I, asexual as I was, thought she was stunning. She was the only family member's name that I had learned, as my brother Gio, who was also married at this point, said her name quite frequently when he came over. Gio's wife, Alessandra, was lovely, and he should have been very happy to be married to her, but unfortunately, he was still a playboy, and it was clear that he was having trouble getting rid of that trait.

The neighbors' house had been vacant for many years, but we learned that Anja's father had some kind of business relationship with the family that owned the property. The house was much nicer than ours, almost a small palace, and there was always a high level of security over there—security cameras, bodyguards accompanying them when they came and went, etc. It was a bit strange. We had no security over here other than a gate at our driveway, and the only reason my father got that installed was he was tired of drunk teenagers driving off the road and into our courtyard. That happened twice before my father had the gate installed, and since then, two more cars have crashed into the gate. One can't really blame them, however. The street we live on is not only incredibly curvy, it also has a steep incline. Even my brothers used to drive up and down it at high speeds when we were teenagers.

According to them, it's hard to resist.

After Bunny left last summer, I was becoming curious about exploring my sexuality. I wasn't really prepared for anything overtly sexual, but I wanted to try out the waters a bit to see which way I might be leaning, if any. I asked Luca and Gio to take me to gay and straight clubs (respectively). Yes, Gio was married, but he was more than happy to go with me, explaining to his wife that it was all in the name of helping me find a mate. Gio used the phrases, "I was just talking to her" or "I was only looking" when confronted with situations where I caught him looking or flirting or worse. He was making me feel that if that was what a straight relationship was going to look like, maybe I didn't want any part of it.

Luca brought me to a drag club one night, and I was hooked. Luca still didn't know at that point that I dressed up as a woman nightly in the comfort and safety of my own room, so when I was absolutely ogling over each drag queen's outfit, he seemed a bit perplexed. He leaned over to me in the very crowded, very loud club and said, "Hey, that's my job," meaning he was the Aceti family's resident gay. I just smiled at him.

Luca and I went out every week, and we checked out different bars and dance clubs, but all I really wanted to do was to go back to the few drag clubs each time. But I was just happy to go out with him, no matter where we ended up.

One night, we were sitting at some random gay bar, and Luca excused himself to go and chat with some friends. I sat at the bar all alone until a young woman came up and sat next to me. She was quite pretty, and I smiled at her quickly and looked back down at my drink.

"You don't remember me, do you?" she said.

Other than my brothers' wives, the only women I had ever really met and could say that I knew were Bunny, Mrs. Khumalo, our housekeeper Marta, and Mrs. Jamesson in England. So, no, I didn't remember this woman, and I was pretty sure she had the wrong person. I looked at her, pursed my lips, and shook my head no.

Even though the club was loud, she leaned over and said softly in my ear, "I'm your neighbor."

She pulled away from me so that I could have another good look at her.

I looked at her and shook my head no. She pointed at herself and said, "Gunnar."

My eyes widened. This was Anja's brother. I would have never recognized him. Instead of being shocked by the way he looked, my first reaction was jealousy over his style and makeup techniques. And I would have just about killed for the shoes he was wearing. They put my beautiful ruby red "slippers" to shame.

Gunnar held out his hand in a very effeminate way, and I took it. I was never good at shaking hands, but this felt comfortable.

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“Do you want to go outside and talk?” he asked.

Looking nervously around the room for Luca, I said, “I can’t. I’m here with my brother.”

“Come on. Just for a few minutes.”

Gunnar and I took our drinks and headed for the outside seating area in the back. I sat down on the bench against the wall, and he came over and sat very close to me, putting his hand on my knee.

He looked at me and said, “Put your arm around me.”

I obliged, though I’m not sure why. I felt quite uncomfortable. I wanted to leave. Where was Luca?

Gunnar kept looking me over, up and down. He smiled in a seductive sort of way, and I honestly couldn’t tell if he was truly interested in me or if this was a colossal joke being played. I kept looking around to see if Luca was there and had put Gunnar up to doing this to me.

I swallowed hard and started to say something, but Gunnar interrupted.

“Let’s get a taxi back to your house.”

He picked up his drink and swallowed the entirety of it in one large gulp.

I felt a wave of relief. Yes, let’s go back to my house. We can sit in the courtyard and have a few beers and talk. Sounds perfect. I put down my drink and started to head back into the bar, heading towards the club entrance. I felt Gunnar slip his hand into mine, and we walked out. A taxi was waiting down the street, and we got in. We said nothing to each other the entire cab ride back, but I could feel Gunnar’s fingers run up and down my leg. He brushed up against my penis, and I pushed away from him, sliding over in the back seat to be closer to the door. I didn’t look at him the rest of the car ride back.

When the taxi dropped us off in front of the gate to the house, I expected Gunnar to walk back to his own home, but he didn’t. Instead, he followed me in through the front gate of our home and up the stairs to the courtyard. I stopped and stood still, not wanting him to go any further onto our property.

Gunnar was relentless; he pulled my arm forcefully so that we both ended up against the brick retaining wall surrounding our yard. I tried to pull away, but he grabbed my waist and pulled me close while sliding his hand down my pants. He kissed me hard on the lips, not letting me pull away.

Finally, I pushed him away with all my might and said, “No! No. I don’t want this. I’m sorry. I think you misunderstood.”

I was expecting Gunnar to be mad at me, or at least sad, but he smiled a sly smile and touched the outside of his lips with one finger, trying to fix his smeared lipstick.

He slowly and casually walked to the front gate, opened up the gated door, and said in English, “Thanks for the memories.”

I ran through the courtyard and down the stairs. I locked the outside

door as well as my bedroom door behind me. I took a few steps backwards just staring at my bedroom door. What the hell was that? What had just happened?

I was completely confused and slightly terrified. What kind of signals was I sending off to make Gunnar do that to me? I kept thinking that I was the one that was wrong in that situation. It kept me up that night thinking about what I had done to provoke that response from him. It wasn't until days later that I would find out that I had been set up and that my whole life was going to implode.

It was a rainy, cold March morning when I walked into the kitchen to get myself some coffee. I heard my father, who had not yet left for work, speaking quite seriously with a man in the formal dining room. I had never heard that voice before, and this was perplexing to me, as my father always handled any business at his office next door, never in our home. I was inching closer to the dining room to see if I could hear the conversation when I heard the man wish my father a good day. He let himself out the French doors in the dining room, and I watched him exit through our front gate. He had no car with him to speak of that I could see.

I walked into the dining room and saw my father sitting at one end of the formal dining table which we almost never used. There were about 15 8x10 black and white photos scattered across the table. My father looked up with tears in his eyes. But these were not tears of sadness. He was furious.

“You have destroyed us. What were you thinking?” he growled.

Was he talking to me? I was reeling. What was he talking about?

I looked down at the pictures and saw that they were stills taken from our neighbor's security camera next door. They were of me and Gunnar that night we came home from the bar. Although it was the dead of night when the security camera would have been filming us, the photos were crystal clear. One could make out every detail. I was embarrassed. Although I distinctly remember not being interested in Gunnar, the photos made it look like I was thoroughly enjoying myself, almost forcing myself on him.

I was so ashamed that my father saw me like that. But I also knew that my father was not a homophobe. Luca was gay, and it was known to all of us that he was gay very early on. He wasn't even a teenager before he would be dancing, dressed like Liza Minelli from Cabaret, singing Shirley Bassey tunes all around the house. So, I couldn't even fathom what he meant by these photos destroying us. And who was us?

“Papà, I'm sorry. These are not...”

He stopped me right there. He was seething. “Do you have any idea how old the child is in these photos?”

I didn't answer. I looked at him with big eyes, in total shock.

“He is 15. Fifteen years old, Bastian! You are a 24-year-old man! Do you know what they do to child molesters in prison? Do you have any idea how

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much trouble you are in? And what about your career as a physician? That is over—gone forever! My Lord, Bastian, our clinic is set up to help children! We provide help and services to children! Do you know what will happen to our clinic? To my career? To Gio's? It's all gone. Your one action has disgraced us all indefinitely!"

I stood there, shell-shocked.

"Say something!" my father screamed at me.

But, I couldn't. I had no words.

He looked away from me and said, "Get the fuck out of my sight. I can't stand to look at you."

I walked out of the room and out of the house. In a daze, I walked across the courtyard and down the steps. I sat down on my bed and looked across my room. What had I done? How much longer was I going to be allowed to stay down here? When were the police going to arrive? I tried to think of what I needed to do before I left, before they took me away, but nothing was coming to my mind.

At that moment, Snickers jumped up on the bed next to me and knelt down in the playful position, his little nub-ish tail wagging. Snickers. I picked up a pen and paper and started to write a list of what Snickers' new owners would need to do—how much he needed to be fed, what brands of dog food did best with his finicky digestive tract, what his favorite toys were. I stopped writing mid-sentence.

Bunny.

What was I going to tell Bunny?

I felt a wave come over me, and suddenly, I was sobbing.

I didn't know he was 15. My Lord, I didn't know. And he was the aggressor, not me. I had no interest in him. But the photos, they showed something altogether different, didn't they? I kept thinking, "This can't be real."

I don't know how, but I cried myself to sleep. The stress was overwhelming. I had only awoken when I heard a large group of people walking and talking through the courtyard. The police are here, I thought. They are coming to take me away, probably forever. But no one came down the stairs from the courtyard. Maybe they didn't know where to find me. Should I go upstairs? I didn't know what to do in that situation.

I walked up the stairs to the courtyard to see a large gathering around the table in the dining room. My father was there and Gio, but it also looked like Anja and her parents were there, along with several other men that I assumed were either lawyers or police detectives. They talked for only a few minutes and then got up and walked out of our house.

I stood in the middle of the courtyard, waiting for someone to arrest me or yell at me or take me away. That didn't happen. The entire group walked right past me, all looking directly at me and smirking. I looked to my father,

who was standing just outside the door to the dining room. He said my name and motioned for me to follow him into the house.

When I walked into the dining room, my father said, “Not here. Let’s go to the library.”

The library was our equivalent of a living room. My father did not like to watch television, so we boys all had TVs in our respective bedrooms, but there were none in the shared spaces of the house. He asked Gio to call Luca and tell him to come to the house. He said Michele had already been called and was on his way from Milano.

I sat in the library alone with my father in complete silence for over an hour, neither of us looking at the other. Finally, the sound of the kitchen door could be heard with low muttering accompanying it. Michele, Gio, and Luca all walked in and sat in chairs around the room, facing me. None of them sat anywhere near me. It was surreal. Had this been any other time, my father would have been over the moon to have all four of his boys together, as that did not happen frequently.

My father looked to Gio. “I can’t tell him. Can you please speak on my behalf?”

Without responding, Gio looked at me and said, “The Friggsson family were just here, and they were quite frank with us. It turns out that the family is in a great deal of trouble in their native Iceland. It seems that Mr. Friggsson stole quite a lot of money from his former employer, and Iceland would like for him to be extradited back. Italy does not have an extradition agreement with Iceland, so in terms of being extradited, for now, they are safe.

“The problem is that they are here only on tourist visas, and every 90 days, they drive up to Germany so that they can re-enter Italy with new visas. However, now, they can no longer do that, as Germany does have an extradition agreement with Iceland. In fact, every country that borders Italy does. So, they need to stay here, and they need to start the process of becoming Italian citizens. And, in order to start the process, Anja needs to get married. And they would like you to marry her.”

I quickly looked up at Gio and shook my head. “I’m sorry... I’m very confused. They would like me to do what? I thought this was about Gunnar.”

“They would like for you and Anja to get married. It needs to look authentic so that no one will question it. If you get married, Anja and her family can get Blue Cards and stay here long-term. If you stay married to her for three years, the entire family can apply for Italian citizenship.”

“And, if I say no...”

“Yes, it means that they will go to the police with the photos and with Gunnar’s statement. You will go to prison, and our lives will be ruined.”

I looked over at Papà, who had said nothing that entire time.

“Papà,” I called out to him, but he wouldn’t look at me.

Looking off, he said, “I’m sorry, Bastian. They set you up. They told us

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so. It doesn't matter, unfortunately." He looked at me and leaned forward in his chair. "They told us that Gunnar said that you rejected his advances."

Gio started to speak again. "Bastian, I'm sorry, but this does also mean that you won't be able to see Bunny again."

Bunny. This was just so unfair.

"It has to look like you and Anja have a legitimate marriage. Bunny would wreck everything. You can't tell her what's happening. You have to break it off with her clean. She can't be the wiser."

I thought for a few minutes. "If I do marry Anja, then the photos...?"

"Yes, the photos will be destroyed. Our careers and reputations will remain intact. In fact, they need our reputations to be spotless in order to pull this off."

I looked around the room at my entire family. Everyone looked distraught.

"Okay. Okay. I'll do it. I'll marry Anja."

I could hear my father breathe a sigh of relief even though I wasn't looking at him.

Three years. I needed to be married to Anja for three years. Bunny would never forgive me. She would be nineteen before I would even be able to see or talk to her again. By then, she would have graduated high school and would be on her own, maybe in college, definitely with a boyfriend. She would have forgotten all about me or worse— hated me for cutting her out of my life. At that moment, I realized that I would never see my best friend again.

Diarab (a.k.a. D.J., Bunny, Deloris)

15 CHAPTER FIFTEEN: DIARAH AT 16

I got off the plane in Firenze that summer, as I always did, as I had done a thousand times before. This time, however, was not the same. I was so mad at Michael. Yes, of course, I know his name is Bastian, but let's face it, Bastian is about as attractive of a name as Deloris. Bastian and Deloris. Truthfully, does that sound like a couple you'd actually want to hang out with? Exactly.

I had tried to call Michael a million times, but he wouldn't pick up. None of his brothers or his father would answer, either. What the hell was going on? I got one phone message on the machine from Michael, telling me not to come to Italy this year. He couldn't explain it then, and said that at some point, he would tell me. Sorry, but that was total B.S. After 11 years of summers, the Aceti house was my second home. If Michael had found himself a girlfriend (or a boyfriend), I wouldn't care. Honestly, I wouldn't. So, I got on a plane to tell him so. But flying there that time really sucked because I had to be the one to shell out the money to get me there. Papà Aceti wasn't going to be covering the cost of my flights any longer, it seemed.

My taxi pulled up to the gate of the Aceti household. I paid the driver, and he left. I only had one small bag in addition to my backpack that I took everywhere with me. Even when I was in school, I wouldn't leave my backpack in my locker nor would I leave it in the classroom when I needed to use the facilities. If the teacher was not going to let me bring my backpack with me to the restroom, I either held it in, or, if it were an emergency, convinced the teacher that the backpack contained items that were necessary for the bathroom. Sometimes, it's nice being a girl. We get away with so much more than boys do.

I rang the buzzer for the gate. The latch didn't give, and no one came out to greet me. So I hit the buzzer again. I hit it over and over until someone finally came out. It was Papà.

I smiled and said, "Hello, Papà!"

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He didn't smile back. He stopped in his tracks and looked at me. "Go home, Deloris. You're not welcome here anymore."

I could feel the smile drain from my face.

"Let me speak to Bastian, please," I quietly demanded.

He shook his head no.

I was seething and started to bang on the gate. I screamed into the courtyard, "Michael! Michael! It's Bunny! Can you come out here, please?!"

Gio came out of the house and started to walk towards me. I then saw Michael coming up the stairs into the courtyard.

"Michael! What is going on? What did I do? Did I do something wrong?"

Michael just stood in one spot with a sad look on his face.

Papà screamed at him, "Get downstairs, now!"

I could see Michael still looking at me as he slowly walked down the stairs. I kept my eye contact with him and didn't realize that Gio had come to the sidewalk. Gio grabbed me by the arm and led me down the street towards his car that was parked against the curb.

"Gio, what did I do wrong? Why does everyone hate me?"

Gio said nothing. He opened the passenger-side door to his vehicle, shoved me inside, and slammed the door. He started to walk around the vehicle to the driver's side. I opened my door and was about to get out when Gio looked at me through the windshield. He gave me a look that told me it was best if I just shut the door and stayed in the car. I hesitated for a moment and then reluctantly pulled the door closed.

He got in the car and started driving. I turned my body so that I was facing the door. I didn't want him to see me crying. He was driving me back to the airport, this much I knew. We didn't speak to each other the entire ride there, which took almost 30 minutes.

He pulled up where the signage said "Partenze/Departures" and parked next to the curb. He then put the car's hazard lights on. He turned to me.

"Look, Bunny, there is no way I can tell you what is going on right now, but Bastian is okay. He's not hurt, and he's not sick. He's just at a point in his life where he can no longer be friends with a 16-year-old girl. You are stunting his growth into becoming a man. You're holding him back. If you truly wanted the best for him and for our family, you need to get back on a plane and go home."

I had my back to him the entire time he spoke. He gently grabbed my shoulder to turn me around so that I was facing him. I still wasn't looking at him. He placed his hand delicately under my chin and raised my face up until I was looking at him. Gio had such a kind face, and he truly looked sad.

"Tesora, will you do me a favor? Go and have a beautiful summer with your friends. Go be a teenager, not a babysitter for a broken man. Go do stupid things that stupid teenagers do. Finish high school. Graduate. Go to college. And, maybe one day, you and Bastian can find each other again. But

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not now. Your friendship has come to an end for the time being. Know that he loves you with all his heart and that we will all be thinking of you and wishing you well.”

I should have been kind and gracious at that moment. This family had taken care of me for years; they had essentially raised me to be the person that I was. But with all of his beautiful words and sentiments, I felt like a dog being abandoned on the side of the street by its owners. I got out of his car and looked back at him.

“Giovanni, you’re a fucking asshole. Don’t talk to me like I’m four, and don’t tell me what I should do or how I should feel. Tell Michael that I never want to see him again as long as I fucking live. He can go to fucking hell. And if anyone in your family cares, tell them thank you for loving me and caring for me all those years. I’m sorry you all consider me garbage and totally worthless now. I will not bother any of you ever again.”

With that, I grabbed my bag and backpack and slammed his car door as hard as I could. I walked into the airport without looking back.

All I kept thinking was “shit, shit, shit.”

