

THAT
WOMAN and

the **M**AFIA
DON

Marie Menna Pagliaro



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iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

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Lincoln, NE 68512
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ISBN-13: 978-0-595-37212-6 (pbk)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-81610-1 (ebk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-37212-0 (pbk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-81610-X (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

To my family

CHAPTER 1



Eugenio kept shaking her. “Get up, Domenica, our turn to go out on the deck. Fresh air, it’s what you need, make you feel better.”

She opened her eyes halfway, then closed them. “No tell me what I need. I’m tired, got to rest.” She took a deep breath, held it for several seconds before swishing it through her teeth. “Give me a few more minutes. You go, take Joseph with you, I come in a little while.” Her arm made a weary wave. “Go, go.”

What did he want from her? Being on the deck wouldn’t make the nausea go away. The rocking, the rolling, the swells, bad enough. But the swelling inside of her? That she couldn’t do nothing about.

She remained alone on her back in the bed jammed against the corner, the mattress a mushy sack of flour, sagging so much it might sink into the ocean and take her with it. Yet how could she complain? At home her straw mattress wasn’t as soft.

She put her arm out. Not much distance to the next bed. Twenty-nine, thirty centimeters, the most. Better for her. If they could move the beds together at night, Joseph could sleep between her and Eugenio, keep him away from her.

Creaking, more creaking. Engines clanking, straining, driving her crazy. She squeezed her ears, looked up. Caked rust on the ceiling, moist rust dripping creepy red-brown fingers down the wall, almost touching the fingers crawling up. Like the picture her cousin, Conc-

etta, saved in the corner of her bedroom. The picture they used to open up, let go, and cover their ears as they watched it roll shut with a snap. The Creation of Man. Michelangelo himself couldn't do nothing with this room.

A rumor floated on board that this 1931 voyage was to be the last for this ship. Just as well. Should of been sold for scrap long ago.

She sneaked a change of clothes after sleeping in them, threw the dirty ones under the bed with the rest. They smelled sour, and no wonder—too long they weren't washed. It would never of happened in Ficarazzi. Ah, Ficarazzi. How the little town helped shape the crescent of Palermo's harbor. So much sun. Their lemon farm. The big crop they picked.

For nothing.

But in America things would be different.

Or would they?

Maybe going to America wasn't such a good idea after all. Gold in the streets? Probably a lie. More people returning to the old country now than leaving. She should go see the captain, tell him turn the ship around, and go back. Silly. Her, Eugenio, they were different from the rest. They were promised jobs.

She pushed herself up. Sticking out from the wall, a dresser it was supposed to be, a piece of wood that already gave her two splinters. Wood with even more holes than the wheel of the donkey cart Peppino had used as a teething ring. Peppino. Born last year on St. Joseph's Day and named after the saint himself. Why would a dog with all that brown hair, almost beige, love to sleep in the sun? How hard it was saying goodbye to him.

Her eyes rested on the statue she had packed, tipped sideways, almost completely hidden under more clothes thrown on the other end of the wood. The Virgin, long white dress and veil, blue mantle, her heel squashing the head of a snake whose body was wrapped around her bare feet. Domenica slid her way between the bed and the statue, stood it up, and dropped on her knees before it. "Dear

Madonna, make me lose this baby the same way I lose the other five, six, I no remember how many since Joseph.”

A shudder went through her when she heard what she'd said. An angel could pass by and say “Amen” and leave her pregnant forever. “No, I'm sorry, Holy Mother, please forgive me, I take it back. Now you know I want a girl. But women, we have no life. I pray for what I no want, another son. I read that if he born in America he could be President of the United States. You hear me?” While shaking her finger at the statue, she raised her voice. “No forget.”

Her finger found its way to the gold cross she wore on the chain around her neck. She rubbed the cross, careful also to rub the gold horn right next to it. Just in case. It would give her protection against those dangers of nature that followed everybody around.

The evil eye.

Should she go back to sleep, take the chance of having that dream again—swarms of people buzzing new words at her, circling her, stinging her with their eyes?

But last time upstairs, people heaving over the rail, sometimes missing, making her wish the wind would shift. And the junk they threw overboard bobbing up and down, up and down.

Yet downstairs more sea, a sea of beds, mostly empty. No empty enough so she wouldn't have to wait for the one shower, one bathroom that worked. No place to wash clothes. No portholes, no ventilation. So much perspiration she couldn't smell it no more.

Now, even more creaking than before. Motors grinding, crunching. She had to get out of that room. But first she had to fix herself.

Steerage had only one mirror, and even that one was cracked. What did it matter? She could braid her hair, tack with hairpins the braids to the top of her head with her eyes closed. She knew she looked much older than twenty-eight. Daily exposure to the Sicilian sun had gave her skin a leathery texture and she was already missing five teeth, one in the front, on the bottom. She wanted to find the mirror anyway, to take another look at what she always received

compliments for. Her blue eyes, just like the Mediterranean on a beautiful clear day, everyone told her.

The sea had turned calm that March afternoon, and the sun hinted that spring was on its way. As soon as she stepped out on the deck, she could feel the salt-water air fixing her lungs.

Joseph ran to her. She picked him up, raised him high in the air, then winced. A cramp near her hip. Stupid of her. Or lucky.

She managed to limp her way to an empty chair and drag it to the railing. This time no cramp. With Joseph on her lap she sat facing the never-ending blue-gray.

Blue-gray. Just like her life.

“Joseph,” she untied the black shawl around her head and covered him with it. Then she wrapped her arms around him and rocked. “Mama so sorry for making you always work so hard. You never a baby. Eight years old, have the life of an old man already. But Papa, you know how he is.”

She cradled Joseph’s head in her hands. “Mama make it up to you, in the new world. There you be somebody, you get an education. You no born in America so you no can be President, but you brother can. I make a deal with the Madonna he going to be President of the United States.”

Joseph turned around. “What brother?”

“The brother inside of Mama. He come around October, November. You going to be somebody special. But he going to be real special,” she lifted her head and eyebrows, “President of the United States.”

Eugenio joined them just in time to hear what she’d said. “Why you make up stories, Domenica? Joseph’s like us, he be nobody special and his brother or sister be nobody, too.”

She was just about to let her husband have it when he moved from the shade of the lifeboats into the sun. Reminded her of the first time she saw him, chasing birds from the fig trees. Tall for a Sicilian, good-looking. The curly dark hair framing the blue eyes made all the

young unmarried girls in Ficarazzi have a crush on him. Some of the married ones, too.

Everyone told her how lucky she was her parents had arranged such a match for her. Lucky, all right. In sickness and in health. The sickness you get, that she could live with. But the sickness he already had? She would never have made that promise if she knew.

She stood up so fast that Joseph had to hold on to her to keep from rolling onto the deck. Her shawl fell to the floor. She swooped it up before she'd have to chase after it if the wind came back.

The finger that had warned the Madonna was now aimed at her husband, who had put on a suit, his only suit, every time he went up on the deck. He crouched down, bent his head, and raised his palms. "No start in with that again."

Did he think for even a second that she wouldn't remind him every day of his life? "You better pick your friends in the new country more careful, Eugenio Esposito. It still breaks my heart to give up the farm."

"But it wasn't Tommaso's fault. I won it from him fair and square."

"Fair and square? All those years you play cards with him, you no know he's related to that miserable *mafioso*? You think Don Paolo let his nephew lose? You can't deal with those people. Even if you win, you lose. There's no fair and square with them."

"I know, I know. Don't say it..."

"We pay Don Paolo all our profits just to let us use his water."

"How many times you going to say it, a thousand, two thousand times?"

Eugenio turned his back toward her, covered his ears, and shook his head, but she didn't let up.

"Maybe if I say it ten thousand times, it sinks in. Two years working to make Don Paolo rich. Our son, a baby, working to make him rich. And with that new law they make in America, another two years waiting to go to the new country."

He faced her again. “Domenica, I had to believe I could make the farm work. There are no jobs in Italy even for people with a trade, and you know how in Sicily the lemons grow as big as grapefruit.”

“They could be as big as melons, it no make no difference.”

“Stop saying the same old things.”

“You shut up. No tell me to stop. I no stop, never stop, I never let you forget. And you better no forget you promise, no more gambling. We start new. We get rid of those rotten *mafiosi*, they no bother us no more.”

Just as she said that, a huge, puffy white cloud took its time crossing the sun, darkening the deck and sending a bone-chilling wind across it. From the blue-gray water, the blue disappeared. Domenica hugged herself to stop shivering. The ship took a dip, water slurping then crashing against the bow, making her stomach gurgle.

Eugenio began walking away from her but she caught up with him. “And let me tell you something else, my dear, dear husband. The Madonna told me the baby’s a boy. No sister for Joseph, if it’s a girl I send it back. No more girls with a life like me.”

Eugenio shrugged, thrust his right hand upward, and moved to another part of the deck.



It wouldn’t be long now. Seagulls cawing, circling the deck. More of them gliding over tugboats. Even the ship’s horns didn’t scare those noisy birds away.

She must of been the first to spot the green woman. She’d been searching, straining her eyes through the mist. Thought she had saw it before. No, a mistake. The green only the moss-covered canvas clinging to the flagpole of a passing ship.

But this time the green woman looked real. Domenica kept staring. It, it *was* real. She jumped out of the deck chair with the speed of one of her goats she had just prodded with a stick. Slowly she

stretched her right arm high in the air, as though she herself was carrying the torch.

The chattering on the deck stopped. One by one, all the people, even the children stood up straight, placing their right hands over their chests.

In a minute, there it was. They were almost on top of it, could almost touch it. The fog partially covered the English words. She couldn't read them anyway, but knew what they said. Poor, huddled masses, tired, maybe not in that order, but she was all three. Even though the day was overcast and blustery, she felt warm and welcome.

Warm and welcome until Ellis Island.

More prisoners there now than immigrants. Cold faces that all looked the same behind counters, little patience on both sides, and the stamping of red marks on papers, making a thump-thump sound in her ears. Joseph was so full of energy, poor kid. Took all her remaining strength to keep him still.

Outside everything was big, tall.

Bigger, and taller. When they got to Brooklyn, it seemed as though it would never end.

Why did they have to leave the farm?

Finally, a cushion to the new world. Bensonhurst, they called it. Familiar faces, familiar food, familiar language. And there, running down the street, closer and closer, Peppino. She bent down to catch him so he could jump on her, lick her face, but he passed. No Peppino, he was too beige. And he was a she.

Rosa DeSalvo, her childhood friend, greeted them and showed them to their apartment. Eugenio lugged the valises to the middle of the living room, leaving more scratches on the wood floor that already had too many. Then he disappeared with Joseph.

Her and Rosa, they hugged each other, wiped their tears on their sleeves. The apartment was more cramped than Domenica had

hoped. Plaster footprints were tracked all over the floor from the hole in the ceiling, but for now the place would have to do.

"It's the best I could find for the rent you could pay," Rosa said.

Domenica traced her finger along one of the many cracks on the walls, ran her hand on the window sill, which looked like it leaked. And in the corners, thick lacy cobwebs that made nets up to the ceiling. How could even a spider want to live here? "How much you say is the rent?"

"Thirty dollars a month. And no forget, it's got two bedrooms."

"Two closets you mean, and four families sharing the bathroom." She shouldn't of complained. At least they didn't have to go outside to use it.

Domenica saw the disappointment on her friend's face. "Sorry, Rosa, I'm just tired. Thank you for all you help. The apartment's fine. I can still save money with the jobs you got us."

Rosa let out a nervous cough. Her pudgy face twisted, her black eyes narrowed. "There's a little...a small problem, Domenica."

She sighed. "I can't take no more problems. What is it?"

Rosa took a quick step back, almost as though she expected to be hit. "It's the—the employment agency. You got to pay a fee to the employment agency."

"What employment agency?"

Rosa lifted her shoulders and smiled uneasily. "You know, the same kind we had in Sicily."

She lunged toward Rosa, stopping herself just in time from pulling at her friend's hair. Instead, Domenica took her two hands and started pulling her own hair. "You mean those people are here? We got to pay them to get a job? In America?"

"Mussolini scared them off and a lot of them came here and do only what they know how to do."

"I no believe it. Son of bitches *mafiosi*, in America."

"No be upset, Domenica, I had to pay the employment agency to get my job, too." She kept her eyes on Domenica's fingers, which

were still busy tugging her hair. "And you have to pay for training. You and Eugenio have no skills, and here we measure in inches, feet and yards."

"Feet? Yards? What kind of craziness is that? And how much all this going to cost?"

Rosa looked at the floor while she computed by tapping her fingers against her thigh. "Only a hundred and thirty dollars."

"Only a hundred and thirty dollars! How you get that?"

"There's a month's security deposit, for the apartment."

"What's a security deposit? You no say nothing about a security deposit."

"A month's rent, thirty dollars, ahead of time. Now you got to pay this because a lot of people move out and no pay the rent. But no worry, Domenica, you get that back at the end of the lease."

Domenica shook her head while punching her forehead. "I no live to the end of the lease."

"Then there's twenty-five dollars for the employment agency. Each. That's eighty." Rosa continued manipulating her fingers. "And the thirty dollars each for training makes a hundred and thirty all together."

"No, a hundred and forty." Domenica then added the eighty-five dollars they'd borrowed for the trip. They were in debt for two hundred twenty-five dollars. And she hadn't noticed no gold in the streets. She sank to the floor and dropped her head in her lap.

Rosa put her arms around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Domenica."