I had no idea what I was going to do, where I was going to go. I was not going back to California. I would literally die if I had to go back to California. No, I was done with the insanity that was my life. What Michael did killed me inside. It killed me. If Deloris was dead on the inside already, I was going to finish her off once and for all. I was going to start a new life and never rely on anyone ever again. That was my goal. Fuck them all.

I was standing next to the ticket counter, not knowing where I should get a plane ticket to. Think, Bunny, think! I never had many people I could turn to, but... There was one person who owed me big time. God, he was the last person I wanted to see, but I was desperate. I went up to the ticket counter and asked for one ticket to JFK.

I didn’t have Bobby’s phone number or address, and all I knew that he was a police officer in the city. What was his last name again? Oh, yeah—Garza. And I was fairly sure I heard that Jack still lived in the city, as well, though I had no idea where. Good—two people in the city that could possibly help me.

I didn’t sleep a wink on the plane. My brain was going a mile a minute, trying to figure out my plan. Once my flight landed at JFK, I took the subway from the airport into Manhattan.

I had no idea where to find Bobby, but I figured if I started at one police station, somehow, someday, they would put me in the right direction. It was getting dark, and I figured I should probably wait until the morning to start searching. I was going to get a hotel room somewhere, but the first place I went to, the guy looked at my passport and said that I had to be an adult to get a room.

Okay, Plan B. I found a lovely, little 24-hour café near Central Park. I

ordered myself some dinner and was able to drag out my meal for hours, ordering each item individually—salad, then a drink, then a burger, then an order of fries, then a piece of pie, then some coffee. Four hours later, the waitress came up and said, “Is everything okay, hun?”

I said, “Honestly, no. My flight to Italy got cancelled. I don’t have enough money to get a hotel room and even if I did, I’m not old enough to get a room on my own. I don’t want to go to a shelter, either. So...” I started to whisper. “If I gave you a \$50.00 tip, would you let me just hang out in this booth? I’ll keep ordering food, I promise.”

I took out a \$50 bill for her from my backpack and slid it slowly across the table. She looked at the money and then around the restaurant to make sure no one was watching her.

“Fine. But if you cause me one ounce of trouble, out you go.”

“Deal,” I said.

I got out my journal and my book. I kept the cup of coffee in front of me even though I wasn’t drinking it but pretended to do so anytime one of the wait staff would walk by. I fell asleep a couple of times. The waitress let me nap and would kick my foot to wake me only if her boss or a police officer came in. I felt safe, and she was worth every penny of that \$50.00.

First thing the next morning, I grabbed breakfast at the diner and washed up as best I could in the lavatory. I didn’t want to look as bad as I felt. I was prepared for it to take me days to find Bobby. I was expecting to have to go from police station to police station to find him. In reality, it only took me four hours to locate him. That was the good news. The bad news, however, was that he had been reprimanded for inappropriate behavior and was on a two-week paid leave.

Even though I lied and said Bobby and I were related, the desk sergeant at the station wasn’t about to give me his address. For a moment, I had lost all hope. But as I was walking out of the station, a very nice older woman slipped me a piece of paper.

Her exact words to me as she patted me on the shoulder were, “You look a lot like Bobby. I see the family resemblance. Here you go.”

I could have punched her for saying that I looked like that psychopath, but she was trying to help.

I took the subway to Brooklyn and got off at the first stop. He did not live anywhere near the station, and it took me quite a while to walk to his place. My bag and backpack weren’t technically heavy, but carrying them all over New York wasn’t fun, either. I found the house and walked up to the door. The yard was a mess with the grass being about a foot overgrown, and the house was dilapidated. The stairs to the front porch were bowed, and it felt like the porch I was standing on could have caved in at any moment. I knocked and knocked, but no one answered. Ugh.

I was so tired and had no place to go. I sat down on the warped steps for

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a moment and looked around the neighborhood. The houses on the street were mostly very nice, and the area was quiet. Up a bit on the other side of the street, I could see an older man sitting on his front porch, staring at me. I got up and started to walk towards him. I stopped just outside his front gate.

“Hello, sir! Do you happen to know the people that live in that house? And, if so, do you know if they’re coming back anytime soon?”

The older man, keeping his eyes on me, yelled, “Rex!”

The house was two doubles, and another man came out from the other side. “Yeah?”

“This little lady here is looking for Tango.”

“Actually, I’m looking for a man named Bobby,” I said.

The two men smiled. “Tango is Bobby’s nickname.”

“Oh, sorry. Yeah, well, do you know when he will be home?”

The one man blew air out his pursed lips. “He probably won’t be home until late. Anything we can do for you?”

I lied, “I’m Bobby’s sister—uh, half-sister. He didn’t know I was coming, but I have nowhere to go and was hoping to crash at his place.”

They looked at me in disbelief. “Bobby doesn’t have a sister.”

I thought quickly and said, “Yeah, well, if you were to ask any of my friends, they would say that I don’t have a brother, either.”

I was hoping that a bit of humor would diffuse the situation, but neither of the two men smiled.

The older gentleman then said, “I’ll make you a deal, little girl.” I nodded, although I wasn’t loving the nickname. “If you go shopping to get me some food, I’ll let you hang out here until Bobby gets home.”

“Deal!”

He gave me his list and some money. I asked if I could keep my bigger bag on the porch with him until I got back. As I was walking down his front stoop, the younger man said, “Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow, Dad.”

Dad. That was his dad. Okay, that was good information.

I returned from my shopping trip with four bags of groceries. I opened the gate to his house with one finger, letting it slam behind me. He did not look pleased by that. He opened up his front door for me, and I brought the bags into the kitchen. His house was in a complete state of disarray. I looked around the place, then at him.

“It’s the housekeeper’s week off,” he said, trying to be humorous.

I didn’t laugh. I unpacked the groceries and put them away as best I could. Then, the old man said, “What’s for dinner?”

“Don’t you want to know my name first?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said. “I couldn’t care less.”

“You can call me Bunny,” I said while starting to clean up the kitchen.

“Bunny? What the hell? I’m not calling you Bunny. You’re out of your

goddamn mind. Give me your real name.”

A real name. That had possibilities. Of course, I wasn’t going to tell him to call me Deloris. I could give him a fake name. I could reinvent myself.

I needed to keep it a D name that kind of sounded close to mine. Otherwise, it could be confusing. I quickly went through names in my head: Deana? No. Dahlia? No. Darcy? No. Dana? No. Diarah? Hmm. Maybe. Friends could call me Dia. Yes, I liked it.

I tried it out. “My name is Diarah, but my friends call me Dia.”

“Nice name.”

Yeah, it is.

“And your name?” I asked him.

“Roy, but everyone calls me Pops.”

I spent the next hour cleaning Pops’ kitchen only to mess it up again making dinner. I bought a few extra items with my own money, including some fish, some items for a salad, shrimp, pasta, and beer. I had noticed the empty beer cans all over the porch. They were hard to miss. I made him broiled pollock with a buttery shrimp sauce over pasta and a side salad.

I set the table beautifully, but as soon as dinner was served, he picked up his plate and beer and brought it over to his La-Z-Boy. He set his plate down on the TV tray next to his favorite chair and began to eat, not even acknowledging the work I had put into the meal. I thought to myself, “Geez. It’s no surprise that women aren’t banging down the door to be with this guy.”

I ate dinner by myself at the table and cleaned up everything once I was done. The kitchen was spotless, but the rest of the house left something to be desired. I walked out his front door and looked down the street to see if I could see any lights on at Bobby’s place. It was still dark.

I went back in and said, “Pops, it doesn’t look like Bobby’s home yet, and it’s getting late. I should let you be. But thank you for letting me stay for a bit. It was very nice of you.”

Without taking his eyes off the TV, he said, “You can stay here tonight. Who knows when Bobby will be home. You can sleep out back on the three-season porch.”

Oh, thank the Lord! I had nowhere else to go.

I picked up my bag and went through the kitchen and out the back door. There was a porch, alright, but it was filled with junk and books and newspapers and half-finished projects and tools. Pops followed me out and pointed over to the corner on the opposite side.

“There’s a cot back there under those toys.”

Low and behold, there was a small cot. It took 10 minutes to clear away the toys, but once visible, the cot didn’t look half-bad. He brought out the blanket and the pillow I saw laying on the couch in the living room.

“Here. You should be nice and cozy out here. I’ll leave the back-porch

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light on for you and will keep the kitchen door unlocked in case you need to use the restroom. Good night!”

And with that, I heard him shut and lock the back door. Out of habit, he locked me out. Well, I hoped I wouldn’t have to pee in his garden during the night.

I fell asleep pretty quickly, only to be startled awake by someone gently kicking my leg. I cracked one eye open. It was Rex. He smelled of hard alcohol and cigarettes.

“Hey, what are you doing out here, girly?”

I tried to sit up, still exhausted. “Bobby never came home.”

“Yeah, no shit. He was out with me. He said he doesn’t have no sister.”

I paused for a moment. I looked up at him, the backyard light almost blinding me.

“You gonna believe him or me?”

He smiled. “Okay, come on. You can sleep on my couch tonight. We don’t want the raccoons gettin’ ya, do we?”

It was weird. We were in the heart of New York City, yet here was this man pretending to be a cowboy with a harsh Texas twang. And I was happy to let him pretend if it meant having a warm, safe space to sleep tonight. It was late May, and there was still a bit of a chill in the air at night.

I grabbed my bag. I was still wearing my backpack.

We walked into his house and he pointed to his couch. “There you go.”

And with that, he walked up the stairs.

When I woke up the next morning, I was able to get a good look at his place and realized that he had the same decorator as his father—his place was a pigsty, as well. I sighed and started picking up. I washed a ton of dishes and took out three bags of garbage, all filled with to-go and pizza boxes. There was a ton of dirty clothes in a pile by his La-Z-Boy chair, and I took them downstairs into his basement and started a load. As I was coming up from the basement, his father walked in, his cane across his wrist, carrying two cups of coffee.

I saw him and said, “I think Rex is still asleep.”

“This one’s for you, my dear. I saw you taking out the trash and knew you were cleaning his place up a bit.”

The coffee was instant and truly awful, but I thanked him profusely. It was the nicest thing that had happened to me in weeks.

He said, “I’m assuming that neither Bobby nor Rex will be up for a while. They both tied one on pretty good last night.” He guffawed in almost a proud tone. “So, would you like to help me with a few more errands and chores? I will gladly pay you. Between Rex’s schedule and my arthritis, not much cleaning gets done around here.”

“Yeah, of course!” I said, never one to turn my nose up at a chance to earn money. “So, I assume that Rex and Bobby are good friends?” I asked.

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“I wouldn’t say they’re friends. They’re on the force together. Rex is Bobby’s direct supervisor. He helped Bobby get into the police academy.”

“Did Bobby and Rex grow up together? You live down the street from each other.”

“No, that was Bobby’s father’s place. He died...oh, I guess it was about two years ago now. Bobby moved in there with his son to help him take care of his father, Victor, who was suffering from throat cancer. It was horrible for all of them. Victor was in a lot of pain towards the end.”

I had no idea that Bobby had a son. I wanted to ask Pops about him, but then he would clearly know that I was in no relation to Bobby. I guess I would have to wait to find out everything.

“So, clearly you are not Victor’s daughter?” Pops asked.

“No. Bobby and I share a mother. I met Victor once, but only very briefly.”

I hated lying. Normally, I was quite bad at it, but it seemed it was coming more naturally to me.

Pops stayed at Rex’s and watched TV for a couple of hours while I cleaned the kitchen and living room. It didn’t look half-bad by the time I was finished. Then, Pops and I went back over to his place, and I finished the cleaning job I had started the night before.

Just as I was finishing up, Pops shouted over to me, “Hey, Dia, your brother’s outside, getting his mail. If you hurry, you can catch him.”

I grabbed my backpack and ran out of the house and down the block. Bobby saw me coming and stood frozen. He looked angry.

“Did my therapist call you?” he asked.

I stopped in my tracks. “What? No.”

“Why are you here?”

“Because I need your help, and you owe me.”

“Shit. Get inside. I don’t want anyone to see you.”

He pulled me by my arm up the stairs of his porch and into his house. His place looked even worse on the inside than it did on the outside.

“You need to go away. Now,” he said.

“I will, but I need you to do something for me. I need a fake passport.”

“I can’t get that for you. That’s impossible.”

“I have money. Just point me in the right direction, and...”

He interrupted me. “I was just put on a two-week suspension because of you.”

“What the hell did I do?!”

“I told my therapist all about you, and she had to report it to my superiors.”

“Who? Rex? I’ll go across the street and talk to him about it.”

“Don’t you fucking dare! Are you fucking insane? Right now, I’m on a paid leave. If you go over there, I’ll be fired.”

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He was talking so emphatically, he was practically spitting.

“I just came from there. I spent the night on Rex’s couch.” I took a deep breath. “What did you do?”

“I told the therapist and the captain everything. I told them how I kidnapped you and how I wanted to hurt you.”

“That was stupid. Why did you say anything?” I took a few deep breaths to calm down and continued, “Yeah, you may have wanted to, but you never did. You’re a complete asshole, but you never hurt me.”

He sat down on his couch, looking dejected.

“Look, Bunny, I don’t know if I would have hurt you. Maybe if I had the chance then, I would have. To be honest, I’m not 100% sure that I’m sane. I feel suicidal all the time. My life is a mess. The summer in Italy was amazing, but I came back to all of the same problems, and I am just completely overwhelmed. Both of my parents are dead. My son is being raised by his mother—I hardly ever see him. And my brother is in an institution. It’s bad. Maybe I would be better off dead.”

I just stared at him with a look of disgust.

“Seriously? You think your life is bad? I’m looking to get a fake passport with a new name so I can get away from my abusive parents and my crappy life. And I’m 16, motherfucker. Wanna try walking in my shoes? You have a job and a roof over your head, as repulsive as it is,” I said as I looked around. “We need to help each other out, okay? Believe it or not, we need each other right now. You need me to vouch for you, and I need you to get me that fake ID.”

Bobby stared at the floor without saying a word. He slowly nodded his head in agreement.

I said, “I’ll go down to the station tomorrow and talk to the therapist. What’s his name?”

“Her name. Willoughby,” he said.

“Okay, good. And, if I fix things on your end, will you come through for me?” I asked.

He slowly nodded his head in the affirmative again.

“Good. Now, I need to crash here for a few days until you can get me that fake passport. Do you hear me?”

“Fine.”

I walked back down to Pops’ place, thanked him for his help, and got my bag. As soon as I got back to Bobby’s, I crashed on his couch and fell asleep immediately. As disgusting as his place was, I slept remarkably well on that sofa. The next morning, I showered, changed my clothes, and went down to the station first thing.

I arrived 20 minutes later. I walked in and saw Rex behind the counter.

“Hey, remember me? You look kind of handsome today!”

He smiled. “It’s the uniform.”

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“Oh, Lord, yes, I know. Without it, you’re hideous,” I said, hoping to incite a smile. I got a smirk. Good enough.

I continued, “Hey, I’m here to see a Dr. Willoughby.”

“She’s not available,” he said.

“Do you mean now or, like, ever?”

“She’s not available to speak to the public.”

I frowned. “If I gave you a note, would you give it to her right away? It’s really important.”

He looked at me as if I was thoroughly irritating him. “Fine. But do it quickly. I’m about to go on break.”

On a piece of paper, I wrote, “I’m the girl that Bobby Garza kidnapped.” I folded it and handed it to Rex. I was actually kind of excited to see how fast she would come to the lobby to see me.

Within one minute, Dr. Willoughby was standing in front of me. She was a young woman with bright red hair. She actually didn’t look much older than me. The cops here must have loved being sent to talk to this therapist. I probably wasn’t a lesbian, but she was hot.

She approached me and said, “We’d love to chat with you. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure,” I said, not knowing exactly who “we” was supposed to be.

I followed Dr. Willoughby into a beautiful office on the second floor. It was large and had a glass wall on one side. Dr. Willoughby stood behind the desk but never sat down. She instead leaned up against the credenza behind her. She motioned for me to take a chair in front of the desk. An incredibly handsome man in his early 40s walked in and immediately went over to shut the blinds on the windows facing the rest of the office. When he was done, he came around the desk and sat down in the chair.

“I’m James Dennehy, the captain here. And you are... Bunny? Is that correct?”

I stared at them both for a moment and said, “You two are ridiculously attractive. Do you know that?” They both smiled and looked down. “If you’re only hiring good-looking, sexy people, you should probably let Rex go.”

They both let out a tiny chuckle.

I continued, “My nickname’s Bunny, but you can call me Dia. I heard that Bobby is in trouble because of me. I’m here to see if I can help fix that.”

The handsome Captain Dennehy said, “Well, I have to admit that the timing of this is a bit suspect. Bobby was just put on an administrative leave several days ago, and then you show up. Sounds like he orchestrated your visit today. How are we to know you are who you say you are?”

“Well, I can tell you what happened, and then you can judge for yourselves. Deal?”

“Would you mind if we recorded this, so I don’t have to take notes?” Dr. Willoughby asked.

“Knock yourself out,” I said unenthusiastically.

I took a deep breath and then told them the entire story, from me at camp, sitting down next to Bobby at that pavilion, right up to the point where Bobby dropped me off at my parents’ home in California two months later. I didn’t lie about one detail, telling it all exactly how it was. Captain Dennehy was engrossed and stared right at me the entire time I spoke. When I was done, he turned his chair, sat way back in it, and rubbed his chin.

“Well, what do you think, Doc?” the captain asked Dr. Willoughby.

“It sounds to be just about identical to what Officer Garza told me.”

“I haven’t seen Bobby in years. Here, look.”

I pulled out of my backpack the seat assignment from my plane ticket from two days before and slid it across the desk to Captain Dennehy.

“I just got into town. Bobby and I didn’t have time to coordinate our stories. And, let’s face it—Bobby’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer. There is no way he would be able to memorize all of the details that perfectly.”

I looked at both of them. They were both very quiet.

I broke the silence by asking, “What does this mean for him?”

Dr. Willoughby spoke up. “We are trying to establish if Officer Garza was suffering from some psychosis. His father had mental issues, and he himself has had some trouble in the past, but he’s been very good about taking his medication on a regular basis. When he told me this story last week, I thought he was entering into a fugue state.”

“Look, you all clearly know how to do your jobs. And, I don’t profess to know Bobby that well, at all. But from what I do know is that Bobby seems to do better with consistency in his life. Right now, you’ve taken his job away from him, something he clearly loves very much. And, he’s scared to death, trying to figure out if he will even have a job to go back to after this ‘leave.’ If he loses this job, that will affect his ability to live, his ability to pay his child support, his ability to get the help, meds, and therapy he desperately needs. He has reached out to me multiple times, trying to make amends. Have I forgiven him? Hell, no. But I do recognize that he is trying, and for that, I have to commend him. He’s a piece of shit, but he’s trying not to be.”

They both looked at me, not saying anything.

“Please, just give him his job back. He can’t become a better person without it, and if he doesn’t, I won’t be able to forgive him. And I need to forgive him. I don’t want to carry around this anger with me forever. That would suck. It would hurt only me. Not him.”

The two of them sat quietly for a few seconds, not saying anything. Suddenly, the handsome captain spoke.

“Okay. Thank you for coming in. Let us talk, and we’ll get back to you. Do you have a number we can contact in case we need to reach you again?”

“Actually, I don’t.” I said. “The place I’m staying at doesn’t have a phone. But, I am helping Rex’s father out. I’m stopping by his house each day to

check on him and make him meals.” That wasn’t a total lie. “So, if you need to get in touch with me, tell Rex to let his father know, and I will get in touch with you as soon as I can.”

“Okay. Will do. Thanks for stopping in,” Captain Dennehy said.

“Man, that is one good-looking man,” I said to myself as I got up and started walking out of his office. He had a head full of gray hair, but his eyes were a beautiful shade of blue and his body was rocking. But other than Dr. Willoughby, I didn’t see a single other female walking around the office. What a waste.

I walked down to the subway and got on the first train back to Brooklyn. Before I had even knocked on his door, Bobby had already heard back from Captain Dennehy, saying that they were going to accept him back the next day on a probationary basis. Bobby was thrilled. I realized that was the first time I had actually seen him smile. In all honesty, it looked a bit creepy.

“Great! You got what you wanted. Now, I need that passport.”

“Okay. Okay.”

I pulled out an envelope from my backpack. “Inside you will find a sheet of paper, some money, and some passport photos. This is exactly what I want it to say on my passport.”

“I can’t ask for specifics. You get what you get.”

“Okay, fine. Then I’ll just have no choice but to go back and talk to your hot supervisor and...”

“Okay! I’ll see what I can do.”

He read the list out loud. “You want your new name to be Diarah Theresa Jamesson.” He looked up at me. “Your new name looks like you misspelled ‘diarrhea.’”

“Up yours, Bobby.”

He continued, “You want your birthday to be October 31st...wait, this will make you 21 years old. You will never pass for that.”

“It’s what I want, Bobby. Just do it.”

He said nothing else.

“The instant you get me my passport is the same instant I can move off of your couch and find a place of my own.”

He grabbed his coat and headed out the door. If I were a betting woman, I would have bet that he was going to return shortly, within an hour. It didn’t take an hour, it took three, so I was wrong, but I was thrilled with the results. It was fucking perfect.

“I could hug you, Bobby. Thank you. Do me a favor—start calling me Dia. No more Bunny. No more Deloris.”

“Deloris? Deloris!?” The motherfucker was laughing at me. “Seriously, your name is Deloris?”

“Shut up, Bobby. It was Deloris. But Deloris is now officially dead, never to be heard from again. So, it doesn’t matter what my name was.”

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He stared at me, not saying anything, trying not to laugh. I dropped my attitude and spoke to him a bit more calmly.

“Hey, it’s getting late, and I know you have work tomorrow, thanks to me. So, how about I take you out for a quick bite? You in the mood for a steak?”

And, just like that, Bobby and I became friends. We didn’t become friends because we were attracted to each other or enjoyed each other’s company. We were friends out of sheer necessity. And that was okay.

After we were done eating, Bobby started to head back towards his house. I started to walk the opposite way.

“Hey, you don’t need a place to crash tonight?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m gonna try this puppy out,” I said, holding up my new passport.

“Okay. Well, let me know if you need anything,” he said, and I actually believe he meant it.

I walked down the street to one of the nicer hotels in that area of Brooklyn. I entered the lobby and asked for a room. I didn’t have any clothes with me—my bag was still at Bobby’s place—but I didn’t care. I had to pay in advance, as I didn’t have a credit card—something I was going to work on next. But I ordered a pizza and ate it on the bed while watching TV, which reminded me of my time with Michael in San Gimignano.

I hadn’t thought of him much since I left Italy. Every time I thought of him, every time I started to get upset by the situation, I told myself repeatedly that it was not going to take me months to get over losing him. No. I didn’t need him. I didn’t need him. I thought I did, but I didn’t. I was going to be just fine on my own.

I took a long, hot bath in the tub and slept in the comfy, white robe that was provided. I slept better that night than I had in a very long time.

The next day, I found an “apartment” almost immediately. I had a method to my madness, and it was a good one. I took out Louie’s business card, the one he had given to me two years prior in that café in San Gimignano. I first located where his office building was. Then, I looked for the cheapest place I could find that was within walking distance of that. I found an ad for a room in a boarding residence for rent (females only) that was something I thought I could afford. Turns out that it was a group of rooms above a shelter. The access to those rooms had its own private entrance, and there was a gate at the bottom of the stairwell as well as the top to ensure that no homeless people tried to sneak up.

A girl named Candy showed me the available room. It was the size of a large closet and had just enough room for a single bed and possibly a small dresser. However, it was the most-expensive room, as it had its own personal toilet and tiny sink in it. I still, however, would have to share the shower down the hall with the other ladies.

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I was thrilled to see that it already had a bed in it. I looked at the bedrooms that were near mine. All of the rooms were about the same size, and many of the girls got creative in finding new ways to store their items. Oddly enough, all of the rooms, including mine, had no door, only a gate, which discouraged any drug use, visitors, or illicit activities.

I looked at Candy and said, "I'll take it! Can I move in today?"

She handed me the rental agreement and a pen and said, "You can go ahead and sit in your room to fill this out. You can use the heating register as a desk. That's what a lot of us do."

So, I sat at the bottom of the bed, and if I reached over just enough, I could sit and write at the same time. I attempted to give the rental agreement back to her, and she said, "Hold on to it. Just return with the first and last months' rent and deposit, and I'll give you your keys."

"Great! I'll be back in 10 minutes."

I wasn't about to let her know that I already had that kind of money on me, so I left, went down the street, walked into the first bank I saw, went over to the desk, and carefully slid \$600.00 out of the seam of the backpack. I stuck the money in the front pocket of my pants and headed back. Hopefully, that would be enough to convince the ladies I was going to live with that I didn't have thousands of dollars in cash on me at all times.

I took the subway back to Bobby's to retrieve my bag. Then, I stopped off at Pops' house to tell him that I found a place, but he was down at the pub. I saw Rex and let him know. He told me that it wasn't the safest place and that I needed to watch my back living there. I was appreciative for the advice, but I didn't need to hear that. I was pretty good at freaking myself out all on my own. On my way back to my new "home," I stopped off at Woolworth's to purchase new bedding. I felt like such an adult.

The next morning, I got up and went up to the 47th floor of the Pan Am Building to see if I could find my good friend, Louie. I got his card out of my backpack and looked at it again, realizing that I didn't remember what his last name was. Muehlmeier. Louis Muehlmeier. Geez, no wonder I couldn't remember his last name. It's too bad I changed my name. Deloris Muehlmeier had a nice ring to it, right?

The receptionist was a beautiful, well-coiffed woman just a few years older than me. I walked up to her desk and asked to speak to Louie. She looked at me incredulously. I showed her the card and said, "I'd like to see Louie, please" again, thinking that she was daft. She was gorgeous, but she clearly didn't understand what I was asking.

She looked indignant and gave me a firm, "No. You are not welcome here, young lady," and asked me to leave.

At that moment, I could see Louie walking down the hall behind her.

"Louie! Hey, Louie!" I called out unprofessionally.

Louie squinted his eyes and looked over, initially not knowing who was

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calling his name. A look of recognition came across his face, and he smiled.

“Is that my good friend Bunny coming to visit me?”

“Yeah, I was trying to, but your robot won’t let me in.” I gestured towards the receptionist.

When he got close enough to me, I said out of the corner of my mouth, “She looks like a Stepford wife.”

He let out a big laugh.

“Come on, Bunny. Hop this way,” he said, and I followed him down the hall, but not before I stuck my tongue out at the gorgeous receptionist.

Louie had the most amazing voice. It was not what you would picture a CEO of a big company to have. It was kind of geeky and squeaky, but I loved it. He made me feel right at home immediately. We got to his office: a big, beautiful corner office with two walls made of windows. I went over and pushed my hands and face against the windows, trying to see if I could see all the way down to the street.

“The cleaning people aren’t going to be pleased tonight having to wipe off all of those fingerprints.”

“Oops. Sorry!” I said and tried to rub the streaks off the glass with my shirt sleeve.

“Don’t do that!” he said, scolding me and then laughed.

Man, I liked him instantly. Why was I such a jerk to him in Italy? He was incredibly cool.

“So,” he said, sitting down behind his big desk, “how’s Michael?”

“Nonexistent.”

Louie looked at me with an overexaggerated frown. “Ouch.”

I said in a growl, “I’ll tell you later, if you’re interested.”

Changing topics quickly, Louie asked, “Okay, so how about ciphers? Are you still interested in those, or are they nonexistent, too?”

“Oh, you’re hilarious,” I said with no affect. “Yeah, sure, I still like ciphers. Why? Do you have any you’d like for me to look at?”

He looked around his desk. “This one has been giving us a good deal of trouble. Would you like to take a crack at it?”

“Is this, like, my job interview?”

“Let’s say yes, it is.”

“Alright. I’ll give it a go.”

Louie gestured for me to sit at the conference table that was off to one side of his office. But without thinking, I instead grabbed the armrests of the chair I was sitting in and pulled them towards the edge of his desk in order to use as my writing surface. As I did so, I scraped the legs of the chair against the beautiful marble floor beneath me, and I could see Louie cringe.

“Sorry. You can take that out of my first paycheck.”

Still smiling, Louie closed his eyes and shook his head in exasperation. For an instant, I thought he looked a lot like Papà. Papà made that expression

a lot when I was around.

Six minutes later, I was handing him back the sheet with the cipher decoded.

“How on earth can you do that?” he said, laughing.

“Michael told you that I have a pretty serious brain injury. It’s true. I couldn’t do things like this before the accident, but ever since I got whapped in the head, these just make sense to me. My sense of smell is all but gone, and some noises can make me dizzy and pass out for no reason, but ciphers? Ciphers are my friends.” I looked at him. “Plus, let’s be honest—ciphers are far more interesting than most people.”

He smiled. “Do you know that four of us have been working on that for two days, and it took you, what, 10 minutes to figure it out?”

“Six. Six minutes, Louie.”

“Okay. You got the job. We’ll start you part-time at \$10.00 an hour. When can you start?”

My Lord, 10 dollars an hour was a lot of money.

“Tomorrow. But I want to work full-time,” I said.

“Nope. Not possible. You need to start your college classes a.s.a.p. How old are you again?”

“I’m 21.”

He laughed. “No, you’re not 21. I thought your friend in Italy told me that you were 14. That would make you, what, 17?”

“If you must know the truth, I was 16 yesterday, but I got a new passport. So, I’m 21 today.”

“Let me see.”

I handed him my passport. “Is this your real name?”

I looked at him with big eyes and said nothing.

“I don’t want to know any more.”

“Okay. That’s probably a good idea.”

“Be here tomorrow at 9:00. And please dress much better than what you’re wearing now. Do you need me to front you some money so you can get yourself some clothing?”

“Nah, I got it. But thank you.”

I walked out of his office feeling as if I just made my first real friend in the city.

As I headed to the elevator, I stopped a man in the hallway and asked if there was a mailbox nearby. He pointed to a large slot on the wall. I walked over to one of the big chairs in the lobby area, opened up my backpack, and pulled out a letter I had written to Michael on the plane. I didn’t really understand what happened between us, and I probably never would, but I wanted my chance to say goodbye to him, even if it was just on paper. I was so incredibly mad and sad. I felt like I had a hundred different emotions all the time regarding him and the Aceti family.

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I had just enough in terms of stamps on me to mail that letter. I dropped it in the slot and heard it slide down, on its way to the mailroom about 50 floors below. And with that, I had hoped that it had closed the chapter on my time with Michael. But, of course, that didn't happen.

Each week, every Friday, I would drop a letter to him in that same slot. None of those letters were particularly interesting. It was mostly just small things that happened to me during that week. I was pretty much all alone in that big city, and writing to Michael made me feel safe, like someone out there cared. He probably didn't, but I pretended he did and wrote them more for me than for him. No one knew me as "Bunny" in the city, and it gave me a small amount of comfort to sign my name as her once a week. It was crazy, but I felt like he could feel me thinking of him every time that letter was sent off, and that gave me a bit of happiness.

A week after I had started my job with Louie, his assistant, Mr. Jarvis, asked me to meet him for lunch. I went to Mr. Jarvis' office, and it turns out, he actually didn't want to meet me for lunch at all. He, instead, wanted me to take off early and go down to the Borough of Manhattan Community College. He said that Louie thought it would be a good choice for my first year of college, and he wanted me to check out the campus and to meet with a representative from admissions. Louie said that the position I held required at least a bachelor's degree. At that moment, I was 21 years old, for all intents and purposes, yet I didn't even have my high school diploma. That was unacceptable. If I were going to stay working for Louie, I had to at least be pursuing my degree.

I went to BMCC's campus and went to speak to the admissions representative. He was a nice guy and gave me a ton of information about their various programs. I saw that their Modern Languages department had a specialization in Italian. That was it. That was what I was going to study. I didn't speak much Italian in the 11 summers I spent with the Aceti family, but I had to have picked up at least a little bit. Plus, I was hoping that I would learn enough Italian to be able to scream at Michael in his native language if I ever got the opportunity to see him again. I was going to make it a personal goal.

There were placement tests that I was going to have to take, as I did not have my high school diploma. Oddly enough, I scored quite high on all of them and did not have to take any remedial courses. There was an English 100 course available during the summer session. I had already missed the first class, but the instructor said that she would be willing to still let me enroll, so I did. I nearly passed out when I saw how much the seven books for the course were going to be. The class was only seven weeks long, for Christ's sake. But Louie kept the promise that he gave to me in San Gimignano and paid for college, books and all.

I wasn't looking forward to my first English 100 class, but I actually really

liked it. It was remarkably different from high school, and I shocked myself by truly looking forward to doing the reading for the class that evening. As I had no other life than school and working for Louie, I dove into the assignment head first and probably spent more time on it than any of my cohorts.

The course was intensive and was only eight weeks long, but I kept up with everything. On the last night of class, the instructor excused us early. The classroom was on the sixth floor, and once we were dismissed, I followed my classmates to the elevator so we could go down to street level. The elevator was full, but we stopped on the third floor to let even more people on. And that's when I heard it. Music. Sweet, glorious music. Oh, it was being played truly horribly, but I was so, so happy to hear people practicing.

I pushed my way out of the elevator and slowly walked down the hall, peaking my head into each room. In one, I saw a classroom with a drum set up at the front. Five people, all men, were sitting in various seats, scattered around the room. I took a chair at the very back, next to a man who I can only describe as "fabulous!!!" And he was. From his pink hair to his rainbow-striped leg warmers, he was a sight to behold.

"Hey, what's going on here?" I whispered to him. He gave me a look like I wasn't worthy enough to talk to him.

"We're auditioning for a drummer for our band," he whispered back.

"If you ask me nicely, I'll be your drummer," I said with a smile.

He looked me up and down and scoffed audibly.

"Can I try out?" I asked.

"Nope," he said, standing up. "You weren't on the sign-up sheet."

"Uh, yes, I was," I said. "Let me see the list."

He looked around the room, spotted it, and brought it over to me. I quickly scribbled in a very large D.J. at the bottom of the page. I was trying out new nicknames. I had always wanted to be called D.J. for some reason. It just sounded cool.

"Seeeeee," I whispered in a snarky tone.

"You're an ass," he said to me.

"And, I think you're positively amazing!" I said sincerely, with a smile.

Again, he looked disgusted. "Fine. You can go after this monstrosity."

He pointed at the young kid at the drum kit who was desperately trying to find the beat. He finished his song, and there was a faint, half-hearted round of applause from the room. I dug into my backpack, found the drumming gloves that Michael made for me, and put them on.

It was my turn. I got up, walked over, and sat down at the kit. I had to quickly reconfigure the setup to accommodate for the lack of drumsticks. There were only three people left in the room, all boys.

The fabulous man spoke and pointed, "I'm Duncan. This is John, and he's Jason."

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“Hey,” Jason said, unenthusiastically and barely audibly.

“What the hell is on your hands?” John asked me.

“Let’s just say I have a special technique.”

“Look—,” John began curtly, but Duncan cut him off.

“Let’s just give her a shot, okay? We’ve got nothing to lose at this point. Everyone today was garbage, right?”

He turned to me. “Alright, sister, show us what you got. What are you going to play for us?”

“What do you want to hear?” I asked. The three boys looked at each other incredulously.

“Don’t waste our time, bitch. What are you gonna play?” John was getting impatient.

“I’m not wasting your time, *bitch*. What do you want me to play?”

I never learned to read music very well, but I was fairly good at playing by ear and could mimic.

John walked over to the boombox over on the side of the room. He had a tape already in it. It started in the middle of a song. It was “Roundabout” by Yes. It was one of my all-time favorite songs, and I felt as if the gods of music intervened on my behalf at that moment. It wasn’t easy to play, not at all, but I probably spent a week with Michael trying to learn it. I practiced it over and over again, enough to make Papà leave and go out and see a movie one night so he didn’t have to listen to me play anymore. I was so happy that this was the song that they chose.