She lifted her heavy head. "You no should be sorry. I'm the one who's sorry, sorry for thinking only of myself. You always, still, such a good friend. All the years we spent together in school, in church, talking, dreaming. Thank you for all you do for us, finding us the apartment, jobs. Any job, even one we have to pay for, is better than no job."

"I'd do anything for you, Domenica. I want everything to go right for you."

She suddenly remembered. “Rosa, I need you help for one more thing, something very important.”

“Anything, tell me.”

“Me and Eugenio, when we start working, I no can take no chances with him. He give me his pay, I take care of the money. After I pay the...security deposit you call it?...the employment agency, training, I give you a bag and I put the money in the bag and you hide it for me in you house, keep it safe. You know Eugenio, no can trust him with money.” When she pictured him tearing apart their apartment, looking for the money without finding it, she felt a devilish smile about to cover her face.

“Whatever you want, Domenica. It’ll be safe with me.”



Each weekday and every other Saturday, Domenica, Eugenio, Rosa, and several of their co-workers packed their lunches and boarded the Sea Beach Express, a long ride from Bensonhurst to the Manhattan dress factory. Compared to anything Domenica ever saw in Palermo, this factory was huge, and alive, so alive that machine oil filled the air. Sewing machines arranged in twenty rows, twelve across, chugged along. Every machine occupied, a few more men than women. Huge bolts of fabric-filled shelves lined two walls, the third supported closets containing many types and colors of threads, needles, thimbles, and machine replacement parts. Completing the rectangle were twelve tall meshed-glass windows.

The factory was directly under the roof. For that Domenica bet the workers thanked God in the winter and cursed the devil in the summer. And the rusted metal squares on the ceiling, they reminded her of the ship they had just took.

Her and Rosa sat eight rows apart but couldn’t resist the temptation to talk, chat with each other. Several times the foreman, Signore Ruggiero, passed by, staring his disapproval. One day he must of thought it was one chat too many. He called Domenica into his

office, a room so quiet and neat that being in it made the noise and activity of the sewing room seem even louder. Ruggiero, a stocky, rugged-looking man in his forties, had a flat face and the kind of bulgy eyes that seemed as though they could watch you even if they were closed. He pulled out a chair, which she rejected, leaning on the back of it instead.

He looked her straight in the eye. "Signora Esposito, I tell you the first time you come here there no talking till lunch. You remember?"

"Yes, but please..."

"Now look, Signora DeSalvo ask me to help get a job for her friends. These are hard times, even in America, but I do it for her, no? No only for you husband, but for you too. There a lot of families in the Depression where nobody have job, and you and Signore Esposito both working. And the first three months you train, you both did good." Domenica felt his bulgy eyes on her even though hers were stuck to the wall. "Now Signora DeSalvo, she no talk while she work here until you come. If I know she start talking to you, I never get you this job." He stopped speaking for a few seconds. "Or if I know why you wear those dark, loose clothes these hot days. I see you sweat and I..."

She turned quickly to face him. "Please, Signore Ruggiero..."

"See, you talking again. I no through yet. Be quiet and listen, no interrupt."

Domenica cupped her mouth and he wrinkled his forehead.

"I know you have a, what they say in this country, a bun in the oven, and, and I no say nothing. I'm a family man myself, eight kids, two to thirteen years. I understand. But you make sure you no use the *bambino* as an excuse. You make sure you no miss no days, no time, or I have to find somebody else." He stood up. "We all lucky we have jobs. We have jobs because here we make clothes for people with money. I struggled very hard, worked myself up to this job, and I got to make sure everybody work hard, make quality clothes, and no waste no time or I have no job, too. *Capisce?*"

"You no have to tell me again, Signore Ruggiero. You see. I work hard, no talk, no miss no time. You see."

"We see." He sent her off with a wave of the hand.



At exactly twelve the lunch whistle blew, and with it aromas of the workers' lunches replaced the gnawing of the sewing machines. Sausage and peppers, egg and pepper omelets, provolone and prosciutto on rolls, meatball heroes, stuffed eggplant. A common practice was to pass lunches around so everybody had a taste and could show approval or disapproval with head shakes, rolling eyes, or bunched fingertips, which either remained on lips or sprinted open after being kissed.

Rosa rushed over to Domenica. "Ruggiero, what he want?"

"He no want us to talk while we work."

"He say anything about the baby?"

"Only that he no want me to miss no time." She clasped her hands. "I pray to God I have this baby on a Sunday."

"No worry, Domenica, if it's a day we work, you go to the bathroom. Drop a piece of flannel on my machine so I know to meet you there. You no miss no work."



The next three months Domenica didn't speak a word in the factory. She was never late, never missed a day's work. With her new skills she spent her spare time at home sewing from jagged scraps left on the bolts of material, lace curtains, bedspreads with ruffles, and for the used couch and chairs she had bought, floral slipcovers. But not until she, on her hands and knees, had scraped the floors with steel wool and had gave them three coats of wax.

One Friday afternoon, as she sat in front of her sewing machine at the factory, pains started to attack her. No too bad yet.

But as they got stronger and faster, she pressed stronger and faster on the pedals.

Three o'clock, three-thirty, four.

Maybe she could last until six.

But by four-thirty, she no could wait no more.

She pushed herself up from her seat by the palms of her hands. Today the bathroom had moved too far away. Would she make it?

She shuffled her feet, knees together, eyes focused on the bathroom. She passed the eight rows to Rosa's work station, and dropped the flannel cloth on her sewing machine.

Rosa's machine stopped grinding.

So far so good.

Domenica kept herself low to hide behind a post. She watched Rosa check for Ruggiero, stand up and head toward the bathroom.

Domenica went to lay down in a stall. More private, but the door wouldn't close all the way. Thank God there were no other women using the bathroom.

As the pains got more worse, she took turns rolling over on her sides and back. Rough edges from the broken ceramic tiles scratched her. She lifted her buttocks as high as she could in search of relief. But the pains, too much.

On her side, then on her back again. Had to avoid screaming, attracting attention. She clutched and squeezed the base of the toilet bowl, pressed her sweating face against the cool porcelain.

Rosa. She could see her through the space in the door that wouldn't lock, arched into the wall like a statue in the cathedral, gaping at her, motionless, useless. Why couldn't Rosa be a midwife, like Signora Magnotta, that lady from her town who always wore a hat when she went to deliver the babies of important people in Palermo. She wished Signora Magnotta was here now, even without the hat.

The pains no stopping no more.

Finally, the last big push, the last potential scream crushed by the porcelain.

Strange.

Something different about this birth, different than Joseph's. This baby wasn't crying.

Panic.

She elbowed herself up, stared at the male genitals of the child between her legs in a puddle of fluid.

He looked blue.

Was her unbaptized infant doomed to an earthly Limbo, his restless spirit traveling about the planet throughout eternity? Not *her* baby. No time, no energy left to go get water from the sink before the baby's soul would leave its body, if it hadn't already went.

Water. Jesus help her, she needed water.

Where could she get...?

Hurry up.

She cupped her hand, scooped out some of the icy cold water from the toilet bowl, then poured the liquid over the infant's head.

"I baptize thee..." She paused to think of a name.

What suddenly came to mind was her church in Ficarazzi. Above the altar, the fresco of the Savior, radiant, draped in flowing white robes, arms raised toward heaven. The Savior, Salvatore.

She began again. "I baptize thee, Salvatore, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

She had propped herself high enough to pour the water over the baby's forehead.

Then, she saw it. God help her.

The cord wrapped around the infant's throat!

Quick.

She unraveled the cord and the baby began to cry.

A miracle!



Al Bones yelled, "Hey, Toni, lower that noise."

Toni LaMarca swayed her hips across the living room over to the victrola, stepping over Sal Esposito and his friend, Bruno. She listened to the last few bars of *La Traviata*, sang along with Nellie Melba, and acted out the death scene, before reluctantly turning off the recording. She loosened her long chestnut brown hair and let it fall over her face as she bowed to Sal and Bruno. They put down their crayons, got up and started jumping while yelling at the top of their lungs, "*Brava, brava.*" Together they handed her an invisible bouquet of lush flowers. She pulled out one of the flowers, tossed it to the audience, bowed again, and blew them kisses.

The children promptly returned to their coloring books.

Over and over Toni had rehearsed this scene with Sal and Bruno, preparing for the day she would make her debut on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, dazzling the audience with the rich lyric soprano voice that would make her a great opera star and leading *prima donna*.

Opportunities for studying music? Better in New York than in Sicily. But how else could she support herself, have time to practice, and pay for singing lessons until she got her first real break unless she allowed the mob to pay her rent in exchange for using the apartment as an office where they could operate one of their Brooklyn numbers rackets? Oh, what she had to do for art!

She got used to the curious stares of neighbors who watched all the men visiting her apartment. The dirty looks, raised eyebrows. She was amused by their false assumptions, but nothing, nothing could stand in the way of achieving her ambitions.

Coaching, rents for recital halls, accompanists, and costume-makers—the expenses never ended. She had to supplement her income by caring for babies of working mothers during the day, mothers who had no idea what extra-curricular activities went on in the apartment. She adored children, sang arias to them, played records and musical games. Marriage and motherhood would have to be

postponed for the sake of her career, with her often wondering if she would ever marry.



Should he color the roof black, brown, or green, Sal kept asking himself. Bruno was coloring his purple. What a dummy. Who ever saw a purple roof? Sal took out a black crayon and pressed it back and forth, up and down over the roof, careful to stay inside the lines. When Bruno saw him with the black crayon, he'd probably use black, too. Bruno was what the girls said, a copy-cat.

The skinny guy, Al Bones, ran into the kitchen. He was followed by the other two Als, Al the Lip, and Hairy Al, both panting. Why were they always unwrapping long sheets of white paper with numbers written all over them?

Hairy Al began spreading the papers neatly over the table. "The delivery should be here any minute. Let's have some wine while we wait." He pulled a bottle from his inside coat pocket, opened the closet, and took out three glasses. "Find me a corkscrew for this," he said to Al the Lip, who immediately began opening and slamming drawers.

The three Als sat around the table and emptied their pockets.

After a loud pop, the cork shot up to the ceiling, bounced off and rolled on the floor.

Al the Lip started separating messy, wrinkled bills in piles of ones, fives, tens, and twenties. He opened the cabinet door under the sink, took out the iron, and plugged it into the wall. A few moments later he licked his fingertip and touched it to the iron. He waited a little longer and did it again. This time his finger sizzled. "Well, don't just sit there and watch me, tell me some stories." He opened the faucet, wet a dish towel, and then wrung it out. He placed the towel over the bills, and began ironing them.

These men always had a lot of money. Bundles and bundles. But those stories, were they going to tell them again? Sal had heard them

so many times he knew them by heart. Even his kindergarten teacher, Miss Thompson, didn't tell them the same stories all the time.

"If stories is what you want," Al Bones said, "then stories is what you get." He took off his tie, and unbuckled his belt. "You see, I was fourteen years old and on probation. My parole officer told me I had to get a job. So I get a job with the driver of Whitey's Laundry Service. He makes me ride with him on his truck so he don't have to carry no heavy bundles up the steps into apartments. I did it for two bucks a week, good money in them days. He wasn't supposed to do that, know what I mean? Supposed to carry the bundles in himself."

Al Bones stopped long enough to scratch his crotch while the other Als, with wide eyes and open mouths said, "Go on, what happened next?"

"When my parole officer checked with me, I told him I had a job with this laundry company. They told him they never heard of me. I told him I worked for the driver. The driver don't want no trouble with his company so he tells my parole officer he never heard of me neither. So what do I get? Six months in reform school. And what do I learn from this?"

The Als looked at each other then said all together, "You get a job and you go to jail."

Al Bones turned to him, off playing in the corner. "Hey, Esposito, come here. Did you hear that?"

Him and Bruno both stuffed their crayons into the Crayola box, then went up to Al Bones. "Yeah, we heard it," Bruno said, "you get a job and you go to jail."

Al Bones grabbed Bruno's shoulders. "Kid, I said 'Esposito'. I wasn't talking to you, was talking to Sal here."

"He's my friend," Sal said. "If you talk to me, you talk to him. And his name's Esposito, too."

Al Bones eyed the other two Als. "Get the loyalty on this kid. When he grows up, we'll give'im a job. He's cute, this Sal kid, picked

up a pizza for me today.” Al Bones looked at him again and pointed to Bruno. “This kid a relative?”

“No,” Sal said, “just got the same name.”

“Every other jerk in Brooklyn’s named Esposito,” Al the Lip said as he kept ironing.

Al Bones whacked himself on the cheek. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” He picked him up and put him in the middle of the table after pushing aside some of the white sheets. “Now, Sal, you’re going to hear Hairy Al tell his story.”

Sal gave him a warning look. “Not without my friend.”

Al Bones screwed up his mouth and moved his head up and down. “Okay.” He shoved more white papers out of the way and waited for Bruno to get up on the table before Hairy Al repeated his tale.

“My wife, that nagging bitch. How I married that pain in the ass in the first place, I’ll never know. Tried to turn off that voice of hers with a few stabs. And what does she do? Calls the cops. They come, she don’t croak, then the bitch don’t press no charges.” He crossed his hands, and placed them over his heart. “She loves me, she tells them. Can’t live without me, God help me.”

Hairy Al took another sip of wine followed by several quick breaths with his mouth wide open. “Then a few months later I’m in Danny’s bar having a few drinks. Some mick calls me a dago. I give him only a little push, really guys, just a small one, he bangs his head on the floor, and guess what? *He* croaks. And what do I get? Two years.”

The Als nodded and repeated together, “There ain’t no justice.”

Sal laughs and says, “There ain’t no justice.”