I looked down and pursed my lips so as not to smile. I waited a few bars and then jumped in. John and Jason stood and watched me, completely expressionless. My boy Duncan, however, could not contain his enthusiasm.

I stopped playing after about two minutes, even though the song had not ended. I heard clapping, and it was coming from the hallway. I gave a small chuckle.

“Well...?”

“We’ll have to think about it and get back to you,” John said.

“Fine. If you don’t want me, I’ll find another—.”

John cut me off. “Look, chica, we’re dead serious about this band. This is not fun time, and this is not a hobby for us. We’re looking to make real music, not have to deal with your drama.”

I looked at him dead in the eye. “Dude, I wish I had drama. I’m 21 years old. I work part-time at Muehlmeier, and I’m going to school full-time. I live above the shelter four blocks over. I have no boyfriend. Hell, I have no friends. I want this.”

I looked at each one of them. “I’ll make you a deal. Let me practice with you for two weeks. If I don’t sound as good or work as hard as the drummer of your band should, I’ll bow out. Okay? I mean it. I want this.”

I had no idea why I wanted it so badly. Yes, the idea of being in a band

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sounded like fun, but it wasn't a burning desire I had always had. Maybe it was because of how much these three boys were discounting me. It made me mad. I felt as if I had something to prove.

"Two weeks. If we ask you to leave after two weeks, you leave, without incident. Got it?"

"Yup, got it." I nodded my head in agreement.

"We practice every night from 9:00 to midnight. Will that work for you?"

I immediately thought about trying to get upstairs to my rented room each night, walking through a large group of homeless men that would congregate outside of the shelter.

"Yes, I will see you tonight. Where?"

"Here. Dwayne is the night security guard at the main door. Just knock on the door and tell him your name. He'll let you in. What is your name, anyway?"

"D.J." I said. "Thanks, boys. See you tonight." I grabbed my backpack and left.

That night, I showed up 30 minutes early with fried chicken and a dozen donuts. Turns out, the boys were as poor and pathetic as I was. None of them had any money, and Duncan had been living on the streets ever since his parents found out that he was gay. I wish I could have had him live with me, but it was an all-girls boarding residence.

I had more fun that night practicing with the band than I had had in a year, and I kept up with them just fine. But I was finding that I was missing Michael so much with each song that we practiced and played. It made me mad that he was in my head. And it made me realize how talented he was, as he was adept at all of the instruments, just as much as any of the boys. John, who played lead guitar, wrote most of the music for the band. Duncan played the bass, and Jason vacillated between back-up guitar and keyboards. But everyone could play at least one additional instrument, as well. Some nights, we would switch instruments, just to get out of our comfort zones for a bit.

After two weeks, I didn't even have to ask the boys if I was in the band. After practice, we all sat down together, and John said, "Okay, everyone. Now that we're a band, we need to come up with an official name."

Yay, I was in the band! I tried to look cool and not too excited, but inside, I was dancing.

"We need to come up with a name that says something about all of us."

"We're all incredibly sexy, and we're all poor," Jason said, trying to be funny. None of us laughed. "We all like Lord of the Rings."

"Sorry, no. No, we don't," I said. Jason looked dejected. "Sorry," I said to him softly.

We all stopped to think. Duncan said, "High school. We were all in band, right? Wait, I don't think any of us went to the prom."

"What? None of us?" I looked around at the boys.

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Duncan raised his hand and sang, “Gaaay! Plus, let’s face it—they wouldn’t have let me in with the dress I wanted to wear.”

Jason raised his hand and said, “State track tournament.”

John raised his hand and said, “No date—my girlfriend found out that I had slept with her sister the night before.”

I raised my hand and said, “Dropped out of high school.”

We all looked around at each other, kind of sad. “We could call ourselves The Losers,” Jason said, solemnly.

“What about The Prom?” I said.

“That’s seriously stupid,” John said.

Jason said, “No, think about it. We could represent all of the losers who didn’t go to the prom. We could be the prom for all of them!”

“We could be the prom for all the gays who couldn’t go, or who went with some girl they didn’t want to go with,” Duncan said.

“The Prom?” John asked.

“Yeah, we’re The Prom.” Duncan said. “All in favor?”

Everyone raised their hand. Amazing. We’re The Prom. I could already see our name in lights.

I got up and said enthusiastically, “Come on! Let’s go get breakfast. My treat. I want to celebrate being part of the best band ever—a band that will take over the world!” I made jazz hands.

“Easy there, DeeJ. Let’s see if we can first get some kind of gig,” John said and tousled my hair.

It was 2:00 in the morning by the time the four of us were done eating, and Duncan and I didn’t have much interest in walking back to our respective shelters. We were strolling around the city aimlessly, enjoying the quiet of the usually hectic streets. I stopped suddenly, grabbed his arm, and looked at him.

“Hey, I want to get a tattoo! Do you know of a good place?”

“You do? Really? Now, huh? Okay, I do know of a good place, but they are probably closed,” he said.

“Can you take me there? Please?” I pleaded.

We walked over six blocks to a tiny place off Broadway. It was down on the basement level with an electronics store above it. It was called The Body is a Temple Tattoo Parlor.

“The Body is a Temple? Really?” I asked Duncan as we walked up to the shop.

“Hey, bitch, how many tattoos do you have? How many do I have? I rest my case,” he replied.

The neon sign was off, but the lights inside were on and someone was walking around. Duncan walked partway down the stairs and knocked on the window. He waved and pointed at the door, asking to be let in.

“Duncan, I’m not doing any more work on you. You still owe me for last time,” said the scary-looking gentleman from behind the locked door.

Duncan was about to start arguing with him, when I pushed in front of him on the stairs and said, “I will pay you what Duncan owes if you can do a small tattoo for me right now. Please, I need to do it now before I chicken out,” I pleaded.

“He owes me almost \$200.”

“Deal. I’ll pay it. I have cash. I have just enough.”

That wasn’t true. I had thousands of dollars on me, sewn into that backpack. I just didn’t want this guy to rip me off.

He stared at me for a moment and said, “Fine. You have 30 minutes of my time. No more.”

He held the door open for Duncan and me and locked it behind us after we entered.

He turned to me and held out his hand. “Jeremy. And you are?”

“I’m D.J. Hey, can I use the bathroom real quick before we get started?” I asked.

He pointed to a door at the back of the parlor. I walked into the bathroom, put my backpack on the sink, and carefully ripped the lining. I pulled out \$300, hoping that would be enough for everything. I held onto the \$200 and pushed the other \$100 into my front pocket. I also pulled out my notebook and opened it up to the page of doodles I had drawn. Then, I flushed the toilet and washed my hands to keep up appearances and went back out into the studio.

“Here you go, Jeremy,” I said, handing him the money. He counted it slowly. When he was satisfied, he looked at Duncan and said, “It must be nice to have a girlfriend to pay your debts for you.”

Duncan and I looked at each other and snickered.

I handed Jeremy my notebook. “This is what I want drawn around my ring finger.”

“All in black, or do you want the letters to stand out?”

“All in black, please. I want it to be almost difficult for someone to make out the letters, almost as if they’re hidden within the ivy.”

“Got it. Look, before we get started, you need to know that finger tattoos hurt to get done. There’s not a lot of fat or muscle there. And fingers contain a ton of nerves. I’m not trying to talk you out of it. I just want you to know what to expect in the next few minutes,” he said.

“Thanks, Jeremy. I appreciate the heads-up.”

And with that, he started working. Holy God, it was unbelievably painful. I thought I had built-up my tolerance for pain after all of those surgeries and therapies after my attack six years prior. But, no—this hurt like hell. Luckily for me, Jeremy was nothing but a professional. He worked fast, and the image on my hand looked identical to the one I drew in my book.

“Thank you. It’s perfect,” I said.

I shook my hand several times to try to get the blood back in it.

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“Careful! Just let your hand rest,” he said. “You know, people are going to assume it’s a wedding band. A lot of couples are opting to get tattoos instead of purchasing rings.”

“It is a wedding band, kind of,” I said, still admiring the perfect job that Jeremy did.

Duncan asked to see my hand. “I wanna see this hidden message. Bass... Bass-tee-an. Bass-the-un. I don’t get it.”

“It’s an acronym,” I replied.

“For what?” Duncan asked.

“Oh, that’s a story for another day, my friend,” I said.

I then turned to Jeremy and said, “Thank you, Jeremy. It really is perfect. What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. I’m glad you like it. Now get out of my shop,” he said with a smile.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“You’re both paid in full,” Jeremy said, as he unlocked the door to the shop. Duncan and I stepped outside and walked up the steps. The door locked behind us, and the lights turned off.

“Thanks, Duncan.”

“For what?” he asked. “If anything, I should be thanking you. I’ve owed him money forever.”

“Thank you for taking me here to get my beautiful tattoo, thank you for helping me get into the band, and thank you for being my friend.”

Everything was slowly starting to fall into place, and I realized that the universe was going to provide me all of the love, friendship, and support I needed.

16 CHAPTER SIXTEEN: DIARAH AT 22 (17)

My daily routine for that entire year was the same: Wake up at 7:30 to be at work by 8:30, work from 8:30 to 12:30, then leave for school (eat lunch on the way), classes from 2:00 to 7:00, dinner, study/homework, band rehearsal 9:00 to midnight, sneak into boarding house around 12:30 a.m. so as not to wake up anyone, shower, to bed by 1:00. Oddly enough, the weekend schedule was just as busy. I was on-call to work Saturdays from 8:30 to 12:30, and the band still had practice even on the weekends. So, instead of my college classes, I would take the subway out to Brooklyn and spend that time with Pops. I would do his weekly shopping for him and clean his place on Saturdays, and on Sundays, I would take him to church, and he would take me out to my favorite soda fountain for lunch with us usually ordering tuna melts and egg creams.

Bobby asked me to watch his son Dominic one weekend, during the same time I usually spent with Pops, so Dominic joined our routine. Nicky, as I called him, had some learning delays (he probably had undiagnosed Asperger Syndrome), but you couldn't find a nicer, sweeter kid. I loved every moment I spent with him, and Pops loved him just as much as I did. In reality, he was only four years younger than me, but I felt very protective of him. Every weekend after that, it was the same routine, with the three of us together. It was lovely.

I didn't see much of Bobby during this time. Months later, when I went to retrieve Dominic one weekend, Bobby told me that Nicky was going to be spending that weekend with his mother and asked me if we could go to lunch instead. He looked sickly, almost a pale shade of gray.

We walked to the diner and Bobby asked to sit in the far booth. We walked over, and I slid into the seat across from him. I did not feel comfortable. It felt vaguely familiar of our time in the diner in the Death Valley desert, waiting for his truck to be repaired. Thinking of it made me a

bit sick to my stomach.

Bobby looked terrible, like he was about to cry or get sick. He said, "Janine doesn't want to be responsible for Dominic anymore. She's giving me full custody."

"That's great!" I said.

He didn't look happy. "Wait... Isn't that great? No?"

"Bunny, I..."

"Dia. Call me Dia."

"Dia, I can't do it. I can barely take care of myself. Janine has a new boyfriend, and I get that she doesn't want to raise a kid anymore. But I don't know how to do it. Overnight? Fine. But long-term? You see him, right? He needs a lot of attention."

"Bobby, what exactly do you want from me? I live in a shelter, for God's sake. I work and go to school. What exactly do you think I can do for you?"

"I can't do it on my own, Dia. I think I'm going to have to..."

"Wait, Bobby. Don't say it. Don't you dare. What? Give him up for adoption? Put him in a home? Is that what you were going to say?"

He looked dejected. "I don't know what I was going to say." He didn't look up from the table.

"I gotta go," I said, getting up from the table. I stood over him while he sat motionless in the booth.

"Let me think about it. Don't do anything until I get back to you."

He nodded his head gently in agreement.

I quickly walked out of the diner and onto the street. Shit. What was I going to do? There was no way I was going to let Bobby give up custody of Nicky. I knew I needed to talk to Pops. He was the closest thing I had to a parent at that moment. He always was so good at helping me see all the options to every situation, and his perspective was usually dead-on. Maybe he would let me rent a room from him that Nicky and I could share. He certainly had the space.

I walked up the street to talk to Pops at his house. As I was approaching the gate, I slowed to a stop. I saw him sitting on his porch, crying. I ran up to him. Pops was not one to cry. He hated showing any kind of weakness.

"Pops, what is it? Is it Rex?"

He nodded his head vigorously. I got a pit in my stomach.

"What? Is he hurt?" I didn't want to know the answer.

Pops was still crying but he was also angry. "No, he's not hurt... yet."

I thought for a moment as to what he just said. "What? Pops, I'm not understanding."

He looked up at me and screamed, "He lost our house! He lost my house!"

I really was not putting all of the pieces together, but I was afraid if I pressed him more, he was going to get really mad and upset or worse. Pops

stopped and took several really large breaths, breathing in and out slowly.

“Two years ago, I put our house, this house, in his name so he wouldn’t have to pay taxes on it when I died. What a mistake. I should have just had him pay the taxes. I knew he had a gambling problem, a bad one, but I never thought he would put up our home as collateral. I’ve lived in this house for 41 years. Mary and I brought him home from the hospital to this house. And it’s gone. He gambled it away.”

Pops looked at the ground and said softly, “Where am I going to go? I’m going to have to live in government housing now.” He looked up at me. “I don’t have any other family to go to. Everyone’s gone.” He looked down again.

What the hell was happening? How could everything be imploding all at once? Everything. Everyone I had come to rely on now needed help of their own. I had to do something. I had to go. I had to find help.

“Pops, I need to go talk to someone right now. Please stay here. Please don’t go anywhere, and don’t talk to Rex until I get back, okay? Please?”

“You have to go?! My goddamn life is falling apart, and you need to go meet someone else?” Pops said.

“No, Pops, please trust me. I’m going to go see if I can get some help. Please?”

He was mad that I was leaving, but I had to. Shit, I wasn’t even 17 yet. I thought leaving California meant it was time for me to work on myself. I had learned very quickly I was not alone in needing help. There are hurt people in need of help everywhere.

I ran down the street, towards the phone booth at the intersection near the subway station. I took off my backpack and took out my day planner. Somewhere in there was Louie’s home number, to use only in case of emergency. I found it. I pushed my way into the phone booth, put my quarter in, and started to dial. Louie picked it up on the first ring.

“Wow. Were you waiting for my call?” I asked.

“Who is calling, please?” he asked.

“Louie, it’s Diarah. I know this number is only for emergencies. I’m sorry. But I have a problem, kind of a big one, and I need your help. Please. If you help me this time, I promise it will not become a habit.”

“You know that I don’t believe that, right?” he said with a chuckle. “Okay, fine, I can give you exactly 15 minutes of my time. Where are you? I will send my car to get you.”

“You could just tell me the address.”

“No. No chance of that.”

That was weird. He trusts me enough to work for him and to have his home phone number but not to know his home address.

“I’m at the west entrance to the High Street station in Brooklyn.”

“Stay there. I will tell my driver to look for you. His name is Frank.”

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“Thank—...” I never got the chance to fully thank him, as he hung up on me without saying goodbye.

Frank showed up about 20 minutes later. A black Lincoln pulled up next to me and the front passenger-side window rolled down.

“You Diarah?”

“Yeah. Hi, Frank.”

“Get in, young lady. I will take you to Mr. Muehlmeier.”

We drove to an area of Manhattan I hadn’t been to before. The car pulled into what looked to be a dead-end. The car sat for a moment. There was a wall at the end of the road that began to move, and I realized it was a camouflaged gate. It opened to one side, and the car pulled in. The gate shut behind us. There was another gate just up ahead with a guard station next to it. Frank rolled down the window.

“Hey, Ted. Visitor for Mr. Muehlmeier.”

The gentleman nodded. A second gate opened, and a small, square neighborhood was revealed. There were ten homes in total inside, and each one was very large and quite beautiful. A one-way street looped in front of them with a tiny park in the middle, fit with benches and a playground set. There were gorgeous flowers everywhere, and the landscaping was immaculate. It was a hidden village, right in the heart of Manhattan, surrounded by stone walls. One could walk right past it on the outside and never know it was there. Amazing.

Frank drove halfway around the loop and pulled into the driveway of what looked to be the oldest and the largest home there.

“Should I get out here?” I asked.

“No, please stay in the vehicle.”

He clicked a button, and a garage door opened. We pulled in. It was not an ordinary one-car garage but a full parking area that spanned the entire footprint of the house. There were eight parking spaces in all, and five of the spaces were filled with possibly the most beautiful and well-maintained cars I had ever seen. Gorgeous. Just gorgeous.

Frank parked the car in one of the spots and came around to open my door. I got out and saw Louie standing at the opposite end of the garage, waiting for me.

I walked up to him and said, “I think you’re Batman” in a dreamy tone, with total sincerity.

With a smile, he held up one finger to his pursed lips. He then motioned for me to follow him. We walked up the steps, through the kitchen (beautiful kitchen), and outside to the veranda (gorgeous veranda).

“Time is money, Bunny. What do you want?” he said in a very matter-of-fact tone. He sat down in one of the plush chairs and picked up his cup of coffee. Steam was rising from it.

I took a deep breath and said the following as fast as I could.

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“Bobby can’t take care of Dominic and wants to give him up for adoption, and Rex gambled the house away, and Pops has nowhere to go and will probably have to live in a group home, and Duncan is homeless and has been living on the street for over a year, and I want to help them all but I don’t make enough money to qualify to rent my own apartment here in the city, and I probably couldn’t find a place here that would be big enough for the six of us because I’m assuming Bobby and Rex would need to live there, too.”

I ran out of air at the end and just whispered the last few words. I then took several deep breaths in and out so I wouldn’t pass out.

“And, you would like money from me to get an apartment for your many, many friends?” he asked.

“No, I don’t need any money from you. I actually still have the \$3,000 you gave me at the café in Italy.”

Louie raised his eyebrows in surprise.

I continued, “No, what I need is for you to help me get a place, sign the rental agreement with me. No one is going to rent to just me. I have a part-time job and am a full-time college student. To use your terminology, I’m a financial high-risk.”