A bell rings three times. A man is let into the apartment. He whispers something to Al Bones, shoves him a newspaper, and disappears. The three Als check the newspaper, then run pencils down the sheets on the table and cross off a lot of numbers.

Hairy Al pushes Al the Lip, almost knocking him over. "While you're flattening out those bills, your mouth still works, don't it? So tell us what you got to say while we wait for the next number."

Al the Lip parts his lips, just about to tell his story, but a bell rings again. This time only once. "That ain't the signal. Must be the cops." He yanks the iron's cord out of the wall, throws the iron in a closet, the ironed bills into a cookie jar.

The three Als keep the wine on the kitchen table, and fill up the glasses again. Next to the wine they put the bursting yellow Crayola box. With his and Bruno's help, they roll up the white sheets and stuff them along with the still unironed bills under several layers of nightgowns in a bedroom chest. They cover the chest with a gold-fringed scarf, decorated with a painted map which has the letters he learned in school, S-I-C-I-L-I-A, sewn in red, white, and green.

Toni picks him and Bruno up, one under each arm, plops them on the piano bench, and sits between them. She opens some music, plays once again the children's march from *Carmen* while they toot their make-believe horns and swing their heads back and forth.

Al Bones throws his tie back around his neck, and opens the door. "Relax, guys, only Joseph comin' to pick up his brother. You're early today, Joseph, ain't you?"

Joey don't answer them, just walks up to the piano, and takes his hand. "Let's go, Sal."

Toni stops playing.

While him and Joey walk down the steps, Joey makes him hold the banister.

"Sal, what do those guys do up there?"

"Sell papers, tell stories, and do laundry."

"You sure?"

"Me and Bruno listen to music while Toni plays with us, but those guys, they're always ironing."

Joey jumps over the last two steps. He does the same as Joey.

"I don't know, Sal, these guys act weird, every time I see them."

“They got a lot of money.”

“Maybe they do, but you’re even beginning to speak like them, and they don’t look like the types of guys who can prepare you for four years in the White House.”

“The what house?”

“What Mama’s always saying. The White House, where the President lives.”

CHAPTER 2



To Domenica it seemed like only yesterday that her and Rosa were playing hide and seek in the cemetery behind the tombstones and cypress trees. They had found a wounded *turturo* there once, the little dove sticky with blood, and were so proud when they took it home, bathed it and nursed it back to health. Real nurses, in a hospital. That's what they'd be some day.

So many notes they passed in school before they'd meet for lunch, look over the boys, share secrets they swore they'd never tell. And the rides they stole to the Piazza Vergogna, to peek at, then study the naked statues.

Where would they live when they grew up? Marry rich men and live in Palermo, on the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele, where they could buy pretty dresses, those with flowers. Wear jewelry and makeup.

And the time they dressed up like older ladies. Disappointing. Nothing glamorous, just darker, bigger clothing. They never did it again, never talked about the way they looked. She guessed Rosa felt the same way she did. It only reminded them of their real future. More of the same. Much more. They'd never be free like the *turturo* they sent off into the air when it was strong enough.

Amazing they never got caught when they sneaked off to the brook, splashing water on their face, neck, arms, those hot days when they should of been picking the olives. And when she held

Rosa's hand, helping her jump over the rocks so she wouldn't slip into the brook, she never dreamed she would be holding her hand this way and for this reason.

"It's terrible someone so young could have a stroke. And such a good man, a piece of bread."

"Only the good die young, Domenica. I can't believe he's dead. Just ten years older than me, and never sick a day in his life."

"Maybe it's a blessing God no send you no babies."

"I'm so lonely now. If I had children, I wouldn't be so lonely."

"You only thirty-four, still young. Maybe you meet some nice man." She tickled Rosa's arm. "And after that, who knows?"

Rosa gave the first smile Domenica had saw in weeks. "Maybe I will, but I'll have to meet him in the Bronx."

"What you saying, the Bronx?"

"I've made up my mind, I'm moving there to be near my sister. Have a job up there already."

Domenica's stomach dropped. She began beating her chest. "Oh my God, Rosa, you sure you want to go so far away? I never see you again."

"I wouldn't let that happen. We'll see each other often, maybe some Sundays or holidays."

"But you have so many friends here, and a job. Why you no stay?"

Rosa placed her arm across her forehead and leaned her head against the wall, while speaking into it. "I've thought about it. A lot. You know how it is, I'm better off being with my family." She turned around fast. "And I'll give you the money I hid for you, you got to find someone else you can trust to keep it for you."

Oh heaven, Eugenio's sickness. What was she going to do with the money? She had put some away every payday. Lived on what was left. Whenever the bag was full, she changed the bills into larger ones. A lot of money in there now, even though she had to pay to put her boys in Catholic school. She couldn't help smiling. In the old country only the rich went to those schools. And now she could keep her

sons in private schools, buy a house in the country, Queens, no too big but with a bathroom they wouldn't have to share with nobody. Maybe two bathrooms. On a corner lot with more grass, and a bigger back yard for growing zucchini and tomatoes. And she could put the basil plants there, too, instead of in flower pots.

Domenica frowned and shook her head. "Finding someone I can trust is one problem, but I got more. Got to get out of this neighborhood. My Sal, he's a real worry. Sal and his pal, Bruno, they no go straight to Toni's every day after school. First they stop in the candy store and spend time with those bums. They no think I know where they go."

"That's a worry, but right now you got to think about what to do with the money. Think of a place in the house where Eugenio won't look. He never knew I kept it for you in the first place, so when I go, he won't suspect nothing. Think, Domenica, think."

Where could she put it, sew it into a pillow? Too inconvenient. Make a padded hanger with a zipper and put it in the closet? Stuff it in a shoe? Whatever she did, she'd have to wait until Eugenio was asleep.

Sleep.

That was it.

For the time being, she'd wrap the money in bed linens and put them in a drawer. Eugenio never made the beds so he'd have no reason to look there.

The next several months, she added a part of their paychecks to the brown paper bag in the linens, trusting the cloth more than the banks. As the bag grew fatter, she kept exchanging the bills, and over time she was convinced her hiding place was safe.



Most of Eugenio's friends complained about having some kind of chest problem during that cold spell in December of 1939. Lorenzo Giordano had a cold he couldn't get rid of. It developed into bron-

chitis. Luigi Rella's whole family, all his six kids, were passing colds back and forth to each other. Even the foreman, Signore Ruggiero, who never missed work, was out for three weeks.

Sal had a case of influenza and was running a high fever. His mouth was open and he was breathing hard. Eugenio put his ear to Sal's chest. Rumbling, roaring fluid. His lungs rasping, straining for air. Eugenio felt his own chest straining, gasping. He kept breathing with his mouth open like Sal's, and blotted the sweat off his son's forehead. Finally he called Dr. Vinci, who recommended bed rest and liquids.

Eugenio let Domenica sleep through Sal's moaning. She had to be exhausted from her work in the factory, then cooking and scrubbing the apartment spotless every day. He eventually gave in to his restlessness and got out of bed. What he needed was to make himself a cup of chamomile tea.

Slowly he sipped the tea as he watched Sal sleeping in his narrow room. Joseph was snoring, also with his mouth open like Sal, not aware of his brother talking nonsense, trembling with chills. Would Joseph catch the disease, too? Eugenio piled blanket upon blanket, some borrowed from the neighbors, on Sal to keep him warm.

He kept watching, thinking, more thinking. If he wasn't so trusting, he would never of lost the farm. They'd have another one by now. Maybe more. People would be working for him instead of him working for somebody else. They could of stayed in Sicily, where it was warmer in the winter instead of this stinking, freezing Brooklyn. But luck wouldn't have it that way.

Too bad he never finished grammar school. He could of helped his boys with their homework. Would they end up in the factory, too? The last thing he wanted.

He wiped more sweat off of Sal, then went back into the living room. His eyes swept over the furniture. Where did Domenica hide the money? Better he didn't know. He had looked all over and never

found it. Never found a bankbook, neither. If he had, would his name be on it, too? Couldn't be. He would of had to sign first.

Even if he found the money, he'd never gamble again.

Never.

Yet, if she had it in the house, did she stack all the same bills together, put the different presidents' pictures facing the same way? Would she...?

Sal stopped moaning.

Too quiet.

Eugenio jumped up. Digestive juices filled his throat, and he felt a rush in his gut. No, no, dear God. Was He punishing him?

Eugenio dashed into the room to check. Then, he froze. The boy wasn't moving. A few frightening moments passed. He'd rather know the worst. He got the courage to unclench his fist, open his hand. Instead of lowering his hand on Sal's forehead, he pressed his lips to it. Cool. The fever broken, the boy sleeping peaceful. But he'd perspired so much that his sheets were drenched. Had to get those pajamas and wet linens off of him or he'd get chills again. Eugenio picked Sal up, moved him onto the living room floor.

He opened several drawers. Underwear and pajamas were in one. He changed the pajamas and then realized they were so big they must have been Joseph's. Not wanting to disturb Sal anymore, he left them on anyway. From another drawer, socks rolled out. The junk drawer rattled next. At last, the pillowcases and sheets. He yanked the top two and replaced the wet undersheet with one of the dry ones. Never made a bed before, but he did a good job tucking in the sheet. No wrinkles.

He put Sal back into the dry bed, covered him with the other sheet, then the blankets. The expression on his son's face was so much like an angel's that the possibility that he might not have been restored to health made Eugenio cry.

"Thank you, God, I promise I'll be a more better father."

He was proud, performed a father's duty very good. He started back to his room, but knocked into the drawer, which in his haste he had left open. When he went to close it, he noticed a small thin brown spot at the edge of one of the remaining sheets.

Damned moths. Too cold out for them. What were they doing here so early in the season? Before you knew it they'd be laying eggs and their larvae'd find their way to his only wool coat.

He picked up the moth and it ripped.

His eyes were playing tricks on him.

He touched it again. Not a moth at all but part of a larger piece of paper.

He tugged at it, pulled out a brown bag. A brown bag, loaded with money.

Money.

His brain fell out of his head. So that's where she buried it all those years! Crazy. He had looked there before but never found nothing. His first instinct was to rummage through the sheets, but more important, he had to stay calm. He covered up the bag. He'd count the money when Domenica wasn't around. She was sleeping now, but could wake up at any second.

He hid the wet sheets. The first thing he'd do when he was alone would be to wash them with Rinso and Crystalline, the same way his wife did, fold them, and put them back in the drawer exactly how she stored them.

That night it wasn't only Sal's recovery that kept Eugenio awake.



How much money could Domenica of saved? With piecework they were each averaging fifteen to twenty dollars a week and had managed to pay back their debts. What could be left?

The next few weeks, whenever Eugenio passed the drawer, he thought about all he could do with that money. What a killing he could make on a horse! He could see his horse already—white, with

a flowing mane. Muscles going in and out with each stride, a stride so powerful and graceful, his horse could fly. Its name was Champion, a sure winner.

No. He had promised. His word was as good as gold.

At first Eugenio passed by the drawer, just brushing against it. Then from a distance he glanced at it. A week later he stared at it. He moved closer, closer, touched the outside, made rings around the knob with his fingertip.

But a promise was a promise.

He touched the drawer again, rested his hand on it until its pulsing was more than he could resist. He clutched the knob, pulled the drawer so hard it fell on the floor, and grabbed the crinkly brown bag.

This time he put the drawer back, and closed it all the way.



Zucca's Pastry Shop looked like all the others in the Italian neighborhood. The windows, made to shine with vinegar, newspapers, and elbow grease, created a sparkling, streak-free medium where passersby could see the mounds of baked goods so artistically designed and displayed. Was there anyone the aromas of cappuccino or espresso could not tempt? Who could reject the invitation to savor the cream puffs, confetti, cheesecakes, rum-drenched sponge cakes, and those succulent Perugina chocolates?

But Zucca's was different; it had an addition. Sergio, the local bookmaker, kept an office there, a convenience for the gamblers in the area who placed their bets over coffee and high-calorie desserts.

It was just little less than three thousand dollars, twenty-nine hundred and eighty-seven dollars to be exact, that Eugenio brought to Sergio. When he won, he'd spend more time with his boys, his wife. Take them to the movies, to Coney Island. Listen to the radio with them like a family. Buy another radio so the boys would have one in their room, even if it cost more for electricity.

The three thousand dollars he already had was a sure thing. He shouldn't take no chance.

But Lady Luck was racing though him, making him tingle. He couldn't lose, had a hunch. He checked the newspaper, pleated it, stuffed it under his armpit, and placed all of the money on Lucky One to win.

Sergio seemed to hesitate. "I got to make a phone call." He dialed a number, and Eugenio paced while the phone call was made.

The white ceramic floor tiles hurt Eugenio's feet. But the chairs were hard, too. He'd sit on a cushioned stool while waiting, rest his feet on the bar rail, order a Fernet Branca, better yet a Petrus to settle his stomach.

Staring at the cash, Sergio said, "Hey Ernie, it's me. Got someone here who wants to bet three grand on the next race."

Silence.

"Yeah, you heard me right. Three grand, can we cover it?" Sergio kept picking on the hairs in his ear with his index finger. "Good."

After all bets were placed, the odds on Lucky One were three to one and Eugenio was already betting in his head the nine thousand dollars he hadn't won yet.

He listened to the race on the radio on top of the bar, standing up while cuddling the wooden box, occasionally pressing his ear against the speaker. The air felt so thin he unbuttoned his vest to help him breathe better.

The crowd was yelling.

Lucky One in the lead, many lengths ahead of the rest.

Too good to be true.

He was now going to win, and win big. He took out his handkerchief, wiped the sweat off his face. When he won, Domenica would stop bugging him about gambling, stop mentioning the lemon farm.

As the horses headed for the homestretch, Lucky One was still ahead. He'd go into business for himself, possibly with Giacomo as a partner. They'd open their own dress factory and he'd have respect.

And wouldn't Domenica be surprised when she went for the bag? She'd find more bags full of money instead of one, so big the bags would explode their seams. Him and his wife would buy a bigger house in Queens than what they had planned, and she could stop working. There'd be no more meals of pasta and beans, lentils, or peas but dinners with meats and rich pastries. Eugenio slid his tongue around his teeth, already tasting the new menu.

But as the race came to the end, three horses that were several lengths behind Lucky One suddenly maneuvered their way around the bend. Lucky One didn't even make place or show but came in fourth.

Starcrossed was the winner. Starcrossed, the son of a bitch.

His throat closed up. He couldn't speak. The sweet smell of the pastries brought acid to his stomach. Blood rushed out of his head; the room started to spin. Slowly at first, then so much that he had to hold on to a table.

Sergio examined his jacket sleeves and lapels. "About time I bought some new suits. And I'm bored with that whore of mine, have to get a new one, one with more class. Feels good having a lot of extra dough."

Even though Domenica wasn't there, Eugenio crossed his finger over his lips. "Sh-sh. If my wife find out about this, she kill me. What I supposed to do? We work eight years to save that money."

"You should of thought about it before. That's the way it goes. If you won, we'd be out nine grand. Maybe you should try killing yourself before she kills you."

Kill himself? What a stupid sugges...

Maybe not such a bad idea. He wasn't no good anyway, causing problems in Sicily and now in America.

His wife. How could he face her? There might be some time before she found out. She probably didn't put money into the bag every day, only on payday.

He tried to sew together his brain. "Suppose I borrow some money from you and play the next race?"

Sergio shrugged. "You ain't got no chance getting money from me. You ain't good for it if you lose. You guys never learn."

Eugenio wouldn't look at him.

"We're a business here," Sergio went on, "we don't take charity cases. You bet and you lost, now you get lost. Beat it."

Eugenio left the pastry shop and began wandering through the streets. Where could he go? He couldn't hardly remember where he lived, couldn't stop sobbing, talking to himself, couldn't find the handkerchief he must of dropped in the pastry shop. People, as they passed, kept nudging each other, looking, pointing, laughing at him, as though he was a crazy man.

Why did Starcrossed have to win?

But he did, and starcrossed was the way he felt.



Domenica was already standing in the lobby of their apartment house when Eugenio finally went home. She'd probably start in on the lemon farm again. Her red face progressed to purple as she began yelling. "Where is it? Where you put it?"

Had to quiet her, didn't want no scene in the hall. When he got close enough she smashed both her fists against his chest and yelled even louder. "Where is it? What you do with it, you lousy bum. Three thousand dollars. Eight years of sweating and saving, doing without, making new clothes out of old, looking like an old lady before my time. And you, what you do, you no-good bum?"

Eugenio managed to drag her into the apartment so the neighbors wouldn't hear.

"God take Rosa's husband," she shrieked, "I wish instead He take you."

Her words stung him, knocked the wind out of him.

“You a disgrace, you no care for you family, you sons, you wife. And you promise me, when we come here...” She bit her curled finger and groaned. “Ah...ah...ah. How you can do this to you family?” She threw herself on the floor, weeping, wailing, and carrying on the way she did at her mother’s and Aunt Lucia’s wake.

As Eugenio watched her pouncing the floor, he felt sick with anger and disappointment. His head drooped so low it might snap off his neck.

Not keeping his word. Gambling with the *mafiosi* they’d tried to escape in the old country.

For that he could never forgive himself.



Joey snored through the whole affair, but every word Sal heard made the lump in his throat bigger. His parents had argued before, but only over something like whether or not his father had bought more fruit than Mama told him to. He had never heard his mother scream like this. He couldn’t listen no more, put the pillow over his head. He lifted his knees up under his chin and lowered the pillow from his head only to use the pillowcase to blow his nose and sop up his tears.

He felt like sucking his thumb, but he was too big for that. Still, he touched the tip of his thumb to his mouth anyway.

What was going to happen to them? Would they have to go back to Sicily? He had heard lots of stories about the old country, most of them scary. He could see his family—no food, no work, begging in the streets. His mother turning into a skeleton, only now all of her teeth were missing. She was crying, weak, her shaky hands dropping everything she tried to pick up.

He had to go to the bathroom, bad, but he couldn’t let them see him go out into the hall. He’d have to hold it in. He crossed his legs, squeezed his thighs together.

He chewed on his sheets, then on his lip. As he thought about his family being broke, he kept going back to his mother.

Mama.

Under the ragged clothes and lumpy fingers was a queen. It would take magic to turn her back into a queen. It would take money.

How could he get money?



After school the next day, Sal darted past Borgia's macaroni store, Ricciardi's tailor shop, and Di Bella's dry cleaners. No action in those dumps. He headed straight for Zucca's Pastry Shop, kept walking in and out until Pasquale Zucca eventually asked him what he wanted.

"I'm looking for work."

"You, kid? What kind of work?"

"Any kind. You need somebody to serve coffee, wash dishes...anything?" Sal looked around for Sergio. Maybe he would give Papa's money back.

Pasquale Zucca turned to his customers. "Anyone know this kid?"

"Sure," one of them said, "he's smart, a nice kid. Everybody likes him, I know him from the candy store."

Pasquale gave Sal a nod. "Hey, kid. I got a job for you, one that'll pay a buck. By the way, how old are you?"

He couldn't believe it. A buck! A whole dollar. "I'm nine." Well, he would be in ten months.

"It's like this, we got a lotta action going on here today. And we need someone to watch out for the cops. Can you do that?"

"You bet. Don't worry, I can smell cops a mile away." He was good at that. Did it a long time for Al Bones.

"Okay, kid, you're on."

Sal sneaked around the block, watched from all directions for patrolmen on foot or in squad cars headed near the area. It was freezing out. He kept his hands in his pockets, stamped his feet, and jumped up and down every once in a while to keep warm. About an

hour later he noticed an officer coming down the street, slowly checking the outsides of stores, poking his head into their doors.

Sal crept back into Zucca's. Nice and warm in there. A lot of steam from the coffee machines. "Cop coming, block away."

The men got off the phones, took seats around the tables, and started telling jokes while eating their pastries.

"Come in, Officer Callahan," Pasquale said when the policeman reached the door, "have some cannoli."

"Another time." His eyes followed the outline of the room. He then headed for the shop next door.

Pasquale lifted the bottom of his white apron and blotted his face with it. "You did good, kid."

The others came up to Sal, patted his head, gently slapped or pinched his cheek.

Pasquale pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket, peeled off a dollar, and gave it to him. "Think you could do this every day after school?"

"Sure." For a buck he would do anything. Loved those pictures of George Washington against a green background and wanted to collect them.

Just as Sal was about to head home, Sergio came into the shop. He stopped, held up his sleeve and snapped off a price tag hanging from a string attached to a button on his unbuttoned jacket.

Sal clutched his dollar bill while he squashed his face into the display case. He stepped back nice and slow to study Sergio's reflection in the glass and in the polished metal trim around it. Jeez. What big bags were hanging under his eyes. Bet he kept Papa's money in there.

Sergio took a seat near a telephone and ordered an espresso.

Sal approached Pasquale. "Want me to take him his coffee?"

"Looking for a big tip?" Pasquale grinned. "You know, you're some businessman. Go ahead and bring him his order."

When the espresso was ready, Sal placed it on a tray and took it to Sergio.

Sergio didn't pick up the cup, just kept looking at it. "Hey, Pasquale, what do you got midgets working for you now? This midget don't know how to serve coffee."

"Never mind, Sergio, the kid's good. Treat him good."

Sal finally caught on. He kept his pinkie high in the air while he removed the cup and saucer from the tray. Gentle, gentle. He lowered the saucer, but the cup rattled when the saucer made contact with the table. Some of the coffee spilled. He immediately ran for several napkins and soaked up the liquid. "Mr...Mr. Sergio, can I talk to you?"

"What the hell is this, kinnygarten? What do you want? Bad enough you're eating the profits with all those napkins."

Sal moved his face right up to the man's. Mr. Sergio had no lips, stained teeth, and his eyes must of fell into the bags underneath them. His suit smelled new, like those hanging on the store racks, not like the suits that had a chance to smell of food yet. "Mr. Sergio, yesterday my father lost a three-thousand-dollar bet. It was a mistake." He had worked up so much spit that when he swallowed, he almost choked. "Can we have the money back? It's all we got in the world. Took eight years to save."

At first Sergio didn't say nothing, just scratched his head. Then he laughed so hard his belly shook making his shirt wave. "Pasquale, besides midgets working for you, you also got comedians. This kid's a fuckin' riot."

He kept on laughing, then stopped when Nunzio Gargano came in. All the men stood up and outdid themselves offering to buy the man whatever the shop had to offer.

Sal had saw Nunzio before. He was reported to be a skillful hit man nicknamed Spar after the assassin, Sparafucile, in that opera, *Rigoletto*, that Toni had told him about.

Spar was tall and skinny. He wore a black hat halfway down his forehead, a black pinstriped suit, and a fat gray satin tie with a pearl

stickpin. Looked more like Mr. Gallo, the undertaker, than a hit man. Maybe they were related.

Spar waved at the men sitting at the other tables before joining Sergio. "What's all the laughin' about?" His voice sounded as if he had a sore throat. "I could use a good laugh myself."

Sergio pointed to Sal. "You see this here kid? His old man dropped three grand on a horse yesterday and this kid asked for the money back!"

"No shit. But I got to give him credit for askin', he's got a good pair of balls for his age."

Spar gave Sal the once-over, then yawned. "I'm tired. Need a cup of coffee, the kind that grows hair on your chest."

"You got it, Spar." Sergio snapped his fingers. "Hey, kid, start earning the three grand by bringing this gentleman a cup of coffee. Strong."

Sal did as told. When the men finished, they tipped him a quarter each. Wow. More than double the price of the coffee.

Sergio made some phone calls while Spar sat at the table, staring at Sal. "Kid, how much longer you workin'?"

"Me? I finished already, was just helping out. I'm going home now."

"Yeah? Where do you live?"

"Two blocks from here."

"Want a ride home?"

"Sure, ready when you are."

"Let's go." Spar gulped down the rest of his coffee.

Sal took his time walking around Spar's Packard. How would his mother like to ride in a car like this? Biggest whitewalls he ever seen, not a speck on them. After he examined the grill, he ran his hand over the side mount. The shiny door handles reflected the streetlights. Once inside he couldn't believe how smooth and squishy the seats were, how new it smelled, as though it was the first time anyone had opened the door and the inside air rushed out. Even the win-

dows were clear and sparkly. Looked like one of those cars in the news they showed in the movies, the kind of car the King of England rode in.

Mama had warned him never to ask this question, but he asked anyway. "How much does a car like this cost?"

Spar grunted. "None of your fuckin' business, kid with the balls. But I like you, remind me of when I was a kid, so I'll tell you. You see, I used to have the 1939 convertible, the 120. Didn't keep it too long. Not for me, more for kids or big guys who want to act like kids. So I just got this 1940 cap, cab, cabriolet, the 180. This baby's all-weather, more expensive. Cost \$1175."

Holy bananas. Papa could've had two of these cars, and then some! Imagine losing two of these beauties with more than six hundred bucks left over. Oh, Papa.

After they pulled away from the curb, Spar said, "What happened with the money?"

"My mother and father worked eight years to save it. Three thousand dollars." He bit his lower lip. "Then my father lost it, lost it all. On a horse." He remembered what his mother had said. "Eight years of doing without, and my father lost all of it. In a few minutes."

"Them are the breaks. So what are you gonna do, kid? By the way, what's your name?"

"Sal."

"What are you gonna do, Sal?"

"I got to get a job."

"How old are you?"

"Almost nine. I asked Mr. Sergio for the money back but he wouldn't do it." Sal wiped his nose on his sleeve. "It's just not fair."

With a sudden jerk, Spar swerved the wheel to the right while jamming his foot on the brake. The car screeched to such a short stop that Sal's head banged against the dashboard.

Spar grabbed his shoulders, shook him, pulled him toward him. Sal hadn't never been so close to eyes this black. They looked like those pitted olives that watched him from inside the jar.

"Kid. Sal. I'm gonna give you a free education. That stuff they learn you in school, it's all bullshit. Spar's gonna save you time and trouble. This education you'll remember. There's an old sayin'. 'If life was fair, birds wouldn't eat worms.'"

Spar's hands were hurting him and so was his head from the bang, but he didn't dare move. Spar's veins were popping out of his neck. "You make sure, kid, Sal, that in this fuckin' unfair world, you're the bird. Don't forget it, Sal. You gotta be the bird."

Spar twisted Sal's shoulders so that he faced the dashboard. "You see this here car? Belongs to the bird."

Spar let go of him long enough to pull out a pile of cash. "You see this green stuff? Belongs to the bird. Know how he gets it? From the worm. Now you remember, Sal. You gotta be the bird." He dug into Sal shoulders once again, crushed them down toward the seat, then released them.

Sal felt like a Jack-in-the-box. Sprung.

But he could still feel deep into his bones the impression of Spar's fingers.



Spar dropped him off in front of his house. He was sorry the ride home was so short. Could of stayed in that car forever. He took a long last look at the Packard before running into his apartment. The couch was ripped, a spring sticking out through the slipcover with the flowers. He sat on the couch. It felt hard and rough. Nothing in the house was made of leather. In the kitchen, the faucet was dull. Tiny black dots, green stains on the sink, even though his mother always scrubbed it with Bab-O. Cracks in the cloudy window and a hole in it, too. Looked like somebody had shot a BB-gun at it.