He smiled. “And how are you going to pay for the rent for this apartment?”

“I will probably have to use some of my savings for the first couple of months. But I will help Pops get Social Security and Medicare and whatever other services he qualifies for. And, I will ask Rex to contribute towards rent, too. I should be able to get some kind of money from Bobby for taking care of Dominic. He’s only 13.”

“Who is Dominic?” he asked.

“Bobby’s son,” I said.

“And, who is Bobby?” he asked.

“Um, how much time do you have?”

“So, you want to find a place that can house five to six people, is that correct?” he asked.

I nodded my head in the affirmative.

“Would you be willing to live outside of the city?” he asked.

I pondered that thought for a moment. “Yeah, of course. I never even considered that.”

“I actually may have a place for you. Do you have time now to go look at it?”

“Hell, yeah!” I screamed.

Louie peered around me. “Frank, please take Diarah to go see the units in Tarrytown. The two units upstairs.”

Frank replied, “Very good, sir.”

As I followed Frank back to the garage, I turned around, looked at Louie,

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and mouthed, “Thank you” and formed my hands into the shape of a heart.

It took just over an hour for us to drive from the city to Tarrytown, and that was with traffic. I had never been to Tarrytown before, and it was adorable! I loved it immediately. We were driving on the main street of the town where all of the little shops and restaurants were all lined up. It still had the flavor of the city and plenty of amenities but on a much smaller scale. We pulled over in front of a building that housed an insurance office and a dance studio. It was a beautiful red brick, two-story structure with big, long windows and colonial-looking shutters.

Frank turned off the car and came around to open up my door. We walked to the back of the building where there was a large outdoor staircase with a deck at the top. We walked up and at the top of the stairs was a door. Inside was a type of entry area, just a small room with a bench, maybe like a mudroom to keep dirty shoes. There were two doors opposite each other, labeled “A” and “B.”

Frank said, “Go ahead.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“Both are vacant.”

“NO!” I said joyfully with a squeal.

I literally ran into Apartment B. It was perfect. It was a very small but very clean one-bedroom. The kitchen was tiny, but it would be big enough for me and Dominic. He wouldn’t have his own room, but I could section off a part of the living room so that it could be just for him. I opened up the door to Apartment B and saw Frank waiting.

“Can I go over there, too?” I said, pointing at the door for Apartment A.

“Knock yourself out, kid,” he said, unenthusiastically.

I ran over to the door to Apartment A and pushed it open. It was perfect, too! It was a two-bedroom unit, similar to but not exactly like Apartment B. I ran out to the lobby/mud room.

“I. Fucking. Love. It!” I said to Frank, doing a little circular dance. “Does Louie know the owner?”

“He is the owner.”

I put my chin down to my chest and did a little running dance.

“Yes! Yes! Oh, yes! Whoop!” I stopped my theatrics. “Do you think he would let us move in here tonight?”

“Tonight? I’m not sure. Give me a moment. I will call him from the car.”

Frank walked down the stairs, and I ran back into Apartment B, laid on the floor, and rolled around on the older-but-still-in-decent-shape carpet. Oh, my Lord, it was like a dream come true. I was going to have a home, one where I felt safe and had control, one that was all mine, one where I didn’t feel like I was a guest.

Frank came in and stood over me.

“I spoke with Mr. Muehlmeier. He said you and your quote gaggle of

friends unquote could move in immediately. Here are the keys, madam.”

I literally started to cry. I stood up and hugged Frank around his midsection.

“Thank you, Frank.”

Frank held his arms up over his head, not wanting to hug me back.

“Would you like a ride back to the city to retrieve your things?”

His hands were still above his head but he lowered them slowly in order to push me away from him gently.

I let him go and wiped away my tears.

“Yeah, thank you, let’s go.”

As I started to close the door behind me, I looked around once more and whispered, “I’m home!”

We all spent the following weekend moving our items in. Pops used the furniture from his place in Brooklyn for Apartment A, which was going to be the apartment he shared with Rex, and Rex let us use most of his furniture for Apartment B. We decided not to use anything from Bobby’s father Victor’s old house, as most of it was in just as bad of condition as his house was in. I didn’t realize this at the time, but Victor’s house had already been condemned and was going to be torn down. Bobby got a little bit of money from the borough for the land, but it wasn’t much. Honestly, I think Bobby was just happy to be rid of it.

Apartment B was as I had planned: Duncan and I got the bedroom, and we fashioned the living room to be a bedroom for Dominic. Apartment A had two bedrooms: Pops got the first bedroom, the one facing the main street, and Bobby and Rex shared the second bedroom. Both Bobby and Rex were able to stay overnight in the barracks on the days when they were working in the city, so they only came back to Tarrytown two nights a week each. They alternated their schedules so that only one of them was using that bedroom at any time. However, they each wanted their own bed in the room. So, their bedroom consisted of two queen beds and one small table with one small TV on it. That was it. Neither of them had many clothes, so they shared the closet. It was perfect. We didn’t lock the door to either apartment ever. Instead, we just gave everyone a key for the outside door to the entry room. This worked out perfectly, especially where the bathrooms were concerned. It was lovely to have two bathrooms for six people.

The commute back and forth to the city for me wasn’t easy, and it was a bit of a challenge to get Dominic up and ready for school and then myself into the city by 8:30 in the morning. It was early May, and there were only five weeks of school left for him, so at least there was a light at the end of the tunnel. The last thing I wanted to do was to start thinking about next September and what I was going to do then. Ugh.

We were in our apartments just about a month when Louie stopped by unannounced just as I was heading out the door with Dominic one morning.

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“Good morning! Why don’t we let Frank take Nicky to school today?” he said.

All I could think was, “Oh, shit. He’s going to fire me. I’ve lost my job, and I’m out on the street. We all are.”

I was so close to crying, and I could feel my eyes well up.

Louie looked at me. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Are you firing me? Have I not been doing a good job? I know I was late to work a couple of times. I’m so sorry. I’ll work harder, I promise.” I was practically pleading with the man.

He gave me a look like I was insane.

“Are you done with your theatrics? Can you at least give me a chance to tell you why I’m here?”

I calmed down instantly. “Sorry. Everything is going so well right now. That is usually the sign when the whole gamut starts going to crap.”

I took a deep breath and smiled my biggest, fakest smile. In the most syrupy-sweet voice, I said, “What can I do for you, Louie?”

“Ugh. Stop that immediately,” he said with a laugh. “You look positively creepy when you smile that big. No, what I need from you is to go see a friend of mine from Fordham University Marymount. Do you know where it’s at?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s just up the street. Do you need me to do some work there today?”

“No, I need you to see about transferring from BMCC to there. There’s no reason why you should make that trek into the city every day for school.”

“Well, I do work for you, and you’re in the city, and The Prom practices at BMCC.”

“I have spoken to a friend of mine, Reginald, who is on the board of directors for Fordham. Reggie has an office near the college for when he’s on campus for meetings concerning the endowment. He’s only there one day a week and said that he would arrange for you to work out of his office the other four. I could have Mr. Jarvis fax over your assignments each day, and when you complete them, you fax them back. There is a private fax machine right in Reggie’s office.”

“So, I would work from here? From Tarrytown? But, what about you? I wouldn’t get to see you each day.” I said sincerely. I absolutely loved him. Not seeing him every day would make my heart sad.

“Diarah, you have a lot going on. And, I like what you are doing. You are doing good in this world, and I want to help and support you. You know, I’ve stopped by before when you weren’t here. I have spoken to Roy and Rex and even Bobby. I know what you’re doing for them. It’s commendable.”

He touched his fingertip to the tip of my nose lightly. “But you are going to burn out soon if you keep up this ridiculous pace. I’m trying to help here, if you haven’t realized that.”

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“Thank you. Thank you, Louie,” I said sadly. “But honestly, Lou, is my work decent? I know I’ve been giving my time and attention to other things. I just don’t want to let you down.”

“Diarah, I don’t normally make these kinds of concessions for my workers. I don’t let them live in properties I own, and I don’t find alternative spaces for them to work from if their lives become complicated. Clearly, if you didn’t fully keep up your end of things, I wouldn’t be doing this for you. I believe that you consistently try your best, I believe that you beat yourself up a bit when you are unsuccessful and cannot complete the work you are given, and I believe that you probably are my most-devoted employee. No, you are not perfect, but I do know that every day, you strive to be. That’s enough for me.”

I gasped softly and held back tears. How was I so lucky to have this man not only as my boss but also as my friend?

Frank returned with the car, and Louie handed me Reggie’s information and left.

I took the day off of work to go see Reggie at Fordham. He was a very kind man and was more than happy to offer me the office and his assistant’s desk four days a week. Oddly enough, after that initial meeting, I never saw Reggie again. Our schedules never overlapped, and there really was no reason for me to ever interact with him. If there were any issues, I would contact his assistant only. I never sat at Reggie’s desk (I knew my place), and his assistant’s desk was perfect for my needs. The only time I entered Reggie’s office was at the start and the end of my workday—to retrieve and send the faxes. I knew I had a really good gig, and I wasn’t going to lose it by overstepping my bounds. I was even smart enough to leave presents for Reggie on his desk for his birthday and for Christmas. I wanted to keep in his good graces.

In addition, I was able to successfully transfer into Fordham’s program, thanks to Louie’s connections, so after one year of being a Blue Panther at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, I was going to become a Bighorn Sheep. You cannot make this stuff up. Fordham’s mascot was the Bighorn Sheep. Not exactly a terrifying mascot.

The best part of this new arrangement was that I was still able to get out to the city each night to practice with the band. Duncan was still living with me and did his best to help out, especially where Dominic was concerned. Nicky loved Duncan, and he ended up spending more time with him than his own father. Do you know that Yoruba proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child?” I can say with 100% certainty that in the case of Dominic, yes, it did. Bobby, Duncan, Rex, Pops, and I all took turns with Nicky, helping him with his homework, making sure he got fed. Rex coined our home The Island of Misfit Toys, as we were a wonderfully mismatched group that somehow became a family. I loved it.

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Pops would make sure Nicky got to bed at a decent hour each night, and Duncan and I would ride the train into the city together every evening. We would often practice and do our own versions of songs if no one else was riding in our car. And, we would take a taxi back home each night. It was expensive, but it was the only “non-essential” money I spent. I never ate out, always bringing my lunch and snacks to school and work with me, and I never went to the movies or out clubbing. In fact, the only time I ever went to any clubs or bars was when we played gigs there.

The gigs started slowly but we became more in demand as time went on. We had our own music, but we were happy to play whatever the crowd wanted to hear. And, we could play just about any current pop song on the radio. It wouldn't be perfect, and we would definitely put our own spin on it, but if we had all heard the song before and knew the key, we could fake our way through just about anything. It was pretty cool.

One night in mid-August, Duncan and I were returning from one of our shows. It was the middle of the night, and as we got closer to our home, we saw a large man sitting at the bottom of the back stairs. I couldn't see all that well, as it was dark out, but I knew that I had never seen him before.

He had to be at least 6' 4", 300 pounds. He was chunky around the middle, and it didn't look like he worked out, but he did look like he could do some damage. If the situation called for it, Duncan, who was about my height and probably weighed 20 pounds less than me, was going to be no help whatsoever in fighting this man off. We stood back from the stairs in the shadows, about 30 feet away, waiting to see what this man was going to do. All we knew is that we couldn't really get past him on the stairs without bothering or dislocating him—he pretty much took up the entirety of the space of that step.

Duncan and I were just quietly watching him in the shadows.

“Is... Is he... crying?” Duncan asked.

Duncan was right. It sounded like the soft sobs of a lost child.

I started to walk over to the man.

“Are you insane?” Duncan half-yelled-half-whispered at me, pulling on my arm.

“He doesn't look much like a threat at the moment.”

I wrenched my arm away from Duncan's grasp and started walking over to the man.

“If he attacks me, save yourself,” I whispered.

“Oh, you're damn right, I will. You're on your own, sister,” Duncan whispered back angrily.

I stopped about five feet away from the man. It was quite dark out, the only light shining was coming from the light above the door behind him, so I couldn't see his face.

“Hello. Hi. Um, do you need help?” I said as quietly and kindly as I could.

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The man said something, but he was speaking so quietly, I couldn't quite hear him. I looked back at Duncan and shrugged my shoulders.

I turned back towards him. "I'm sorry. What was that?" I asked again, trying not to piss him off.

"I need Bobby," the man said, sounding sad.

"Um, Bobby's not here tonight. He's in the city, working."

The man started to sob again, this time, quite loudly. Lord Almighty, I had no idea what to do.

"Okay. Okay. Do you want to come inside for a minute?"

The man nodded his head yes.

Over my shoulder, I heard Duncan half-yell-half-whisper at me again. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Without looking at him, I shoed Duncan away with my hand behind my back.

"What's your name?" I asked before leading him up the stairs.

"Michael," he replied softly. Of course, it was Michael. Just as I was starting to put my own Michael behind me, another one shows up.

I unlocked the door upstairs and led him into Apartment B. We had two small couches in Dominic's room/the living room, and I told Michael to go and sit on one of them. I asked him if he wanted some water, and he said yes. It took me all of 30 seconds to get the glass and put water in it, but by the time I returned, he was already fast asleep on the couch.

He was so large that only his torso fit on the cushions—his legs hung off to the side. It was a warm night, so I didn't give him a blanket, but I did bring in an extra pillow from my bed for him. I tried to raise his head to put the pillow underneath, but his head was so heavy, I couldn't quite do it, so I just left it on the floor next to the couch. I stopped and looked at him as he slept. I know it sounds odd, but to me, he looked a bit like Baby Huey from the cartoons I watched as a child.

It was then that I saw Nicky sit up in the top bunk of his bunk bed. He looked down and said, "What's Uncle Mikey doing here?"

"Oh, my God. This is that Michael," I said to no one in particular.

I realized at that moment that it was Bobby's brother. Of course, it was. Bobby was tall—maybe 6'1"—and very slender with brown curly hair. Michael was a bit taller and probably could be slender with the right diet and exercise. They both had the same curly hair, but Bobby buzzed his short for the force. Michael's was in long, beautiful curls around his face. He had a bit more of a Roman nose than Bobby, and his eyes were blue, but other than that, they looked quite a bit alike. Why hadn't I seen it a few minutes ago?

"Is he coming to live with us now?" Dominic asked, still peering over the side of his bunk bed at his sleeping uncle.

"Live with us? No. Why?" I asked.

"Cause Dad said he wanted him to live with us," Nicky said, and with

that, he laid down and fell back asleep.

I just stared up at Dominic. I wasn't about to get mad, not at him. He was only the messenger. But I was thoroughly pissed at Bobby. Of course, he wasn't going to be home from the city for three more days. Ugh.

For the next two days, I tried to reach Bobby at the station, but every time I called, he wasn't there, and every time I left a message, he never returned it. Either Bobby was now being asked to work 24 hours a day or he was avoiding me.

Our living room was a good size, but we now had two adult-ish people living in it. Nicky kept his bunk bed with the mattress on top and his desk below, and we brought Bobby's queen box-spring and mattress over from Pops' place. Bobby had a pop-up tent stored in the attic that he had only used once, so it was in relatively good shape. Between the four of us (Duncan, Michael, Dominic, and myself), we were able to get the box-spring and mattress into the tent. It wasn't his own bedroom, but I was hoping it would provide Mikey a bit of privacy.

As for Nicky, I installed curtain rods to the ceiling along two sides of his bunk bed. His bunk bed sat in the corner of the room, so the other two sides of his bed were up against the walls. So, when the curtains were closed, it almost looked like a little fort up there. I just hoped he wouldn't get tripped up in them when climbing out of bed in the morning.

The next day, I called Dominic's social worker, Mark Ziller. Between Dominic's mother abandoning him and his delays in speech, social skills, and emotional development, Dominic was very lucky to have someone like Mark assigned to him. Mark was a lovely man, and he really did his best to help us out. He had to do visual inspections of our place each time he came to visit, and, of course, we had no idea when his next visit was going to be. He just dropped in when he was in town. So, I was becoming very worried about his next visit. The last thing I wanted to do was have him fault me for having both "boys" living in the same room or for having a total of four people living in a one-bedroom apartment.

I was very surprised when Mark came for his next visit and didn't seem surprised by the living arrangements. He said that family members were allowed to share a room, especially one that size. (The living room area was quite large.) He thought the tent idea was a bit ingenious, and he liked how the curtains gave Nicky some added privacy. The room also contained two clothing racks for the boys' clothes, a desk for homework, a TV, a dresser, and two small couches.

Mark then asked for Duncan and me to sit down with him at the kitchen table. Believe it or not, in our tiny place with a long and narrow kitchen, we were able to squeeze in a table in the back corner. One would have to walk sideways through a narrow passageway past the sink, the stove, the refrigerator, a small prep table, and a wire rack that we used for storage in

order to reach the table, so you would really have to have a strong desire to sit at the table to make all of that effort.

Mark talked about our “unique” living arrangement and mentioned that although he didn’t see anything wrong with Duncan living with us, it might cause issues with his supervisor and with the state. He asked if there was someplace Duncan could live instead.

Duncan and I had prepared for this, and we said yes, that Duncan was going to be moving out the following weekend. That, of course, was not the truth. I loved having Duncan living with me, and he helped me out so much with Dominic and Pops. He finally had a home after living on the streets for years. So, no, he wasn’t going anywhere. He was family. Instead, we needed to become a bit more ingenious. We removed Duncan’s clothing from my room and placed it amongst the boys’ clothing on their rack. Any of Duncan’s toiletries in my room were moved to the bathroom and organized along with the boys’ items. Every trace of him was removed from the bedroom and spread around the apartment. I’m not sure if Mark ever really believed that Duncan moved out or not, but the small changes seemed to suffice.

Before Mark left that day, he did an in-take on Mikey and said that because both he and Nicky were members of the same family, he could act as the social worker for both. I couldn’t get Mikey fully registered into any programs until I submitted his birth certificate, any ID he might have had, and any health and medical records. I doubted Bobby would have any idea of where Mikey’s legal documents were, so I called Mikey into the kitchen.