Sal set the dollar and a half on the kitchen table before going into his bedroom. Joey was doing his homework on the bed and Sal made believe he was getting ready to do some, too.

He heard his parents come home. They must of noticed the cash on the table right away.

"Where this come from?" Mama's voice.

"I no know."

"What you mean you no know? Who else could of...?"

Footsteps. Getting closer.

She entered their room holding up the dollar and two quarters. "Where this come from?"

Joey spoke first. "I don't have that much money."

"I don't neither," Sal said.

"Well, did the Holy Ghost bring it?" His mother stared at him so long he put his head down. She moved closer, then pulled his ear. "Where you get this?"

"I got a job."

"Really now, eight years old and no working papers, but you got a job? How stupid you think I am? Now where you get the money?"

"I...I helped serve some coffee at Zucca's and got some tips."

His mother rattled her head, raised her voice. "I no want you hanging around that shop with those no-good bums. Those people all trouble, they get you in trouble. You understand?"

She lifted her arm.

He ducked, covered his head. "I just wanted to help the family out because Papa lost all our money."

She dropped her arm, then pulled him close. She cried so hard it made him cry, too.

When they both stopped, she wiped the tears off his cheeks with her thumbs and smoothed his hair. "Mama can work. She start all over again. She no need no help, especially from those bums. Now you keep away from them."

Sal stared at his mother. Her face had lines he never seen before, her cheeks had no color. He could feel his eyelids begin to hang the same way his mother's did. Her grinding her teeth made his stomach crawl into his chest. He wanted to cry again but stopped it by sucking in his lips.

It wasn't fair what had happened to her. But it wasn't going to happen to her no more, and it wasn't never going to happen to him, neither.

He was going to be the bird.

CHAPTER 3



Joseph was studying the New York University catalog at the kitchen table where he could relax, and read while enjoying something to nibble on at the same time. If he ate in the living room and dropped crumbs on the floor, his mother would never let him hear the end of it.

Science, math. He wasn't interested in them. History might be a possibility, even sociology. He kept going back to psychology. Good with people. They always shared confidences with him, sought his advice. He was an effective debater, head of the debating team, and a great speaker. His coach told him he could speak so convincingly that he should be a politician. Whatever, he still had time to choose a major and consider other universities. Like most of the other first generation Italian-Americans to go to college, he'd have to work to pay his tuition, and live at home.

All the concentrating on college made him hungry again, even though they had already had their big Sunday dinner. He was just about to open the icebox when his mother ran into the kitchen, lifted her skirt and covered herself with it. "There going to be war. I heard his voice, President Roosevelt, on the radio. Oh dear God, a war."

Joseph kissed her forehead before hugging her. "They've been saying that for two years now. Stop worrying, worrying is useless."

"But this no the same. The Japanese, they attack Pearl Harbor." She dropped her skirt. "Pearl Harbor. Where's that?"

"In Hawaii."

Joseph stormed into the living room and listened to the report. A lot of static sputtered from the radio. He kept shaking it, turning it, adjusting the dial.

His mother followed him. "What you think?"

"I think you shouldn't worry. We have to wait and see what happens."

Joseph shook his head, tightened his lips when he saw his mother massaging both the cross and the horn she never removed from her neck.

"Just now there be war," she said. "They take young men just now when you going to graduate high school, go to college. All the money I spent for Brooklyn Prep. My dreams, for what?" She plopped on the couch, then got up abruptly to shield him with her outstretched arms. "I no let you go."

"Nobody's going anywhere, Mama, will you relax, take it easy?" But as he said those words, he let the NYU catalog slide to the floor. Later he'd dump it in the garbage. If he survived the war, by then the catalog would be different anyway.

"I no let you go. You Papa keep losing jobs and you brother, he's impossible, always with those bums. He need a strong man like you here. You no can go."

"Think of it this way. If they take young men into a war, Papa'll have more jobs than he needs. And Sal, he'll grow up and realize he has to have an education to make a living."

"I no know, Joseph, I no know."



Sal slammed his books on the floor. "If I got to spend one more fuckin' day in fuckin' school, I'll go out of my fuckin' mind."

Bruno picked up the books and put them on the table but Sal threw them on the floor again.

"Since when do you curse? Take it easy, Sal, I hate school, too."

"Accede, precede, supersede, recede. Who the hell do you know ever uses those words? Who cares about erosion, eclipses, earthquakes, faults? And those jerks we read about who live in the country and suburbs, who knows anybody like that?"

"What's a suburb?"

"I want to read stories about people from Brooklyn. Bet they don't write stories about, don't care about people like us. Only those English snobs." He pushed up his nose with two fingers. "But just you wait, you'll see who's rich some day. And when I get there, I'll take you with me, pal."

"If anybody's going to make it, Sal, it's you. I saw that Phil Marconi give you a quarter to do his algebra homework, and you did it in five minutes flat. At that rate you can make..."

"Three bucks an hour, almost as good as I make on the numbers. Yeah, Phil got a hundred on his homework, too." Sal laughed, struck the table with one hand. "Even put some problems on the board. Teacher told'im he's a brain, he's going places."

"Do you think he'll tell Sister Mary Martha you did the work? I mean, she may figure it out why he always gets a hundred on his homework and fails all his tests the days you're absent."

"Don't be stupid, Bruno. If he does, he'll have to say I do all his work for him. Then she'll find out about the other kids, too." He scratched his chin. "That Phil's got money. His father owns a bread store, makes a lot of bread, a lot of bread. He's going places, all right. To the bread store, if he can learn to count change. Then I'll shake him down."

"But if you don't stop flunking all your tests, Sal, they're going to throw you out."

"Bingo. What do you think I'm trying to do, Mr. Genius? I don't want to go to school at all but if I have to, I want to go to public school with all my friends."

"Got a lot of girls there, in the same class, too."

"Lock'em up here, like us guys are poison."

Bruno checked his watch. "Let's get going. Time to pick up the bets."

"You get started, I'll catch up with you. Got to go to the drug store."

"What for?"

"To buy my mother a present."

"Again?"



Sal had finally hit the jackpot. A little over six months at St. Michael's High School and Father Hennessey had to send for his mother. Failed all his tests, easy stuff he could of passed with his eyes closed. He was going to be expelled. When Bruno heard about it, he told Sal he would make sure he'd be expelled, too.

Sal's friends in public school pushed and shoved each other trying to show him around the building. He examined the outside of the school. What was missing was GIRLS etched in concrete on one side of the building and BOYS on the other.

The only thing he regretted about leaving Catholic school was not wearing a uniform. In public school some kids had better clothes than his hand-me-downs passed among the neighbors.

At the beginning of his first social studies class, the teacher introduced him as the new kid. With everybody staring at him, he was embarrassed but forced his chin up.

Right after class Cammillo Troiano ran up to him, panting. "So what did you think of her?"

"Of who?"

“Theresa Petrillo, jerk, you had to notice her, the one with the big knockers.”

“I didn’t notice nothing, I was too busy getting my stuff together and trying to figure out what’s going on. Don’t forget, it’s the middle of the term.”

“Jee, Sal, what’s the matter with you? Since when do you pay attention in school? Save attention for important things. Theresa’s the pretty one with the kind of round face, black silky hair, dark eyes, hair always falling over one of them. Just like Veronica Lake.”

“Sorry, didn’t see her.”

“Well, she saw you. Kept looking over at you.”

“Point her out to me tomorrow, I’ll check her out.”

“I won’t have to point her out. Can’t miss her, Sal.” Cammillo opened his hands and held them about a foot from his chest. “The biggest knockers you ever seen.”

“I’ll ask Bruno if he noticed her. By the way, how long you think I got to wait to cut classes, two weeks, three?”

“Give it a month. We got lots of kids taking turns cutting school to go to Coney Island or the movies.”

“Maybe I’ll wait that long.”



The next day, a girl leaned in front of his locker. “Hi, Sal. You’re the new kid, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, how did you know my name?”

Mr. Lutz introduced you yesterday, don’t you remember? Or were you too nervous to remember?”

“Nervous, me? Sal Esposito nervous about school?” He flexed both arms. “The only thing that makes me nervous is how I can’t wait to get out.”

“Me, too.” Her hair was covering one eye, just like Cammillo said. She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I’m going to beautician school. Before I came here, they said at St. Anne’s I had a good

vocabulary and was good in math. My parents don't think math is for girls, they want me to be a beautician. What're you going to be?"

"Rich. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Theresa, Theresa Petrillo."

"I know someone named Petrillo. Steve, maybe nineteen. Is he related?"

"No, but I have a nineteen-year-old brother, Carl. He's in the army."

"Who isn't? My brother's in the army, too."

"Where?"

"Italy." His eyes moved toward the wall. "And I really worry about him a lot." He turned back to Theresa. "But don't tell nobody I said that."

"I won't. My brother's in Italy, maybe they know each other."

"Maybe."

The bell rang. Theresa bent down to pick up her books. For the first time Sal looked straight at her. Cammillo was right, those were some knockers.

Every day Theresa sat next to Sal, and every day she wore a different perfume. One day she was a gardenia, another, a lilac. He decided to toy with her, though aroused by just thinking of the porno pictures the guys displayed at the club. Theresa could of been a star in those pictures.

But he had already learned to be disciplined. The key to getting what he wanted was patience.



Eugenio stopped in the third bar that afternoon. Lost his job again. Couldn't concentrate on work no more. The foreman said his work was sloppy, wouldn't recommend him to another factory. A woman would replace him because men were hard to find. Replaced by a woman. Such a disgrace.

What would he tell Domenica? She was already so edgy with Joseph overseas. And still so ashamed that the principal, Father Hennessy, had to call her into his office to tell her he was throwing Sal out of St. Michael's.

The words she said to him when he lost the three thousand dollars were always stuck in his head. "God take Rosa's husband. I wish instead He take you."

Another drink would make him forget what she said.

He still had some money left in his envelope, and since it would be his last, he decided to splurge. A new suit would make him feel good. His hands couldn't be steady enough on the sewing machine so he couldn't make a suit for himself. He'd have to buy one. After he had just one more drink. Or two.

The clock on top of the bar clicked to four-thirty. Still more than an hour to shop for his suit. Just one more shot of whiskey to clear his head. He grasped the edge of the bar, clung to it all the way until he reached the door. There, across the street. Men's suits in the window. Was the one in the front dark blue or black? He couldn't see clear.

He hobbled along the sidewalk, holding on to cars parked along the busy street, waiting for the traffic to slow down. While he waited, he noticed himself in the glass of a car window. What had he become? What had he ever been? No future for him now except depending on his wife. Always depending on his wife. Should of been the man of the house like all his friends, but in his family Domenica always had to be in charge. What kind of man could be so weak his wife always had to tell him what to do? He couldn't look at himself no more.

He'd buy the suit now. It would make him feel better for a while, cover him up on the outside, maybe on the inside, too.

He needed another drink.

"God take Rosa's husband. I wish instead He take you." Domenica's voice was ringing in his ears. He clasped his arms over his head.

Had to cross the street. Get another drink. Cross the street.

A break in the traffic. He could go now. But he was dizzy.

He stepped off the curb. A car coming fast. He couldn't go backwards fast enough. Or maybe better it hit him. No make no difference whether he lived or...



About an hour before sunset, Joseph Esposito walked along a dirt road on the outskirts of Palermo. He needed to be by himself, away from the barracks. In the distance he could see three young girls walking in his direction. The way they were swinging their hips, giving shape to their shapeless dresses, their flesh bouncing carelessly beneath their underwear. If they were wearing any underwear at all.

The girl in the middle, he recognized her. Cecilia. Named after the patron saint of music. Melodies, passionate melodies pulsed through the air when he looked at her. He had spent the night with her once. When she got closer, she passed without acknowledging him. All American GIs probably looked the same in uniform, especially in the dark.

Maybe if he called after her, offered her a chocolate bar, she'd spend time with him again. He needed to be close to someone, desperately, particularly now. The wind surged across his face, taking his breath away.

Odd.

Summer was the time for the sirocco, not March. And today was a clear, cool day. Yet those winds wouldn't stop following him, pushing him around.

He continued past peeling stucco houses with slanted Spanish tile roofs. The houses were barely standing, and with all the bombing it was a wonder they were standing at all, hadn't been pulverized.

In burnt fields that were remnants of olive groves, children were playing kickball. He enjoyed watching them. A tall boy was teaching a small girl how to kick. She looked up at him, possibly her older

brother, adoringly. Some day he would have a family like these kids. Then the wind started up again, whirling all around him. It blew dirt across his face, scraping his cheek, scratching his eyes. Where was this wind coming from?

Perched on a cliff was a huge dilapidated house. He climbed to the top of the cliff, walked through the mosaic-covered arches that were left. Knocked over, cracked Corinthian columns lined the ground, almost like railroad tracks. He followed them. They led to a magnificent view of the Tyrrhenian Sea. This house had to be the most glorious of its day. Who once owned it, still owned it? He'd have a house like this on a bluff on the north shore of Long Island, overlooking the sound. Or when the war was over, he'd come back and buy this one, restore it, and live like a king.

That damn wind. Blustery. Howling. Blocking his view of the house by blowing dirt in his eyes. He could have sworn he heard the wind say, "Jo-seph...Jo-seph." The weirdest feeling he ever had.

He didn't even hear the jeep coming until a horn blasting a punctuated rhythm attacked him from the rear. He sprinted out of the way. The pebbles stopped rolling in the jeep's wake and the dust settled, much of it in his hair.

He took the letter out of his pocket, unfolded it, refolded it. He'd read it dozens of times, knew it by heart. No point in opening it again.



March 7, 1944

Dear Joseph,

We all miss you. We know you no can come home for you Papa's funeral even though me and Sal, we need you. You got to be strong soldier and fight hard for all of us. I still no know if that car hit you father or if he walk into it on purpose. Lately he no seem to care about nothing, just keep talking to himself saying he disappoint his family. I no know if he give me all his money with his new jobs or keep

some for gambling. Most of time he drink too much anyway. I think he stop gambling and start drinking. Same sickness. Pray for him. I no can wait till you come home. Sal going to get in trouble if he no have no man here. We need you. I send you more packages and I write again next week. No worry you fight against you own blood. You American first. We love you. I love you. Everybody here good. I pray for you every day that the war end soon and you come home to us.

Mama

Joseph sat by a small pond and wept. He shaped the letter into a sailboat, let it drop into the water so he could watch it float like the others he had made out of newspapers which drifted away in large street streams after heavy rain or in the little lake in Prospect Park. He dipped his hand into the pond, spread water over his face and neck to wash away the dirt. He prayed for his father who had always seemed to be searching for something.

A rock he had disturbed with his boot rolled into the pond, making a ripple. When the ripple smoothed, Joseph looked into the water and saw his father. Curly dark hair like his, temporarily gray from the dust left by the jeep, blue eyes, the same shaped nose, straight but with cartilage that curved down, both the same height.

Joseph liked the way he looked, but he didn't want to see himself in his father's image. He had spent a lot of time thinking about the craziness of war, the egos of the Pattons and Montgomerys, the killing he was engaged in. Worst was the killing of relatives and *paesani* in the old world.

What was it all about? Why was he on this earth, and how could he make a difference? Then, that annoying wind again calling him, "Jo-seph, Jo-seph."

In the barracks that evening he searched for something to read. All he had were bunches of letters from home he had already read several times. He went through some of his sleeping buddies' duffel bags. Only one book in all the bags. Had to be pretty hard-up to read it. The life of St. Alphonsus Liguori, founder of the Redemptorists,

the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, the order of preachers. Boring as all shit.

He yawned, picked up the book, and read until he fell asleep. The next day he read some more, and thought about what he read. On the third day he finished the biography then reread it over the next several days.

By the time VJ-Day had arrived, those strange winds that had been following him, coming consistently out-of-season, calling him by name, had finally died down, and their message had become clear. He would enter the seminary and make use of those speaking skills he was given by becoming a Redemptorist priest.

His mother jumped up and down when he told her. "It's wonderful, Joseph, the answer to my prayers. I make so many novenas to St. Joseph, you patron saint, to keep you safe. A dozen candles a week, maybe more."

"I thought you'd feel bad that after being away so many years I have to leave you again."

"I wish you no have to go so soon. You brother so smart they skip him in Catholic school in the second grade. After that he do bad. Now he no do good, even in public school. And he always hang around those gangsters. Please, Joseph, talk to him. He say he quit school when he's sixteen."

"I'll talk to him the first chance I get."



The opportunity came the following Saturday after Joseph waited up for Sal until three in the morning. Where the hell did the kid go all night? He was drawn and pale. His waist too thin, with a belt that had to be made tighter by adding extra holes, uneven ones at that, probably punctured with a knife or a nail.

"Mama tells me you're going to quit school when you're sixteen."

Sal looked through the clothes in his dresser drawer instead of at him. "Yeah, what of it?"

So ignoring him was going to be his tactic. "That would be a big mistake, Sal. You're not going to do it."

Sal kicked his drawer shut. "I'm sick of you and hearing about you. All my life everybody said, 'You look just like your brother. Are you going to be as good as Joseph, smart as Joseph? Your brother wouldn't do this, your brother wouldn't do that.' I'm fed up being compared to you. And just because you think you're a big war hero, don't think you can go around giving everybody orders."

"This has nothing to do with orders. It's about your life and where it's headed. Sal, you're a smart kid, were even skipped, have a higher I.Q. than mine. I checked the records when I worked in the school office. You can be anything you want, a professional, even a doctor."

"A doctor. You know how long it takes to be a doctor? About ten years. And Mama works hard enough now. I already make enough money to take care of her so she don't have to work no more, and I can buy her nice things."

Typical teenage know-it-all. Used to be the same way. "Mama doesn't want you to buy her nice things, she wants you to stay in school."

"She don't know no better. And I'm going places. You said I'm smart, you bet I am, I'm headed for the top."

"The top of what, Sal, that pile of crap? I'll never understand how you can associate with that swill, that garbage. And believe me when I tell you..." He sat on the bed. With his finger he made a slow deep and deliberate indentation across the red chenille bed cover. "This is your line in the sand. You'd better take a strong stand, know which side you're on. If you pick that bunch of rot, it's being very shortsighted. It might look good now but it can backfire on you. You can get killed, go to prison. And I can guarantee you, you'll live to regret it."

Sal stared at the bed. "You can't understand how I can hang around my friends, and I'll never understand how you've chose a life of nothing, getting your jollies when some widow makes you a

ricotta pie on Easter. Even more I can't understand how you can live a life without women."

Cecilia.

The way she swayed her hips.

Was she married yet? He'd never know. Especially now. "Do you ever think of Mama and Papa, the hopes they had and Mama still has for you? She's always saying you're smart enough to be President of the United States."

"Pipe dreams. And sure I think of Mama and Papa, think about them all the time. Don't want to be like them, always controlled by powerful people. I'm going to be the one pulling the strings. Got that straight? Nobody, nobody is ever going to tell me what to do, including you."

What a little turd. Even that was too good a description for him. How he wanted to slug him, clobber his head, as his father should've done. Just once. Rattle his brains so they'd settle into common sense.

Sal looked into the dresser mirror. He filled his lungs with air, extended his arms sideways, and flapped them. "I'm going to be the bird."

The bird? Probably the nickname of that hood with the hooked nose. What a role model! He continued the conversation in the mirror. Might as well start practicing a more priestly approach. "The gospel says that he who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword."

His brother remained silent.

"Sal, don't you know the difference between good and evil, right and wrong? Aren't you concerned about spending eternity in hell?"

"Hell don't concern me. And if you were so honest, how come you looked up I.Q.s in office files?" Sal turned away from the mirror and faced him. "Hell's something powerful people made up to control you, keep their power. Besides, I seen Mama and Papa go through hell right here on earth. That hell I already know. There may not even be the other one, and people accept their miserable lives because they're scared of it. Even you're scared of it, that's why you're

going to hide in the priesthood. But not me, I only know what's here. And I'm going to get more than my share of it and worry about hell later."

Well, wasn't the kid cocky, invulnerable, immortal. Joseph sighed. What was the use? In his first attempt at being a preacher, he was already a failure.

Sal put his nose right up to his. "And, as long as you're going to quote the gospel, if I repent when I'm older, won't the big guy let me into heaven? Isn't there all that joy in heaven over one sinner who repents more than over the ninety-nine who were always good? Think of all the joy I'll bring. Probably more than you, Joey." Sal folded his arms and let out a roaring laugh. "All that goddam joy."



Sal and Bruno tried to hitch a ride to Bensonhurst from the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It was the kind of sunny, crisp day that made Sal believe he could do anything. Fly. Walk on water.

"Jee, Toni was great," Bruno said. "I hope she's going to make it. And it's just like her to introduce new talent."

"Yeah, especially that redhead." Just thinking about her made him feel flush all over.

"Will you stop talking about her? Enough already."

"Enough with the enough already. You spending too much time at Nathan's? She was wonderful. When she sang 'Wanting You', she was singing only to me. She wants me, did you hear her? I could feel it." He began singing, "Wanting me, every day she is wanting me, da-da-da she is longing to hold me close to her eager breast." He stopped dreamily. "I got to get the sheet music, learn the words to that song." He gripped Bruno's arm. "And when I ran up to the stage to clap, she blew me a kiss."

"She didn't blow you no kiss, she sent it to the audience."

“Ah, shut up. You never see nothing, Dumbo. And when she kissed me, she looked right at me. And what eyes she’s got, same color as her hair. I’ll never forget those eyes. Never.”

“What was her name again?” Bruno pulled the program out of his pocket.

“Diane Pinto. Some day she’ll sing in the opera and I’ll be her biggest fan.” Sal closed his eyes and put his arms straight out. “Help me around the neighborhood, Bruno, before we go to the club. I want to make believe I’m blind and think about her, see those eyes. Diane Pinto.”

“Get her out of your head, Sal. We got plenty of important things to take care of today, let’s not wait too long.”

“Long. Yes, I long for her.”

“You’ll never see her again, so get off of it. This is no time to think about broads, fill your head with stuff that counts. Things are going good, you take care of families of guys in trouble, and they even have you arranging meetings. You may be up for a promotion.”

“Bruno, you ever been in love?”

“No, and neither’ve you. Let’s get to the club.” He bent his thumb by a passing car.

Sal smacked him in the head. “You got no romance. And you’re cheap, too. Wouldn’t even give a buck to that kid who shines shoes in front of the Academy until I forced you. Don’t ever forget what it’s like to be poor. You know, Bruno, I don’t know why I bother with you.”

“Because we been together since we were kids, and we both like the opera. And when you make it big, I’m going to be your driver.”

“You mean my chauffeur. That sounds good, don’t it?”



They arrived at the social club. Sal passed through the faded green and white-striped canvas canopy that covered the entrance. Inside, backs of chairs with missing or broken slats, Coca-Cola chairs worn

through the finish, discarded tables that would easily give splinters, cinder block walls that needed repair and paint, burned out fluorescent tubes, exposed pipes—none of it reflecting the amount of money accumulated from their business transactions.

Sal went into his office, and closed the door. Had to get away from the crazies, get away from the smoke.

He'd furnished his office in a way that clearly said who was in charge. Even though he wasn't officially recognized, he was now managing activities as the others shot pool, ran numbers, played cards, and collected debts.

On the wall were two plaques, one to the left, the other to the right of his desk. The plaque on the left had etched in marble the mob's version of the golden rule. "Remember the golden rule. Whoever has the gold makes the rules."

The plaque to the right contained the Sal Esposito version of Luke's gospel. "Do unto others before they do unto you."

Against the wall was a chest, which held a record player. In those deep drawers he hoarded piles of opera recordings and photographs of nude, large-breasted women.

Sal took out the pictures, and thought about Theresa. Some day he would set her up in her own business and he'd use her as his mistress.

For a wife he had bigger plans than damaged goods.



Sal gathered the pictures and shoved them back into the drawer when Frankie Nine barged into the office, out of breath. "You, you hear about the Ventresca brothers?"

That lob, Frankie Nine. Of all the wannabes, he was the dumbest and most annoying. Swellheaded with nothing in the head, always had some cock and bull story. Would rat on anyone to feel important. "Now what?" Sal said. "And if you know what's good for you,

you'd better learn what knock means. Now go out again and do it right."

Frankie went outside, closed the door, and knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Come on, Sal, you know who it is. Frankie Nine. Frankie La Rocca."

Sal whistled "Wanting You" for a full minute while examining his fingernails. That guy, Sigmund Romberg. He wasn't Italian, but he sure knew how to write a song. "Come in."

"They're in the hospital, the Ventrescas. Word's out they robbed the poor boxes in the church." Frankie threw himself into a chair.

"I didn't give you no permission to sit. Stand up, report to me what you got, then get out."

Frankie stood up. "The story is that Enzo Capretta and his boys beat them up and dumped them in front of the altar. We heard that Father Piccione gave them the last rites, they were so bad."

"Enzo Capretta? That zero who thinks he's going to be a hit man?"

"Yeah, real tough, but he's real religious, big cross around his neck, and Jeez, robbing the poor boxes? That's bad."

"That's bad all right." What would he do if he'd caught the Ventrescas? "Anything else you got to tell me so I can get you out of my sight?"

Frankie started to answer, but Bruno walked into the office. "Hey, Frankie, what the hell's the matter with you? You look beat. Didn't you get no sleep last night?"

"Not much. This morning I had to jerk off twice to get my heart started."

"Always good for starters." Bruno parked himself in one of the chairs.

Frankie opened his mouth, closed it. He looked like he was waiting for him to tell Bruno to get out of the chair, too.

Sal didn't.

“Dino finished washing all the cars and’s picking up the laundry,” Frankie continued, about to sit down again when Sal gave him the eye. “And the fuck said he’d bring some sandwiches about six.”

“Watch your mouth, Frankie. I don’t like cursing. Now which one’s Dino?”

“The one who’s always holding his joint, a different hooker on his arm every night.”

“Yeah, I know who he is.” So many wild, loud, showy, girl-crazy tough guys satisfied doing simple chores. More zeroes, zips, with no smarts, no discipline. “Is that it?”

“Guy D’Ambrosio’s picking up everybody’s tab at the restaurant again. Thinks if he acts like a big shot, he’ll get made.”

Bruno leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “Don’t that redheaded hand-job know he’ll never get nowhere in the organization? Nobody trusts redheads, and nobody should. That’s what they get for invading Sicily.”

Sal shoved his desk out and stood up. “Get the hell out of here, Frankie. Scram. And Bruno,” he rushed up to him, pulled him out of the chair by his tie, then socked his chest, “watch what you say about redheads.”

Frankie Nine left.

Sal adjusted his desk then sat down again. “What’s with that nut case?”

“He’s a hard-on.”