“Mikey, do you know where your birth certificate is? Or any of your important papers?”

He shook his head no. He was eating an apple. He was always eating. I remembered Bobby saying something about a “Sunnyside” facility that Mikey lived at.

“Hey, do you think the people at Sunnyside would have that information?”

Mikey’s face contorted into a look of terror. He started to walk backwards out of the kitchen, bumping into the stove and the prep table as he tried to leave. He turned and ran out of the kitchen, out the door, and down the stairs. He didn’t even have his shoes on.

“Mikey, stop, it’s okay. I just—...”

“You’re not taking me back there! I’d rather die than go back there!”

He started to run towards the busy street we lived on.

“Wait, Michael, listen to me. Please stop and listen to me!” I yelled as I ran down the back stairs after him. He stopped running, but he didn’t turn around to look at me.

“Mikey, you never have to go back there ever again. I promise.”

He didn’t move, and he didn’t turn around.

“Mikey, I didn’t know you were at that place, otherwise I would have

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come to get you. This is your home now. You can live with me forever and ever. Promise.”

He turned around, his face wet with tears. “Do you promise-promise?”

“I promise-promise-promise.”

He stared at me for a moment. Then, he took a deep breath in and started to walk back towards the stairs.

I was completely unaware that Mark was standing right behind me during Mikey’s outburst, and he startled me a bit when he said, “Very nice.”

“Are you being serious? You enjoyed watching Mikey have a major cow?” I whispered back.

“I meant you did a good job diffusing the situation. That could have gone very badly, but I think you did an excellent job calming him down.”

When Mikey was back inside the apartment, he went over to his tent, climbed in, and zippered it up so that he could be alone.

I looked at Duncan and whispered, “What the hell do you think happened at Sunnyside to make him act like that?”

Unfortunately, I found out soon enough. I had arranged with Mark to visit Sunnyside the following week to see about those documents. What I was told initially was that Sunnyside was a group home for adults with mental delays. I was misinformed. Several days later, we drove up to what was not a group home but a state psychiatric hospital. Mark was driving, and when I saw the sign that read Sunnyside Psychiatric Hospital, I looked over at him.

“He was living here? Michael was living here?”

He had some delays and behaved more like a six-year-old child than the 30-year-old man that he was, but he wasn’t crazy. Why was he here? My heart sank even before we walked in the door.

We went inside and spoke to a woman at the receptionist’s desk. Mark was kind enough to do the talking, and as he did, I peeked my head in through the doors. People were confined to wheelchairs, banging their heads against the bars on the windows, walking around like zombies. I couldn’t believe Mikey lived here. Who did he talk to? Who took care of him?

Mark came over and said, “Dr. Collins would like to speak with you.”

I had no idea who that was, but I followed Mark. We were buzzed into a separate wing of the hospital, one that contained the hospital offices. It was nice and clean and bright and quiet. It looked nothing like what was on the other side of the building.

Dr. Collins looked pleasant enough. He was a short man, bald, with glasses with big, black rims. And, he had a nice, kind face.

“So, I hear that you are Michael’s half-sister, is that correct?” he said as Mark and I entered into his beautiful office. It looked like a psychiatrist’s office you would see on a made-for-TV movie: wood furniture, monolithic executive desk, overstuffed leather chairs, Persian rug.

“Yes,” I lied and sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

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"I'm glad you're here. And, I'm glad Michael is now with you. He is very crafty, that one. He was able to sneak out of here that night without anyone detecting him. I believe it was four days from the time he left here to the day he ended up on your doorstep," he said with a smile, which I thought was odd. I would have assumed he was going to be mad at Mikey for sneaking away. If anything, he seemed impressed.

He began again, "I will be honest with you—I never thought he deserved to be here. He has delays but nothing that would prevent him from living a fairly normal life without incident."

"Then why on earth was he here, Dr. Collins?"

I was getting impatient and wanted to get the hell out of that place, even with as gorgeous and inviting as his office was.

"Michael probably could have done quite well in a traditional group home. He probably would have needed the help of a social worker, such as Mark here, to assist him in getting additional help and services on top of what the group home could provide. But he was basically abandoned after his father got sick and was hospitalized. No one was able to get Michael set up with proper living arrangements, so he ended up here."

I was shocked. I was so mad, and I could feel hot tears stream down my face.

"So, let me get this straight. The only reason Michael lived here for what? Three years?"

"Yes, three years," Dr. Collins agreed.

"He lived here three years because no one in his family, namely his brother, could take the time to get him set up with services and a home?"

"In a word, yes."

I put my head in my hands. I was feeling woozy. Mikey was in this hell for three years because Bobby abandoned him. I wanted to strangle Bobby with my bare hands.

Seeing that I was getting upset and wanting to diffuse the situation, Dr. Collins said, "So, if it's alright with you, Ms. Jamesson, I would like to work with Mr. Ziller to ensure that he gets all of Michael's paperwork and documentation. Mr. Ziller has said that Michael will need another psychological evaluation and an IQ test. I would be more than happy to administer both for you, free of charge."

I tried my best to appear appreciative.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm not bringing him back here for—"

Dr. Collins interjected, "No, nor do I think you should. Nor should I come to your home. We should meet in a neutral area—your local library or a coffee shop, perhaps. We need to make sure that your home is a safe space for Michael. I advise that no testing of any kind take place there. It seems that Mr. Ziller has a good rapport with your son, Dominic. Is that correct?"

I nodded my head yes, not correcting him for saying Nicky was my son.

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“Continue to have Mr. Ziller come to your home to see Dominic and interact with him. Of course, Mark can continue to observe Michael and take notes on his behaviors, but I would request that for the time being, Michael should only interact with Mark when he feels comfortable doing so. It should be Michael who makes the first move.”

I nodded my head yes. I didn’t want to, but I liked this Dr. Collins. It was somewhat disgusting to me that Dr. Collins seemed to give a bigger shit about Mikey than his own brother.

But that truly wasn’t correct. I knew it wasn’t. I was wrong.

It was on the drive back home that I realized that Bobby was with me in Italy almost four years prior. Bobby had a complete breakdown and wanted to hurt someone because his life was overwhelming. His father was diagnosed with cancer and was living in a facility, receiving palliative care. He couldn’t take care of his brother. He didn’t know what else to do. And, on top of all of that, his son was exhibiting undesirable behaviors and was having issues functioning, as well as having sensitivities to lights and sounds and the taste of certain foods. It was all too much, and Bobby lost it.

I knew Bobby didn’t want that life for Mikey. I knew this. And he was still trying to dig himself out of that hole. My God, he couldn’t even handle taking care of his own child. For a moment, I wondered why he never asked me to help him with Michael. I realized that he couldn’t. I was only 17, and yet I had helped him time and time again. He was ashamed, embarrassed knowing he needed that much help. So, at that moment, I chose not to bring that anger home with me. I was going to talk to Bobby about it—about all of it—but I wasn’t going to come at him from a place of anger.

I rolled down the window of Mark’s car and stuck my head out a bit. No, I needed to get off of Bobby’s case. Our Island of Misfit Toys needed to support each other, not tear each other apart. I smiled and remembered that Bobby hadn’t been home in close to two weeks. Whenever he did return, he would need to go shopping. He wasn’t going to be thrilled having to replace the mattress and box spring that we stole for Michael. That was probably punishment enough.

As for Mark, well, he was a magician. He was able to get help and services for Michael that I didn’t even know existed. Mikey went to a day program where he learned self-help skills, and they even paid for him to get vocational training. He was terrible at everything, but it got him out of the house every day so that I could work and go to school, and for that, I will always be appreciative.

Pops also was amazing. As long as I brought him his morning paper and coffee, had lunch packed in the fridge for him, and gave him a hot meal each night, he would do just about anything I asked of him in terms of help. If I had a big assignment due the next day and neither Duncan nor Bobby was around, Pops gladly brought the boys over to his place to watch movies. He

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would stay home with whichever “child” was sick from school, and he would scale “those horrible wooden steps” to go wait for Mikey’s bus to drop him off each afternoon. He even took care of Duncan for several days after his appendectomy. I have no idea what I would have done without him. And although he would never admit it, I think he was much happier living in that apartment than he ever was living in his house in the city. He was surrounded by people that loved him, and he was never alone. His place was always clean, he always had home-cooked meals, his laundry was done for him, and he was never lonely. Rex losing their house was actually a godsend. But I would never say that to his face.

Everything was starting to come together. I was beginning to get into a routine with the boys, and Pops was starting to come out of his shell a bit. He no longer spent his time with “the boys” at the local pub, as he did in Brooklyn. Now, he ventured down the street each day to our local coffee shop. We soon realized that it was not the coffee Pops was enjoying so much but the barista named Terri.

Terri was an older woman, possibly in her early 60s, but she was striking. All of the older men enjoyed flirting with her, but for some reason, she took a special liking to Pops. Most of us were very happy for Pops, with the exception of Mikey and Nicky. Pops was one of the few constants in their lives, and if they ever needed help or companionship, they knew they could just walk across the mud room to Apartment A and see him there. That was no longer the case. Pops was still there for them, but it was far less frequent.

Bobby, however, was home a bit more. He was put on probation again, this time for having sex in his patrol car with one of the prostitutes that he should have been arresting. He couldn’t return to work for two weeks, and when he went back, he was only allowed to do administrative work. He was not pleased by this, but it actually worked well for us. He went into work at 9:00 and left at 5:00 every day. He wasn’t permitted to reside in the barracks any longer, so he had to commute in each day from Tarrytown. The commute was hard on him, but at least his brother and son got to see him every day.

Three months later, Bobby got another surprise. It turns out that the prostitute, who was also a recreational cocaine user, was pregnant with Bobby’s child. In six months, Bobby was going to have shared custody of a baby with this woman. Let me rephrase that: I was going to have shared custody of that baby with that woman.

17 CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: DIARAH AT 23 (18)

My true 18th birthday (the real one in May, not the one on my passport showing it as October 31st, the same day as Michael's) was uneventful. It was a Thursday, and I really didn't have the ability to do anything for myself that day. Louie had quite a bit of work for me, and it was the first week of the summer session at Fordham. If I was going to graduate within the four years it took most to graduate, I had to take at least one class every summer session. But the next day, that Friday, Bobby was home, and I asked him if he would make sure the boys got off to school and if he would take care of them that evening. As I was leaving the house, they were eating breakfast, making plans that evening to go to the drive-in in Warwick, about an hour away. I had the entire day to myself. What a gift.

I had a plan and knew exactly what I was going to do that day. I walked down the street to the local café and found a table near the back. It was after the morning breakfast rush, and there weren't a lot of people there, so I pretty much had the back room of the place to myself. I took out my Casio mini keyboard, my headphones, and my songwriting journal. I had so much music, so many songs, that were sitting in my brain, stirring with nowhere to go, and it was time to get them out.

It had been two years, but I still hadn't allowed myself to grieve over losing Michael. I knew this; it wasn't good for me, and I wasn't able to move on. I had no interest in dating and truly didn't feel I deserved to have anyone. I needed to go through the pain associated with Michael and come out the other side. So, I wrote a whole series of "musical letters" (as I liked to call them) to Michael in my head, and I needed to get them out, on paper, in order to free up some space in my brain for something new and positive in my life.

I don't even really remember what I did for those nine hours at the back of that café. I wrote down those songs as fast as I could. Some of them had

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the lyrics completed but the music only partially finished, as I had other songs fighting to come out. By the time I was done, the entire notebook was completely filled, and I had other song lyrics with the basic melody and the signature key written on scraps of paper. The last few from that day were actually written on napkins. I know this is going to sound gross, but I don't know of any other way to describe it: It was like having "thought food poisoning," and the only way to rid myself of it was to regurgitate it all up so I could feel better. I "threw up" 16 songs that day, some complete, some incomplete, just one after the other. They just all came pouring out. I still had more in me, though. I felt like I could have written 100 more.

That day was so cathartic for me, and I became obsessed with having those songs out. I needed more time to do so. I called in every favor from every friend I could possibly think of to have them take care of the boys for me that weekend. Duncan was amazing. Not only did he help watch the boys that weekend, he took the songs that I had started on the scraps of paper and napkins and wrote them out as best he could. He didn't know exactly what was in my head, but he finished them enough to the point where, as a band, we could rework them if we chose to. Let me rephrase that: We could rework them if John chose to. The rest of us didn't really have much say in what songs we would play at our gigs or what we would work on during rehearsals. It didn't matter. Jason, Duncan, and I were not what you would call "leadership material." We were happy to just sit back and let John drive.

Over that weekend and into that following Monday, I pumped out 21 more songs. Again, none of them were fully developed, and most were just like the others, with the lyrics, key, and basic melody constructed. Over those five days, the bones of 37 songs were down on paper. Although that time was good for me mentally, I actually came out of that experience quite sick. I had developed a fairly serious bladder infection from the hours I sat in one spot, denying myself the chance to go to the bathroom, afraid that I would lose my train of thought. I also gave myself some pretty bad gall bladder and stomach issues for a week or so from drinking so many iced coffees. But the whole process overall was incredibly healing for me. Up until a week prior to pouring out those songs, I was still pretty upset with Michael for cutting me out of his life. But getting all of it down on paper made me realize how much fun we had together and how much he and the rest of the Aceti family did for me. I was able to let the anger go, and, therefore, let Michael go. And, I let him go with love. I wished him well. I truly did.

I was a changed girl. That following Wednesday, when Rex returned home from the city for a few days, I went up to him when no one was looking and kissed him, hard. I had always been attracted to him on some level, but while I held on to that anger, I wasn't able to move forward. This was my first step. Plus, even though my passport said I was 23, I was only 18 in truth and was only now ready to start a physical relationship with someone.

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Rex and I had a relationship for a year. It was in secret, and no one we knew was aware of it. It wasn't love. It was a release. A year after our relationship started, it ended just as quickly. One weekend, he brought home a lovely Vietnamese-American woman named Kathy. He didn't tell me about it beforehand, and I would be lying if I said it didn't hurt my feelings a bit, but in hindsight, I'm glad he did. Our relationship wasn't real—it was just fun. We were never going to become boyfriend-girlfriend, and we were never going to get married. We both deserved more. It would have been nice if he would have given me some warning, but he didn't. And, I guess that was okay.

The winter that year was bad, and we spent more and more time together as a “family.” That January, we were hit with a pretty big storm, and in one day, about two feet of snow fell, and power went out in various parts of the city. Rex and Bobby, who were scheduled to come home that week, didn't, as the city was paralyzed. The police were needed to help stranded motorists and the elderly who had no heating or electricity.

The schools were closed, and Pops, Duncan, the kids, and I hunkered down, not planning on going anywhere. Plans were changed quickly when I received the phone call from a woman named Fionna.

Pops handed me the phone, saying that the woman on the other end of the line identified herself as Louie's mother.

“Hello? This is Diarah,” I said.

“Diarah, this is Fionna Alderson-Muehlmeier, Louis Muehlmeier's mother.”

“Yes, of course, Ms. Muehlmeier! How are you? How can I help you?”

“I was calling to see if you have seen or heard from Louis. He did not come home last night, and he is not answering his phone at work. His driver, Frank, has not heard from him, either.”

“No, I'm so sorry, I haven't heard from him. When was the last time you spoke to him?” I asked.

“Yesterday afternoon. He was at his office. He said he was going to wait until the worst of the storm blew over and then head home.”

“You haven't heard from him for a full day? Jesus. Okay, I'll go into the city. I'll see if he's still at work. He may have gotten trapped there.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. I've tried calling everyone, and no one is in a position to help right now. We haven't had any electricity here at the house for two days, so Louis went into work to try to get a few things done. The ice and sleet have positively wreaked havoc around here.”

I got her phone number and told her that I would call her if I had any news. I started to get dressed to head into the city. I wouldn't be able to take a taxi there—the roads were an icy mess—but the trains, thankfully, were still running.

Mikey saw me getting dressed and said, “I want to come with you.”

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“Mikey, this trip is going to be very unpleasant. I’m going to go look for Louie. You’re going to be miserable in this cold.”

“I’ll pack snacks!”

And he ran off to get ready. I stopped and thought. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have Mikey come along with me. Who knows what trouble Louie got himself into? I might need the help.

By the time we left, Mikey and I were dressed in our warmest clothing and our waterproof boots. We each had our own backpacks; mine filled with a change of clothing for Mikey and me, and Mikey’s pack filled with a thermos full of hot tea, another thermos of vegetable soup, crackers, 2 cans of soda, 4 candy bars, and some beef jerky. I’m sure there was other food in there, as well. As we left the apartment, I thought “Half of that stuff he is bringing will be consumed before we even reach the city.” Mikey also donned his large headlamp and his infamous huge keyring that boasted a total of one key on it, the key to the outside door of our apartment, but also included a Swiss Army knife, a small pair of nail clippers, a tiny first-aid kit, and a mini high-powered flashlight. He never went anywhere without it.

I said goodbye to Pops, Duncan, and Nicky, and Mikey and I started walking towards the station. It took a while, as the snow was deep. The train was surprisingly fast getting into the city. The only other people riding in our train car looked to be homeless people looking for a warm place to sleep. I watched them and thought about how, without Louie’s generosity, that could have been me. He gave me a job as soon as I got into New York. He didn’t care that I didn’t have my high-school diploma in hand, and he didn’t care that I was living in a glorified shelter.

I realized exactly how lucky I was. I was lucky that I met him in San Gimignano. I was lucky that I knew about ciphers. And, I was lucky that he not only had his business in New York City but that he offered me a job on the spot. I never stopped to think about how that one person changed my whole trajectory. My life in the city would have been much, much worse had it not been for him. I had to find him and make sure he was okay.

The Pan-Am Building was right above the Grand Central Terminal on Park Avenue, so we didn’t have far to walk. There was no one on the streets. The city was a ghost town. The stairs up to the building were icy and slippery, so we carefully walked up to the glass doors. I saw one of the security guards that I knew, Hassan, and said hello to him by name. He remembered mine, which I was very thankful for, as I no longer had access to that building.

I explained the situation, that Louie had not been seen in over a day. He told me that no workers were in the building and that it was only him and another security guard. I asked him if one of them could please bring us upstairs to just look around for a minute. He looked like he was about to say no, but I gave him a look of absolute desperation. Plus, Mikey was complaining that he had to use the bathroom, so it was probably better for

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him to bring us up there just to get us out of his hair.

We took the elevator up to the 47th floor, and just as we exited, the electricity went out and the elevator died.

“Yeah, the power has been on and off the last few days. Don’t worry, it’ll come back on in a few minutes,” Hassan said.

“Hey, you, go use the bathroom,” I said to Mikey, pointing at the men’s room door.

He cracked the door a bit and said, “I’m not going in there! It’s dark!”

“You have your flashlight with you, right?”

“Come on, buddy. I’ll go with you. I’ll hold the door open so you’ll have some light from the hallway,” Hassan said.

“Hassan, is it okay if I look around. I promise I won’t take or move anything,” I said.

“I’m not supposed to let you do that,” Hassan said, more informing me of the rules rather than forbidding me.

“I’ll be right back.”

The 47th floor was one large oval with offices on the outside and cubicles towards the middle. I called Louie’s name as I walked around. I was three-fourths the way around the oval when I called Louie’s name and faintly heard, “I’m over here!”

It took me a minute to locate where the sound was coming from: the emergency stairwell. I opened up the door and saw Louie sitting on the ground a flight below.

I was about to run to him when he screamed, “Stay right there! Do not shut that door! I have been locked in here for days!”

I ran back and grabbed the door, looking for something to keep it propped open. I screamed for Hassan and Mikey. Once the door was fully propped open with a chair, I ran to Louie. He looked awful.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

“I spent all night in here. It was freezing. I think I caught pneumonia,” Louie said, hoarsely.

The stairwell was pitch black, and I saw Hassan and Mikey’s shadow when they came to the doorway. Mikey came down immediately. Hassan yelled that he was going to call 9-1-1 to get some help. I told Mikey to give Louie the thermos of tea while I got Mikey’s change of clothing out of my backpack. We helped Louie out of his suit jacket and slid Mikey’s heavy Fordham sweatshirt over his head. He was weak. Who knew the last time he had something to eat?

“Mikey, get the soup out for Louie.”

Mikey handed the soup over to him while I took off Louie’s dress shoes and put Mikey’s large sweat socks on over his dress socks. After a few minutes, Louie was starting to feel a bit better and was able to stand long enough for me to get Mikey’s sweatpants over his suit pants. That was all he

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could handle, though. He sat back down on the step with a heavy thud.

“Keep drinking that soup!” I demanded.

“Yes, ma’am,” Louie said with no energy. I pulled the hood of the sweatshirt up over Louie’s head.

The three of us were sitting in the dark with a small stream of light coming in from where the chair was propped open. Mikey got out his flashlight and put it in Louie’s hand.

“There! Now you can see what we look like,” Mikey said.

Louie gave a small chuckle. “Yes, that’s very important, at the moment.”

Mikey was having the time of his life, taking his snacks out and eating with Louie. He acted as if it were a unique spot to have a picnic. I put my arms around Louie, running my hands up and down his back and arms to try to warm him up. I took off my scarf and hat, as dirty as they were, and put them on him. He looked hilarious in Mikey’s sweats and my pink hat. I had never seen Louie without his signature Italian suit, looking like a million bucks.

It felt like an eternity that we sat in that stairwell before the lights finally came back on. It was quiet, and I could hear Louie’s breathing, which was a bit labored. Within two minutes, we heard the distant ding of the elevator arriving on the floor above.

The medics from the ambulance entered the stairwell and rushed down to check Louie’s vitals. He wasn’t doing well and was starting to lose consciousness. They had to get him to the hospital, stat. Then, looking like a superhero of some kind, one of the firemen got underneath Louie’s arm, picked him up, and carried him up the stairs in a fireman’s carry. Mikey gave out a big “Whoo-hoo!” which was totally inappropriate for the situation, but the accolades were directed at the fireman, who totally deserved it.

Louie was on the gurney and was being loaded into the elevator when he weakly said to me, “Please go check on my mom.”

I nodded my head. “I’ll go right now.”

And with that, the doors of the elevators closed. Hassan, Mikey, and I took our own elevator down.

As we started to exit the building, I said, “Thank you, Hassan. I will make sure Louie remembers to tip you well at Christmas.”

He gave us a small, quick smile.

Mikey and I were exhausted and wanted to go home, but we had to check on Fionna, Louie’s mom. The 6 subway would take us to the Upper East side, and from there, I was pretty sure I could remember how to get to the hidden neighborhood. It wasn’t far, but it took us over an hour to walk there with all of the snow and sleet. We were freezing and hungry when we reached the outer wall. There was a call box for the security guard. I said a little prayer that someone would be there.

“Yes?” A voice answered.

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“Hello. Ted, is it? I’m here to check on Fionna Muehlmeier. She knows I’m coming. My name is Diarah.”

“Hold a moment.”

A few minutes later, a door over to the side opened up, and the same man who I saw some nine months ago, when I first came to Louie’s house, popped his head out.

“Please come this way.”

We walked through the first door, passed the security guard station and over to a second door on the other gate. The security guard opened the door for us and said, “You know which house, correct?”

“Yes, we do. Thank you so much!”

He closed the second door behind us. If it had not been so fucking cold, the view before us would have been beautiful. The snow- and ice-covered neighborhood looked like something straight out of a magazine. It was gorgeous. The most amazing part was that with all of the snow that fell, the walkways, street, and driveways in this hidden neighborhood were all free of snow and ice, as if it were someone’s job 24 hours a day to just be responsible for only that. I later learned that the street and sidewalks were heated. Heated!

Walking to Louie’s place from the gate was the easiest thing we had done that entire trip. We got to Louie’s house and knocked on the door, but no one answered. I was brazen and turned the doorknob. The door was unlocked. We walked into the living room, which was gorgeous, filled with antique furniture and grand chandeliers. I hadn’t seen this room before, as last time, I was shepherded through the kitchen and into the backyard.

We saw a small figure sitting in a chair with her back to us. She was resting, almost sleeping, and was dressed to the nines, even during the storm. It was warmer in the house than outside, but it was still quite cold in that room. I saw that the fire was reduced to just embers. I set down my backpack and took off my jacket and then went to work on getting it started back up again.

By the time I had the fire going, Louie’s mother was waking up a bit. I hadn’t noticed it before, but she had two cats sitting on her lap, and the three of them were doing their best to keep each other warm. However, when the fire was full and crackling, the cats jumped down and hopped up onto the hearth to take advantage of the heat.

“Hello, Ms. Muehlmeier! It’s Diarah. This is my... uh, my nephew, Mikey.”

I had never had to introduce Mikey to anyone before, so I didn’t know what to say.

She started, “Please call me Fionna. And, I owe you my thanks, don’t I? I received a call from the hospital. Louis will have to stay there for a few days. He has pneumonia and is terribly dehydrated, but he is expected to make a full recovery.”

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I smiled. "Oh, that is good news."

I looked around and didn't see any sign that Fionna had eaten in a while.

"Fionna, can I make you a cup of tea?"

"Oh, yes, please, that would be lovely."

I walked into the kitchen and put everything I needed to make tea on a tray. I brought it into the living room and set it next to Fionna. The kettle was put on a rack off to the side of the fire. Within minutes, she was drinking tea and eating her favorite biscuits. She looked quite happy.

"Okay. Now dinner. What would you like?" I said.

"Oh, no. I'm fine. Really," she said.

"Is it okay if I look around your kitchen to see what you have?"

"Yes, of course," Fionna said.

I knew she had to be hungry. We found an old-fashioned waffle iron, pancake mix, some instant mashed potatoes, a jar of gravy, and some leftover fried chicken in the fridge. Mikey got really excited when he saw the old waffle iron.

"Can I be in charge of that?" he said, pointing to it.

"Absolutely! I wouldn't have it any other way." I really was so thankful that Mikey was with me.

Within 30 minutes, Fionna was eating a hot dinner of chicken and waffles. We cooked everything over the fire, like we were camping. Mikey found the sweet spot in the flames where the waffles cooked but didn't burn, and everything else just needed to be reheated. It wasn't the healthiest of meals, but I would venture to guess that it was probably the only meal Fionna had eaten in 24 hours.

By the time we went into the kitchen to wash the dishes, it was nighttime. I called Pops. He and Nicky were fine. The electricity was spotty, turning on and off frequently throughout the day, but it stayed fairly warm in the apartment. When the electricity was on, they made a frozen pizza and some Jiffy-Pop popcorn and were watching movies. Everything was good on their end. I told them that we weren't going to be home until the next day, and they were fine with that. Nicky and Duncan were going to sleep on the couches at Pops' place.

As the electricity still hadn't come on at Louie's house, and it didn't look like it was going to anytime soon, Mikey and I pulled a twin mattress and box spring from one of the guest rooms upstairs and brought it downstairs. We put them fairly close to the fire and made the bed up with lots of blankets and comforters, so it was quite warm and inviting. Fionna had initially fought to use it, saying that she was fine sleeping in her chair, but once she laid down in it, she fell asleep within minutes. Her two kitties curled up right alongside of her. I grabbed an alarm clock from one of the rooms upstairs and set it so I could sleep for two hours. Mikey said that he wasn't tired—he wanted to stay up and read his book using his headlamp. So, I slept for a couple of

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hours that night and stayed awake the rest of the time so that I could keep an eye on the fire and make sure it didn't go out.

Soon after Fionna woke up that next morning, the electricity came back on, and the house started to heat up on its own. Mikey and I started to clean up the living room, carrying the twin mattress and box spring back upstairs. We were just about to start cleaning up the kitchen when Nora, Fionna's housekeeper arrived. Nora was an older, Brazilian woman. We learned that she had been working for the Muehlmeier family for the better part of 20 years, so she was almost like family. It was a small miracle that she had shown up at all with how icy and unsafe the roads still were, but she was worried about her boss.

"No, no, I will do it. I will clean," Nora said.

I was thrilled. I was so tired—all I wanted to do was get home, take a long, hot shower, put on some clean clothes, and crawl into my own bed.

Mikey and I were getting our coats and backpacks on. We were just about to leave when Fionna came over and tried to put a roll of money in my hand.

"Thank you very much for everything you did for us."

I looked down. There had to be \$5,000 in that roll.

I took the roll and put it back in her hand, saying, "Thank you, but no thank you. If you only knew half the things Louie has done for me and my friends over the years, you would know that payment from you is the last thing I deserve or expect."

I put both hands around the hand she was holding the money with and said, "I love your son very much. He is one of my best friends."

She gave me a look like she didn't understand. Maybe she didn't. That was okay.

I found out the next day that Louie was going to be released from the hospital. He was going to have to rest at home for the next week and not go into work, but Mr. Jarvis was already taking over, delegating work and responsibilities.

Two weeks later, Louie was well enough to stop by my workplace in Tarrytown. He had never come by to see me at work since I took over Reggie's office, and I was thrilled to see him.

"Uh-oh, am I in trouble?" I asked, jokingly.

"Always," Louie said, looking around the offices like he had never been there before.

"You have been to this office before, right?" I asked.

"Nope. First time. It's quite nice." He nodded his head slowly, as if he was giving his approval of the space. "I could work here if I had to."

"Yeah, right. I could totally see you giving up the view from the 47th floor." I looked at him. "So, how are you doing, really?"

"I'm okay. I'm better. I will tell you this, though. I will never be alone in that office again. Yes, I made a bad decision to go down the stairs when the

electricity went out. I had no idea that the door would lock behind me and that I would have no way of getting out. And when the lights didn't come back on, and I was trapped in that metal box for 24 hours... It was bad, Dia. It was bad. So, the way I deal with it now is that Frank, of course, takes me to work and drops me at the front of the building each day, but each evening, he now has to come up to the office and retrieve me. I will not leave the building alone anymore."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you."

"Dia, do you know what terrifies me? Had you not walked around that floor yelling for me, I would have been trapped in there for days. No one came into the office until that following Monday. There is a very real chance that I would have died from the cold or from dehydration or from going insane."

"You are Louie-fucking-Muehlmeier. Someone would have found you. Do you know how many people would have been looking for you had I not found you?" I asked.

"I understand. And you are right, to a certain degree. But I still appreciate you doing what you did. You did not do that as my employee. You did that as my friend, and I do know that," he said.

"Honestly, your mamma got the better end of that deal. Did she tell you about the bed next to the fireplace and the chicken and waffles? Ha! She did alright for herself." I said, smiling.

"Yes, so I heard. She said the three of you had a nice evening, and that Mikey found an old radio and found a station playing Inner Sanctum mysteries," Louie said.

I laughed and nodded my head. "I have to say, I had a really nice time with her. And honestly, Mikey had a lot of fun that night, too. He even got to stay up as late as he wanted to read his book with that flashlight of his."

Louie didn't laugh. He just stared at me with a small smile on his face.

"So, enough with the chit-chat. You're probably wondering why I am here. There are a couple of things we need to discuss. First, Mr. Jarvis came to me, advocating for you. He felt it was unfair that you should have to pay for items and supplies for the office with your own money and then get reimbursed weeks later. So, he took it upon himself to get you your own corporate credit card."

As he handed it to me, Louie lowered his voice into a whisper, even though he and I were the only two people in the office.

"Look, if you need to use the card for a personal emergency, go ahead and do it. Just let me know, and we can work out the details. I know you won't be irresponsible with it."

He resumed his normal voice. "Okay, and second, there is a document that I need you to take to a notary public today. Immediately. Here," he said, passing me a large envelope.

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“There are documents in there in a specific order, so please do not open the envelope. Give it to the notary and let him deal with it. Do you have your identification with you?” he asked.

I nodded my head yes.

He continued, “This is very important, so I need you to go to the notary public’s office as soon as I leave. The address is on the envelope.”

“Absolutely. Anything for you,” I said.

He looked at me with kind eyes and smiled. “Get a move on, kiddo.”

We both left the office together, with me locking the door behind us. He started to walk down the sidewalk in the opposite direction, towards his car, and I ran back and grabbed him from behind.

Hugging him hard, I said, “I am so, so glad that you’re okay. I was really worried about you.”

I could feel him pat my hands, which were on his stomach at that point. Without turning back to look at me, he pulled away from me and continued walking towards his car, Frank holding the door open. I saw Louie say something to Frank and saw Frank give a little laugh. Frank gave a small wave and walked around to the driver’s side of the car.

I got to the notary public about 20 minutes after Louie left the office. I walked in and told them who I was. The receptionist said, “Yes, we’re expecting you.”

I was led into an office with a smart-looking older man sitting behind an older metal desk, probably from the 1950s. Actually, everything in that office looked like it was from the 1950s, but it was all in pristine condition. I handed the gentleman the envelope, and he began working on completing the documents. He had me sign in six different places. It took him about 30 minutes to complete everything. When he was done, he turned to me and handed me an envelope.

“Congratulations, ma’am.”

“Excuse me? Congratulations? I don’t think you mean me. I was here for my boss,” I said.

“I know exactly what you were here for. You are now the proud owner of 1000 N Main Street, Tarrytown.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

“Excuse me...what?”

“Mr. Muehlmeier has now turned over possession of 1000 North Main Street to you.”

I quickly opened up the envelope and looked over the documents. Holy cow, it was true. I was signing documents for myself, not for Louie. I didn’t know what to say. I just stood there in shock in this man’s office.

“You have yourself a lovely day, now!” he said, basically asking me in a polite way to leave.

“Uh, yes...yes, thank you...thank you.” I was in a daze.

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I had my own home? I had my own home. I had my own home!

I kept that little gem of a secret to myself for years. I still had Pops “pay rent,” but I asked him to put it into a separate bank account for me. A few years later, Pops would come to learn that he had been saving those funds for himself and that he had been saving his own money for years. By the time he realized what I had been doing, he had a nice chunk of change in that account.

As for Louie, how do you thank someone who buys you and your friends a home? You can’t, not really. At the very least, I offered to take the rent from the businesses downstairs and give it to him each month. He said no, that I owned the whole building outright, and that I should keep it. I still sent the rent from the two storefronts to him every month anyway.

That sweet, sweet gift came just in time. Bobby’s daughter, Delilah, was born shortly thereafter, and we were going to have to make a lot of changes around the apartments to accommodate a baby. The first few months were doable, but by the time she started crawling, we needed to fit all of the cabinets with child safety locks and put a strong baby gate outside of both apartments and at the top of the outside steps, certainly things we couldn’t do if we were renters. And, by this point, we had eight people living in those two apartments, with a ninth person (Terri) staying over most nights. Certainly, that wasn’t going to fly if we were renting.

As far as Mark, the boys’ case worker, was concerned, we still had to keep up the illusion that Duncan had moved out and that Bobby and Rex were still living in the city and only staying at the apartment two nights a week. We also had to make it seem that Delilah only came to visit sporadically, which wasn’t true, either. She was certainly there more nights than not. If anyone in Mark’s office had ever found out, we could have all been in some real trouble, and there would have been a chance that the boys would have been taken away from me. So, we had to be consistent in our stories. Things were getting a bit complicated where our living conditions were concerned, but we made do.

The Prom was doing well, and after the dance studio moved out downstairs, we made that our practice area. None of us were students at BMCC any longer, so we really couldn’t justify using the music rooms each night. No one told the night security guards that we weren’t students there, so they just kept letting us in. But that was unfair, and we didn’t like taking advantage of their kindness.

The dance studio was perfect. The previous tenants had spent a lot of money soundproofing the walls, so we could play our music without bothering too many people as long as we kept the sound at a reasonable level. In addition, John and Jason moved up to Tarrytown. There was an office area in the dance studio, so we spent some time converting it over to a half-bedroom-half-office for the boys. We couldn’t really make it a full bedroom

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in there, as the building code did not allow for it, so we kept it an office with a desk and bookshelves and just added bunk beds to one wall. There was a small kitchenette next to a maintenance closet with a utility shower stall for mops and such, so the boys just used it as a regular shower. It was truly perfect. The Prom was all together, and it was lovely.

For the first time in a long time, I was truly, truly happy.