Sal lifted his hand. “Please, Bruno, that would raise him too high a level. He’s not a hard-on, he’s a dick. Keeps his brains in his jock strap. Thinks he’s going to make it being a snitch.”

“Oh, no, Sal, you won’t believe it. He’s got a library on explosives, thinks he’s going to get in the organization because he’s an expert on blowing things up.”

“Nobody that crazy ever gets in. But maybe we can use him as an independent contractor, to blow up a safe, maybe a door or something.” He tapped his fingers against his cheek. “Nah, he’s too nutty,

can't trust him to keep his mouth shut. And the next time you see him, remind him I don't like cursing. Now I got work to do, so you get the hell out of here, too."

After Bruno left, Sal opened the drawer and dug out a record. Luisa Tetrazzini singing, "*Caro nome*." Dear name. Dearest name. He carefully lowered the needle onto the record before flipping the turntable switch. He had learned to do it that way so the record wouldn't get scratched. He adjusted the volume, listened for a while, then looked outside. Didn't know why. The window had been bricked over a long time ago. A mason who owed them money. Now if Pellegrino would only miss a few payments on his furniture store, they could really decorate the dump. Also, had to get an electrician to fix that fan. Easy. Maybe he'd do it himself.

Sal picked up some of the papers on his desk, then put them down. Before he picked them up again, he looked at the ceiling fan that kept thumping and thumping. Her dearest name, thumping and thumping.

Diane.

"*Caro nome*."



Sal picked up the phone to dial 411. "Brooklyn Academy of Music." As soon as he got the number, he called the Academy.

Next week. The entire production of *The New Moon*, not just excerpts from different Romberg operettas. The same performance for three consecutive Saturdays, all matinees. Diane Pinto in the leading female role.

The following Saturday he took a bus to the Academy. Without Bruno. Sal stood on line outside the box office and bought a ticket for the available seat closest to the stage. When he got his seat it wasn't close enough so he scurried to the front row, pulled a startled woman out of her center seat, shoved ten bucks into her hand, and ordered her to exchange seats.

He rocked his right foot back and forth, up and down, sideways again, dug his heel into the floor, while biting the program until the curtain rose.

He waited. Diane Pinto appeared on the stage. Gravity disappeared, the atmosphere along with it. Air gushed from his lungs. He levitated out of his seat, floated over her, dazzled by her eyes, moon-lit skin, the one red curl that had slipped out of her platinum, 1792-style costume wig, the heart penciled onto her cheek.

When she sang, "One Kiss," he was intoxicated into stillness. Only his lips puckered.

"But I will try to love only one man," she caroled, "and no other man in the world." She carried "the" as high as the score would allow, taking the liberty of holding the note a full five seconds. Her voice floated into his brain. He would be the man, the only man she would ever love.

During intermission he kept looking at his watch, air filling his lungs only when the performance continued. Like a zombie, he followed her movements on the stage.

She took a final bow, planted a kiss on the palm of her hand, and blew the imprint across the orchestra. His head followed the kiss. A young man not too far from him caught it, pressed it to his lips. Sal almost went for the guy's Adam's apple. But more important, he couldn't be distracted one second, couldn't look away. Had to save his eyes for Diane. He turned to the stage again. She was still there, smiling, then bowing, blowing kisses to the standing applauding audience. He yelled so loud his voice turned hoarse. He envied the curtain that draped around her.

He pushed his way through the crowd to the stage door. Ten minutes was a lifetime until the cast started to dribble out. Every time the door began to open, he yanked the knob, pulling the door wide open.

A little later she came out, surrounded by at least a dozen people.

"Diane," a man's voice reached over the crowd.

She turned in the direction of the voice. "Bye, see you next week, Charlie." Her speaking voice was like vintage wine. Her smile made his internal organs fuse together. The way she moved made him think a gazelle should go home and practice some more.

Then she was whisked away into an idling bus. He ran after her only to be greeted by a slamming door, which signaled the bus to streak away, leaving him standing in a mist of exhaust fumes.

See you next week, Charlie. Her voice was stamped into his brain. The way she pronounced the 'r' in Charlie meant she couldn't live anywhere near New York, damn it.

Charlie. The clue to finding her.

He ripped the pages out of the program. Only two Charlies there. One a makeup artist, the other a lighting technician.

The next week he searched them out, but nothing useful panned out. Both over forty. No competition, just regular working guys who knew only that the troupe would be back on Saturday.

Sal planned the next performance of *The New Moon* very careful. Each morning of the next week he crossed off that day on his calendar, becoming increasingly excited by the shrinking space till Saturday. On that day he borrowed a car from Gaetano Bova, the undertaker. Sal placed on the front passenger seat the old-fashioned bouquet the florist created by special order. Pink rosebuds mixed with baby's breath, surrounded by a white lace doily. Pink and white satin ribbons. He would bribe a cop to leave the car parked in front of the stage door. All the way up Atlantic Avenue he rehearsed what he would say when she came out of the theater. On his hands and knees he'd beg her to have dinner with him. She'd be suspicious at first, but he would sway her.

Why couldn't he keep his mind on the road? He had made a wrong turn. Might be late, wouldn't get a seat. He began driving faster, but didn't want to get stopped by a cop, especially in a car that wasn't his. Would make him even later than he might already be.

One more traffic light before the Academy. He squeezed into a spot as close to the stage door as he could find before scrambling for the box office.

Closed.

Was the performance sold out? He should of came during the week to get a ticket. But then, a sign pasted diagonally across the playbill smacked him.

Cancelled.

Cancelled?

A middle-aged man in a green plaid shirt, dusty corduroys, and tarred boots kept sweeping the sidewalk, swinging his arms in one direction in a steady motion. Sal ran up to him, and grabbed him by the collar. "Know anything about this?" He pointed to the sign.

"If you take your hands off me, I'll tell you," he grumbled, brushing his collar as soon as Sal let go. "Polio. Some of the cast came down with the disease. Had to cancel the rest of the season."

He was about to reach for the man's collar again, but hesitated. Could Diane have caught the disease? She might end up with braces on her legs, like FDR. When he was President, he couldn't stand up to give a speech. She wouldn't be able to stand up to sing. She'd need a wheelchair. He would pick her up, carry her in his arms, help her with the crutches, take her himself to Warm Springs, wherever that was. "Which ones got polio?"

"Don't know, it's awful. They're all only high school and college kids." He shook his sagging head.

Had to find the nearest pay phone. There, mid-way down the street.

He filtered through his pocket for change, made the call.

A busy signal. Damn those bookies.

He tried again. Four rings, five. Why wasn't she...?

Then Toni answered.

He pumped her brain. The producers of the operetta were in debt, had gone bankrupt, and disappeared earlier that week when the

show was cancelled. Toni had no way of tracing them, or any members of the troupe. The only other information she had was that several of the cast had already died.

Died.

Jesus Christ, what if Diane was one of them? That smile, that skin, those eyes, buried in the earth. Her voice silenced forever.

His heart splintered into a thousand pieces. Tears pelleted down his cheeks. His eyes were so misty he could only feel his way back to the car.

Slowly he drove back to the social club. He wandered into his office, fell into his desk chair, then reached for his handkerchief to rub away whatever tears had not been drained from him. Out with his handkerchief came his penknife. He manipulated his fingers around it, opened it, and carved into the top of his desk, Diane Pinto.

After he stared at the name for a while, hope suddenly resurrected inside of him. Why did he always think, believe the worst? What if she was alive?

If she was, some day he'd find her.



Frankie La Rocca was the last child in a family of eight and the first male. His sisters catered to his every whim. His mother's life revolved around him, which was fine with him until he went to school.

She often embarrassed him. With a soft-boiled egg in one hand and a spoon in the other, she'd chase him through the streets trying to get him to eat. As he darted in and out of traffic, his mother would yell a version of, "Frankie, you son of a bitch, you lousy bastard, you should get hit by a truck, God forgive me."

As he grew older, his mother checked his penis every day to make sure it was growing. Soon, he began checking it himself, massaging it to help its development along.

He loved playing with fire. When he was younger, he played with matches, set fires in playgrounds, hallways—anywhere there were papers or a pile of rubble. Before long he graduated to explosives.

Each year, a few weeks before the Fourth of July, Frankie hoarded firecrackers, hid them in his family's apartment in the Bath Beach section of Brooklyn, and sold some. On the big day he was the neighborhood star, running around setting off sparklers, cherry bombs, and ash cans from his collection, wearing a tank shirt that showed all the car tattoos on his arms.

But on July 4, 1947, when Frankie was twenty, one of his cherry bombs didn't go off as planned. He fiddled with it and it blew up, leaving him lucky that only his right index finger, not his entire hand was blown off. From that time on, though, he was known as Frankie Nine—a name he loved calling himself to prove how macho he was.

His parents had sent him to Catholic school, hoping the nuns would straighten him out, but Frankie hated it. In particular, he hated the smart kids the nuns favored. The most favored of all was Tom Flynn, who was not only intelligent and a good athlete, but Irish, too.

Every day, Frankie made it his goal to mess with Tom Flynn. Whenever Tom answered a question right, as he always did, Frankie would mutter loud enough for everyone but the teacher to hear, "Smart ass." Other times, "Fuck Flynn," or "Irish dick."

For the most part, Tom ignored him.

But one day Frankie physically attacked him. Tom struck back by giving him the beating of his life. Not only did Tom get a considerable amount of blood out of him, but he also did it in front of Frankie's friends.

The double insult was more than he could tolerate. He waddled backwards to his apartment, limping, and giving Tom the Italian arm all the way home. "I'll get you, you Irish prick, you son-of-a-bitch bastard fuck. I'll get you, just you wait."

He stopped screaming long enough to spit out some blood.

Yuk. Salty.

“I’ll get you. Just you wait and see, you Irish prick.”

His opportunity to get Tom came during eighth grade graduation. The boys were sitting alphabetically. Tom Flynn next to Brendan Foley. Then came Harrigan, Ianucci, Keane, and finally Frankie La Rocca in the seat on the aisle.

Sister Margaret Mary called Thomas Joseph Flynn to the stage. She handed him the most valued medal of all. General Excellence. The audience’s applause, a thunder.

When Tom returned to his row, Frankie tripped him, sending him smashing to the floor. The only sound that echoed through the auditorium was the ripping of the back seam of Tom’s pants and the clanking of his unleashed medal as it struck the metal foot of one of the seats.

The audience’s applause switched to laughter. Tom picked up his medal with one hand, and keeping the other over the open seam of his pants, returned to his seat.

Frankie laughed the loudest of all.

After the ceremony, Frankie stood outside the auditorium talking to some of his buddies. Someone approached him from the rear and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around to Tom’s punch in the face. Then Tom beat him without mercy.

Frankie fell to the floor. “I’ll get you, you Irish prick.”

Tom kept circling both hands toward his chest. “To get me, you’ve got to get up, you dumb fat duck-footed jerk.”

“Who the fuck are you calling dumb?”

“You, loser.”

“Think you’re hot shit because you got a medal today?”

“They don’t give medals to the least likely to succeed, loser. Now get up. I want to beat the hell out of you.”

“What are you, a tough guy, prick? I dare you to try. I ain’t getting up.”

Tom rapidly stroked his nose in one direction with his thumb.
“Come on, get up. What are you, a loser and a sissy, too?”

“Fuck you.”

“Okay, you had your chance.” Tom kept kicking him as the rest of the guys cheered on.

Frankie staggered to his feet with Tom beating and kicking him all the way up. Tom continued to smash his jaw. Crunch. The blows were so hard that he couldn’t open his mouth to curse. He fell on his forehead.

Crack. Was it the pavement or his head?

All Frankie could think of was he’d get Tom Flynn, some day, somehow.

He wouldn’t forget.

He’d never forgive.

CHAPTER 4



Al Lombardi, a capo in the De Nardo family, visited Sal in his office. Al didn't give his usual cheerful greeting. For once he seemed very serious.

"Sal, need you for a favor. Make you some bucks, too. Big bucks."

He perked up. "Sure, what is it?"

Al leaned over and lowered his voice. "Pay attention. There's gonna be a hit on someone, someone big, at Blackie's Restaurant."

Sal sat up straight in his chair. "Who?"

"Don't ask no questions. All you gotta know is that it's someone big enough to be hit in an important restaurant. It's the way we do it. A final sign of respect and everybody knows someone else is in charge."

A list of possible names went through his head, but he remembered to keep his mouth shut. He couldn't help smiling. "Where do I fit in? Am I next to be in charge?"

"You should know better than to be in such a hurry." Al moved his chair closer. "I know you're smart, so I'm gonna say this only once." He kept looking around while he was talking even though no one else was anywhere within earshot. "On Thursday night you go to Sammy's Hardware Store at eight sharp. You know Sammy, don't you? He's that guy who owed us five grand, and to get out of it, he lets us use his store as a front."

“Yeah, I know him.”

“He’s gonna make believe some guys tried to rob him. It’s really our guys who are gonna fake the robbery. But just in case anybody else shows up at the store at the same time and they chicken out as witnesses, you’ll be our witness. You’ll be a good witness, you ain’t got no record. You make believe you’re shopping for some tools. After the robbery, Sammy’ll call the police. Both of you say the robbers drove away in a black car. And this is the important part.”

Al moved so close Sal could smell his bad breath. “That the car drove in a direction *away* from Blackie’s. We need two people to tell ’em that. When the police go to chase the robbers, it’ll be all clear for Spar to make the hit. Simple?”

Spar. Still in action. Did he still have the Packard? “You’re a genius, Al.”

“Now you be a genius, too, and don’t forget what to do. We’re counting on you.” Al got up and was almost out of the room when he turned around. “And remember, whatever happens, you stick with the plan.”