18 CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: DIARAH AT 24 (19)

My nineteenth year was all-consumed with four things: 1) graduating from Fordham, 2) starting my master's program at NYU, 3) the boys, and 4) everything Delilah. When she was around, she kind of made it so that everyone and everything else came second. But she was a delight. She looked a lot like me, which is not surprising, as I looked like I could have been related to Bobby and Mikey. She was a strong, chunky (in a good way) girl and was very rough-and-tumble.

We all showered Delilah with attention, but out of any of us, she preferred to be with Mikey, and he catered to her every whim. If any one of us was holding her, he would come up and say, "My baby!" and take her away. He had no issues feeding her or changing her diaper, and he would help with bath time and keeping track of her. And I would love when he would sit with her and listen intently whenever we would read Delilah a story. They were best friends, even more so than Mikey and Nicky, who were also incredibly close. In a weird way, they almost reminded me of Michael and me, and at least once a day, I would see them together and think of my early years with him. I had him wrapped around my finger in much the same way that Delilah had Mikey.

Mikey matured so much during those first couple of years with Delilah. He was incredibly responsible, and it was so lovely to be able to pass her off to him when she was acting up or needed to be rocked to sleep before bedtime. I'll be honest—I was somewhat dreading the arrival of Delilah, afraid to think about all of the extra work, time, and money she was going to cost us, but I really had nothing to worry about. It all turned out fine.

Delilah's mother, Priscilla, was essentially not involved in her daughter's life. Priscilla lived with her mother, Linda, so it was agreed upon in court that that was where Delilah was to spend half of each week. But quickly we discovered that neither Priscilla nor Linda wanted much of anything to do

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with the child. What Linda did want was the money she received from the state to take care of Delilah. So, we came up with a plan that worked for all of us.

Our weekly schedule was that Bobby would pick up Delilah from the state-run day care each Wednesday (she attended that day care center all day Monday through Wednesday). On Wednesday afternoon, Bobby would bring her to Tarrytown, and we would keep her until he brought her back to the city on Monday morning. This way, if Delilah's case manager wanted to see her with her mother, that could be arranged anywhere from Monday to Wednesday. Linda was more than happy to agree to this arrangement for a couple of reasons: 1) Bobby agreed that any state funds for Delilah's care should be directed to Linda; 2) Bobby would also give Linda an additional amount of money each week; and 3) Linda barely had to take care of that baby, which was a great thing for both Linda and her daughter, as it seemed they barely paid attention to that baby.

I know what you're thinking. I'm not a big fan of mothers, having had a bad experience with my own, so I will give you an example of what I mean about Linda not putting Delilah first. On Monday mornings, I would pack up Delilah's bag filled with food, several changes of clothing, and a huge stack of diapers and wipes so that Linda never needed to have any provisions available. In addition, Bobby would take in a bag full of food, snacks, diapers and wipes to the childcare center for Delilah each week, plus would give the center a \$20.00 bill. The day care workers knew to take the money to purchase anything extra for the baby, as we were assuming that the only time Delilah was eating during those three days each week with Linda was when she was at the day care center. We highly doubted Delilah got fed anything while in Linda's care, as, according to the child care workers, she was completely ravenous each day she showed up.

Each Wednesday, when Bobby picked up Delilah, her bag would be filled only with Delilah's dirty clothing. There were no snacks, no diapers, and no wipes anywhere in that bag. So, to be prepared, Bobby had to bring a bag for Delilah into work with him each Wednesday so that he had supplies for the train ride back to Tarrytown.

I would also notice that on many Wednesdays, Delilah would return to us in the same outfit I would put her in on Monday. The only time it seemed her outfit would change was if she messed it or got it dirty somehow at daycare. Linda certainly never changed the baby's clothing. And, funny enough, the clothing that did come back in Delilah's bag was usually pieces that were old, stained, and tattered, not the beautiful, clean outfits I would put in the bag each week.

So, Linda would not only keep all of the money from the state and from Bobby for Delilah, she would not purchase any food, diapers, or clothing for her, either. That was all on us, so it was a bit frustrating. But it was fine, as

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we got to keep Delilah for 5 nights and 4 days, which was all we really wanted. That was a good trade-off as far as I was concerned.

I will be honest—I had a hard time with the whole situation, as it was, to me, very reminiscent of my own mother and my time with the Aceti family. My mother was just like Priscilla, completely ignoring her daughter and essentially denying her of basic necessities, and all of us were like the Aceti family, making sure Delilah had everything she needed, at least when she was with us. I still hadn't met either Priscilla or Linda, and for a long time, I was hoping I never would.

But I was very lucky that year, in that I really had nothing to complain about. Yes, the whole situation with Delilah's mother and grandmother was mildly irritating, but that was all. The band was doing really well, and we were getting a ton of gigs. We were almost becoming big fish in a small pond. No one was beating down the door to offer us any recording contracts, but most college students our age knew who we were or had at least heard of us.

Pops, Rex, and I had gone in together to purchase an old Toyota hatchback for all of us to use, mostly for food shopping and doctor appointments. However, one night, the four members of The Prom, Jason, John, Duncan, and I, drove out to Yonkers to get some White Castle burgers after rehearsal. On the way, out of nowhere, we heard one of our songs being played on Fordham Marymount's radio station. All four of us screamed when we heard it, and I had to pull over on the side of the highway, as my eyes welled up with tears of joy. It was an amazing moment, and within days, we heard our music pop up all over the place, not only on college stations but independent stations, as well.

We were riding the biggest high for days, but three weeks later, it was all done. John was offered a recording contract. Not The Prom. Just John. We all knew he was the most talented of our group, but it did sting that the agent only wanted him, not the rest of us. I think out of the three of us, I was the most devastated. It was not because of the recording contract—I honestly couldn't have cared less about that—but because our time as a group was done.

Jason, however, was determined to keep us together and felt that we should keep going. So, The Prom continued to live, even without John. And brilliant, creative Jason came up with a great idea. Duncan, Jason, and I were going to be the main members of the band, but we were going to allow other musicians to come in and play with us for a year. We were going to help lift up other musicians in the area, ones that the recording agencies never gave a chance to. So, every year, The Prom would have its guest leader of the band, the replacement for John. For one year, we would help rising artists get their music out there to the masses. We would help develop their sound, and we would only play the songs that we all agreed to perform. It was kind of crazy—The Prom never got its own recording contract, but the several

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different artists we helped got contracts fairly quickly. Still, it was a great time.

In the meantime, I still continued to write lyrics on my own, with Duncan composing the music. I started carrying a personal dictation tape recorder with me at all times, and soon, I was just handing tapes over to him instead of notebooks. This was a game changer for me, as I was able to get down the specifics of a song the instant it came into my head. Before, I had to fight to hold onto songs in my brain. With that recorder, I could set them free almost immediately. In fact, the majority of the songs Duncan and I wrote during that time period were songs that were developed while I was at work. I learned in one of my classes that cryptology and playing music require using both sides of one's brain, so maybe that's why all of those songs crawled out while I was in Reggie's office.

Other than that, life was blissfully uneventful. I was still working for Louie. (Let's face it—I would never stop working for Louie. I knew a good thing when I had it.) And, I was chugging right along on my path towards graduation. By that summer, I was going to have my bachelor's degree in hand and would be starting my master's degree soon after. At that point, I couldn't imagine anything disrupting my life and my plans. I had organized my life well, and everything was on track. You can go ahead and plan all you want. It won't matter if the Good Lord has other plans for you.

19 CHAPTER NINETEEN: DIARAH AT 25 (20)

Everything can change in an instant. I knew that to be true. But I wasn't quite expecting it on that warm day on the first of September.

On the first Thursday of the month, Louie would ask me to attend the monthly staff meetings at the office. A lot of the information during those meetings didn't really pertain to me, but he felt that it was important that the rest of the staff was reminded that I still worked for the company and for me to still feel a part of the team. However, in reality, the only person I communicated with on a regular basis was Mr. Jarvis.

After the incident in the office two years prior, the office hierarchy had changed quite a bit with Jarvis taking over a lot of the day-to-day issues and Louie doing a bit more in terms of client relations. This meant that Louie spent a lot of time traveling overseas to meet with current clients and potential new ones. It was basically the same thing he was doing when I met him in San Gimignano six years prior.

So, as I exited the elevator every month, I would drop my four pieces of mail to Michael into that mail slot, as it was the only place that I would remember to send off those letters. And since I was only at the office once per month at that point, all four letters for that month would go out at once. I didn't work on Fridays (I still was responsible for any calls that came in on Saturday), and I normally didn't have class then, either, so I would use that time to go to the coffee shop in Tarrytown down the street from our house to do my homework and write my weekly letter. By that point, though, almost none of the letters were about me. Mikey, Nicky, and Delilah were usually the main topics with the band, Bobby, Rex, and Pops thrown in here and there.

I would always bring my work bag with me anytime I went into the city. Actually, I always brought my work bag with me wherever I went. It was my new, more-professional version of the backpack I used to bring everywhere

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with me. I also still kept quite a bit of cash on me, even though I always had the corporate card in case of emergencies. I just never felt safe unless I had it on me. And, there had been a couple of times that I had been caught in the city on nights when the weather got bad and the trains were so delayed that I couldn't catch one home, so I always had a light change of clothing with me, as well.

And, I always had that passport with me, too. I did have my NY state driver's license, but I just liked that passport. I had a lot of people counting on me at home, but I always liked the idea that I could flee if I needed to. I guess it was just the way I dealt with the trauma of my childhood. Fleeing to Europe each summer was the only thing that kept me going, and I liked knowing that I didn't have to rely on anyone else to do that anymore.

The meeting lasted a lot longer than it usually did, for some reason. There was a lot in terms of news and announcements, and so the meeting that usually ended around 4:45 p.m. was still going at 5:30 p.m. Some people who needed to leave for other obligations left, but Mr. Jarvis asked all who could stay would stay. So, I sat there until the meeting was adjourned just before 6:00 p.m.—only about half of the office was still there at that point.

I no longer had a desk in the building, but once the meeting ended, I walked over to my old cubicle. An intern from NYU had taken my old spot. I didn't know her, but she had NYU everything all around the cubicle, so she either attended that university or was able to get a lot of free stuff from there.

I needed to use the phone to call home to let them all know that I was running late. And I was just about to pick up the receiver when the phone rang. I watched it ring twice, not wanting to pick up someone else's phone line. But something, somewhere deep inside, was telling me to pick up the receiver. I didn't answer the correct way with the usual spiel for the office. Instead, I picked up the phone and quietly said, "Hello?"

I didn't hear anyone on the other end. I said "Hello?" again. I only heard breathing on the other end of the line.

For some reason that I cannot explain, I said in a whisper, "Michael?"

I heard him weeping softly on the other end. Oh, my God, it was Michael.

I said in almost a half-yell, "Michael? Michael? Is that you? Are you okay?"

He didn't reply, and I continued to hear whimpering on the other end of the line.

"Michael, stay right there. I'm coming to get you. Do not move. Do you hear me? I'm heading to the airport right now. Do you understand? Don't move, Michael. I'm coming to get you. Do you hear me?"

I heard nothing on the other end.

"Michael, do you hear me?!?" I said strongly.

"Yes," was all he said. He sounded like a wounded animal.

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“I will be there as soon as I can. I will be there soon,” I kept repeating.

“Okay.”

“I’m leaving now. I’m going to hang up the phone now, but I’m leaving to go to the airport right this second.”

“Okay.”

“Michael?” I whispered. “I still love you with all my heart.”

And I did. Hearing his voice was everything. He said nothing. I could only hear him softly crying on the other end.

“I’ll be there very soon.”

And with that, I hung up the phone, ran to the elevator, and pushed the down button a hundred times. There were only a few people still in the building, so the elevator arrived fairly quickly, but I was positively frantic to get out of there. I was alone in the elevator car and pushed the button for the lobby. When it opened, I leapt out and sprinted towards the main glass doors, waving goodbye to Hassan, the security guard who helped me rescue Louie two years prior.

I got down to the station below and grabbed the first train out to the airport. I sat on that train trying to calm my breathing. For a split second, I thought I had dreamed the whole thing. There was no way that Michael had called. It made no sense. I just happened to be at the office, right at that desk when he called? No. I mean, the first year, I did sign each letter with the name Bunny and with that phone number to that desk, as I had no phone of my own. So, he was looking at letters that were four years old? No, that’s not possible. And, for a moment, sitting on that train, I thought about turning around and getting on the train back to Tarrytown. But, again, something inside of me told me to head to JFK. And so, I did.

I got to the airport and ran to the international terminal. I headed straight for Alitalia. No one was at the counter, as their next flight wasn’t for hours. One lone agent stood at the desk, deep in thought.

I ran up to her and yelled, “I need a ticket to Italy tonight! It’s an emergency!”

The poor woman jumped a foot. I scared her half to death. She looked at me and saw how desperate I was and started to type away on her computer.

“There is a flight tonight at 9:40 p.m. to Rome.”

“I need to get to Florence. Are there any flights there?”

“I can get you a connecting flight to Florence. You will arrive at 6:25 p.m., local time.”

“Okay. I’ll take it.” I handed her my corporate card.

“It will be \$1,337.00. Do you have any bags to check?”

“No, I don’t.”

I almost passed out when I heard the amount. It was going to take me years to pay Louie back all of the money. I knew he said I could use the card for emergencies, but I was pretty sure he didn’t mean this. I didn’t care. I

would deal with the repercussions later.

I got my ticket and started to head towards the gates. And then I remembered that I never called home. Oh, God, I was supposed to be home hours ago.

I called and Duncan answered it on the first ring.

“Hey, where are you? I have a date with Billy tonight. You were supposed to be here.”

I forgot about his date. I felt like the world’s worst friend for what I was about to do.

“Duncan, if you do me this huge, huge favor, I will owe you forever more. Please, please, I need you to come through for me.”

“What? What’s going on?” He sounded excited and curious. I was pretty fucking boring normally. Everything in my life revolved around everyone in those apartments upstairs. So, he was quite interested to hear what was so important to me.

“Well, you’re not going to believe this, but I’m going to Italy. I’m going to go get Michael. I’m bringing him home.”

He gasped.

“NO. WAY! Are you telling me that that man really exists? I’ll be honest, hun—John, Jason, and I totally thought that you made him up just so we would leave you alone about not dating. We kind of thought you were a lesbo! Ha!”

My voice became serious.

“Duncan, please, please, please watch the kids for me this weekend. I promise you, I will give you whatever you want when I get back home. I promise.”

“Okay, okay! Don’t get your panties in a wad. I’ll watch the boys and Delilah. But I’m going to need some money to get us pizzas for the next few days, because you know I am not cooking.”

“There is a can of Ajax in the bathroom. If you pull off the lid, you will see about \$1,000 cash in there. Use whatever you need.”

“Oh, we are all getting our own individual pizzas, then!” He sounded excited.

“I will call you from Florence. I will bring him home as quickly as I can. Hey, Duncan? Thank you. Thank you so much. I owe you big time.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Go get your man,” he said and hung up.

I kissed the dirty phone receiver and said to myself, “Duncan, I love you!”

I was going to call Michael to give him my flight information, but I decided against it. I was afraid Papà or someone else would answer the phone, and I really didn’t want to talk to anyone else there. I actually didn’t want to talk to Michael, either. What were we going to say to each other? I started to walk towards the airport security checkpoint and got through it in record

time, mostly because I was traveling internationally without any bags.

I still had almost two hours to go before the flight took off. I was starving, but I was not going to get anything to eat in the terminal. No, for \$1,300, they could feed me on the plane. I should have probably been a bit more concerned about leaving the boys and Delilah behind for a few days, but I wasn't.

I walked to the gate and sat in a chair with my arms wrapped around my work bag. It was hours before the flight, so there was virtually no one waiting at my gate, but without looking up, I felt someone sit down next to me. I thought for a moment that there were plenty of chairs around me, but some creep had to come and sit right next to me. I kept my eyes closed. Then, I felt this person start to blow in my ear.

"Excuse me!" I started to say when I opened my eyes. It was Rex. He was in his full uniform, and he looked really good. It had been a long time since I had seen him dressed like a cop. He always left his uniform in the barracks or at the dry cleaners downtown.

"What on earth—?" I started to say.

"Duncan told Pops what you were doing, and Pops called the station. The station called me over the radio to pass on the message that you were at the airport flying to Italy. I just had to come see it for myself." He smiled.

I nodded my head slowly, indicating that he was correct.

"Yup. Hopefully, I will be bringing him back with me."

He raised his eyebrows. "I can't imagine you coming back without him. I don't see that as a scenario."

I stared at him. "You're right. You're absolutely right."

Rex put his arm around me and pulled me in for a side hug.

"I hope you get everything you wish for," he said. "Honestly, I do. And, I hope to God this is all worth it, as my father is making me use some of my vacation days to help him with the kids."

"I'm sorry I—,"

Rex interrupted me by putting up his hand in a stop position.

"You don't have to say a thing. You don't have to apologize, and you don't have to thank me. I have owed you for quite a while. My dad was pretty mad at me after the whole gambling debacle. I didn't think he was ever going to forgive me. But he is really happy now. He likes living with you and the kids. I think it keeps him young. And, he's very happy he's found Terri."

He thought for a moment. "Yeah, I owe you. I'm happy to do it for you."

Rex sat with me until I had to board. What a gift that was. So many of my friends hated their ex. I adored mine. It probably had a lot to do with the fact that we were still living under the same roof. But we could have avoided each other, I guess. I just think we really liked each other, and something like a girlfriend wasn't going to come between us.

And, I thought about that on the whole flight over. If it was so easy for

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Rex and me to be friends after he was involved in another relationship, then it would have been just as easy for me to be friends with Michael if he met someone. I couldn't wait to tell him that, to shove it in his face. But I was going to be wrong about that whole situation.

I was soon going to learn how things went down, and I was going to forgive my friend a hundred times over.

The Bunny Trail story continues with the second book in the series,
Thou Wilt Go Now, Rabbit

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D.J. Tombe is a gender fluid educator and writer. They have been an instructor of English and Communications at colleges and universities throughout the U.S. and have also taught in Japan, Brazil, and Florence, Italy.