Al left, and Sal was surprised that they hadn’t shook hands.

Big bucks for an easy job. He couldn’t wait till Thursday to find out how much. Didn’t dare ask. If Al needed him, he’d be ready.



On Thursday night, Sal set his watch with the radio. Just before eight o’clock he went to Sammy’s Hardware Store. He roamed through the aisles picking up a few tools along the way, while Sammy emptied the cash register, leaving only a few bills messed up and out of the cash drawer.

Sammy turned on the radio, and turned the dial till he found someone talking about the Amos ‘n’ Andy show. A few people came in to browse around. Al was right. They looked like people who would chicken out under pressure. Real pussies. He’d be a good witness.

At 8:03, two men wearing masks entered the store, walked up to Sammy. One took out a gun. "This is a stickup. Give us all you got."

Sammy started an argument with them, so good it sounded real.

For the sake of the other customers, Sal decided to get into the act. "Why are you picking on this hard-working guy, why don't you...?" The force of the pistol across his face silenced him. His head was spinning, but he was trying to gather up the energy to hit the robber back.

Then he remembered. These men worked for Al Lombardi.

That didn't seem to matter.

They repeatedly pistol-whipped his face. Blood was leaving his head. Couldn't black out now, he had a job to do. Next, they smashed his stomach and ribs. He took such a severe slam on his chest, he could feel the vibrating bone trying to decide whether or not it should crack. And his diaphragm had a hard time starting to expand and contract again.

When he felt the warmth on his thigh, he tried to keep from completely emptying his bladder right on the floor. What agony! Couldn't believe he was actually shedding tears.

He struggled to his feet during the Pepsodent commercial. "What the hell are...?"

Another smack in the mouth.

"Who do you...?"

This time, a left hook to the jaw.

Down on the floor again.

He tried to get up, but a foot in the stomach met him. He fell backwards; his head struck the ground.

How much money was this job worth? Enough, maybe, to make his mother stop working. If he kept thinking about that, he could handle the pain.

Al's remark, "You stick with the plan," played over and over in his head.

Then his attacker turned to his partner. "Let's go."

Sammy ran out of the store. "Help, help. Hurry up, call the police. Get an ambulance."

People gathered around the store, gaped at Sal, bleeding from the nose and vomiting even more blood, trying to get up, Phillip's-head, slotted screwdrivers, nails rolling on the floor around him, a hammer and wrench near his head.

Sammy phoned the police just about the same time that the person on the radio was describing how Andy frequently said to Amos, "We don't want no trouble with the *police*." Two cars came almost immediately. Sal gasped his story, and Sammy reinforced it. It had all happened so fast. Neither Sammy nor Sal could add more information, but they both agreed that the robbers escaped in a black car.

In severe pain Sal crawled out to point the direction the car took. Nobody knew the make of the car.

Blasting sirens, not coming up for air.

The police were soon in pursuit and an ambulance rushed him to the hospital.

He heard people moving around his room. His eyes were swollen shut and he was barely able to hear their conversation.

"He got such a thrashing they had to put him on the critical list. Internal hemorrhaging, shock. Poor kid."

Probably the cops talking.

"They're saying down the precinct that if there was any connection between this kid's beating and Don Calabrese's assassination, it must've been the robbers who were involved in the plot."

Definitely the cops.

"You should of saw Don Calabrese. When they found that big slob, he was slumped in his booth, his fedora right next to him, with a napkin, a napkin." A laugh. "Neatly tucked under his chin. Some meal he got. Six bullets in the throat."

More laughing.

He could just about think. So it was the last of the big spenders, that old fart, Lucio Calabrese, they were after. A real selfish pig, a

weasel with no heart. Never gave nobody no Christmas presents. Moved out of the neighborhood into a big house. Lost contact with the regulars.

A sharp pain rushed to Sal's head. If this was what it felt like being a bird, thank God he wasn't a worm.

He must of passed out. When he again opened his eyes, it was light out and Bruno was staring at him.

"What time is it?"

"Easy, easy. Don't talk, just take it easy. It's ten o'clock, ten o'clock Sunday."

"Sunday. What happened to Friday and Saturday?" He groaned, but that made the pain even worse.

"Didn't I tell you to keep quiet? Shut up and listen. You got so many tubes twisting and turning in you, you look like one of those fancy rides in Coney Island. Yeah, you look like the Cyclone." Bruno stuck his mouth into Sal's ear. "It was a perfect job. Everybody's pleased. But the word is out, this beating was a test."

Sal squirmed, even though it hurt.

"Relax, pal, they know you're a good manager, but they wanted to see if you could manage fear. The people shopping in the store were also De Nardo's men. They were the backup witnesses, not you, just in case you couldn't handle the beating. Now they know how tough you really are." Bruno looked around the room, his eyes dashing around the walls. "I can't stay long, had to sneak in. Nobody's allowed to visit you. Of course they'll let your mother in."

His mother. How was she? How did she take the news? He didn't want his mother to see him like this. What a stunt.

So this was a test? And the browsers the real witnesses?

Bastards, all of them.

Maybe Joseph was right.

"And I also overheard that you'll get at least two thousand for your part."

No, Joseph was wrong.

Two thousand bucks. For two minutes worth of a beating. More than two thirds of what it took his parents eight years to save. Was it worth it? He would have to...

Too drowsy to think no more.



After being in the hospital eight days, Sal received a surprise visitor.

"Hi there, remember me?"

He opened his eyes to those knockers. Who could forget them? Made watermelons look like raisins. "Sure, from high school. You're name is, uh, Alicia, Patricia, uh, give me a second." He tried to snap his fingers. "That's it. Theresa. Sorry, got such a beating my head's all screwed up. How many years has it been?"

"Too long, that's why I'm here. Told them I was your girlfriend to get in," she said with eyes that flirted. "The whole neighborhood's talking about you, it's all over the newspapers. You're such a hero." She pulled staples off the green paper, unrolled it, then arranged the mixture of red carnations, white and purple mums, that weird flower with pink buds stuck to a stalk, and ferns in the water pitcher provided for patients.

"Oh, that was nice of you. Flowers make me feel peaceful...or dead." Instead of looking at the flowers, he was looking at her dress—gray, a turtleneck, with sleeves that covered her arms down to her wrists.

"Jee, Sal, I was worried about you. Today's my day off at the beauty shop, so I thought I'd see for myself what shape you were in."

There was no doubt about what shape she was in with that black belt around her waist. Tight. Made the melons look even bigger. "I didn't even know you knew I was alive."

"Well, I do know you're alive. And I came here to make sure you still were, and would continue to be." She kept her distance, but stared at his face. "You're so badly bruised."

“You should of saw me last week, after the robbery. I was so swollen I almost didn’t fit in the bed. Six broken ribs, purple eyes.”

“Poor baby.” She moved nearer, looked into his eyes. “Your purple eyes have improved. They’re puffy and bloodshot, but now they’re yellow.”

He was still in pain, but getting horny having her tits so close. The more that dress covered her up, the more he undressed her with his eyes.

She kissed him on the cheek. “Is there anything I can do for you, to take care of you, or make you more comfortable?”

There was definitely something she could do for him. But in the state he was in, it wouldn’t make him more comfortable. “Nah, there’s nothing, I really don’t... Wait a minute, there is something.”

She opened wide her dark eyes.

“There’s a kid somewhere on this floor. Took him in the other night, hit by a car. His family don’t have no money. Look in the drawer.”

She walked in the direction he pointed.

“Bruno gave me some money. Under the bedpan. The wallet. Take a hundred bucks to the kid’s family.”

“But a hun...”

“Did you come here to bust’em or help me? Do what I say and remember, don’t tell the family who gave it to you. That’s important. Just say it was sent to them by a ben...ben...”

“Benefactor. I learned that word in Catholic elementary school.”

“Right, benefactor. Nobody they know. Get it?”

“Okay, okay.” She opened the wallet, removed the money, pulled the top of her turtleneck out with one hand, and fluttered the cash into her bra with the other. She released the turtleneck and let it snap. “Is there anything else you need?”

“Theresa, just hold my hand.”

She picked up his hand and held it. Then she kissed it. She took his finger and kept screwing it into the cleft on his chin.

Screwing. She was the kind of girl you could make time with, one who would put out, not the kind you'd marry.

The next day during her lunch break, she visited him again. This time she held his hand, then placed it over her breasts.

By the third day, his patience had paid off. And though he was still hurting, the cures he received from Theresa helped speed his recovery more quick than he, or probably even his doctors, could ever have expected.



Six months after his beating, Al Lombardi phoned. Sal was dozing in bed but at the sound of Al's voice, he sat up.

"One of the top guys wants to see you. I'll come and get you right away."

With speed Sal got dressed, went downstairs, and waited in the lobby of his apartment house. As soon as he saw a black Ford pull in front of the door, he stepped outside. One man remained behind the wheel. Two others left the back seat, looked up and down the street, and escorted him into the car, sitting him between them.

They blindfolded him, drove around in what seemed like circles, and eventually stopped. They tripped him up a flight of steps, down a hallway, turned him a sharp right, and after a few more steps, shoved him into a chair. One of the men removed the blindfold and substituted for it a light so bright he could only look up at it with very short peeks.

"Sal," spoke the outline of a man behind a desk, "we've had our eye on you. Think you got what it takes to move up in the organization." He stopped for a moment to light a cigar.

Sal cursed under his breath.

"To show our sincerity, we got a job for you. See you do it right."

Another man was off to the right, watching, but Sal couldn't see him very good. Could only hear him cracking his knuckles.

What kind of job could they possibly want? Throw cement down toilets of new construction to keep the guys working? Hijack a truck? Something more sophisticated, he hoped. "What do you want me to do?"

"Now, this job takes brains. Careful planning." The blurred man took a puff of his cigar. "Nothing can go wrong."

"Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do my best."

"Your best better be perfect." He took yet another cigar puff. "Now listen, there's a son of a bitch Jew bastard, Max Ginsburg. Opened a dress factory, won't take in our union, threw us out calling us WOPs. Now you take care of him."

"How bad do you want me to beat him up?"

"Beat him up? And they tell me you're smart?" He got up, clucked his tongue, and walked directly in front of him, blocking the light. "You don't sound so smart to me." He tapped on his cigar, let the ashes fall on the rug, and rubbed them in with his heel. "Sal, now we know you can take it. But we got to know if you can give it. What do you think we want you to do?" After puffing the cigar a few more times, he tilted his head back, and blew smoke rings up toward the ceiling.

Between the smoke and realizing what he didn't want to believe, Sal felt sick. But he was sitting in front of one of the big guys now. Had to prove himself. "You got it. Give him a new name. Fertilizer."

"Good, Sal baby. We'll be watching you. Don't make no mistakes. Make sure you do it so those Christ-killers know we mean business. You know the old Sicilian saying, 'Kill one; frighten ten thousand'. We usually use guns, knives, wires that make a nice clean slit, ice picks in the brain. Take your choice or use whatever method you like. And don't get caught. If you do, we don't know you. If you do this job right, you'll be treated real special."

"It's done."

"It'd better be. And it'd better be good."

The two men who'd brought Sal to the meeting blindfolded him again, and took him home.



Sal tossed and turned all night. He was feeling a little gun shy, what with the last job and all. Maybe this was a setup, too.

Nah, this was really his test for the big time.

But this time, before he did anything, he would thoroughly investigate the entire situation with this Max Ginsburg.

But he'd never murdered anyone before. The numbers, arranging hijackings. That was one thing. Murder, something else.

How the hell could he do it?

Was this Max guy married? Did he have kids? How old was he?

Ah, why should he care? Had to keep himself focused. This was the make-it-or-break-it test, and he was going to pass it with flying colors. Besides, the big guy was right. This was one way to pay back the Christ-killers. Only the first time you kill somebody is hard.

He thought of Spar. He'd did this many times. That's why he was the bird, able to buy that Packard. Max Ginsburg? He was a worm.

God, would there be other murders?

Guns, ice picks, knives. Dumb moves. The police would know immediately it was connected to the mob.

How close would he have to get to Ginsburg to whack him? If he slit his throat with a wire, would blood squirt out of his neck? How could he kill him without touching him, without being in the same room with him watching him die, listening to the death rattle?

He went into the bathroom. The royal blue Brioschi bottle was empty, but he found two Alka Seltzer tablets and dropped them into a glass of water. He ignored the directions on the package, choking them down before they were fully dissolved.



Sal's investigation took a few days. It confirmed that Onofrio De Nardo, that cigar smoker, made him the proposal and that the gripe De Nardo's organization had with Max Ginsburg was legitimate.

During the next several weeks Sal kept observing the Ginsburg dress operation, "Damsel".

He followed Max, observed his routine.

The old Jew arrived at 8:00, had a sandwich brought in from Ira's Deli at noon, worked until 7:00, and went home. He took the subway both ways. On Fridays he left early to attend services at his temple. He was closed on Saturdays for the Sabbath and open on Sundays from 12:00 to 5:00.

What a life. A drag.

But Max would soon be free of his routine.



Every day Sal watched the frenzied lunchtime pace at Ira's Deli. At the front counter, eight men served customers with salads, sandwiches, or cold cuts. Further back four men pumped out sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper. Several young boys picked up orders in the 'to go' pile, carefully separated into sections and labeled with names and addresses which increasingly became unclear as the greasy condiments in the sandwiches seeped into the brown bags they were always shoved in.

Sal ordered different sandwiches every day. He would've preferred meatball and sausage sandwiches but he was beginning to acquire a taste for pastrami, corned beef, and tongue. And the pickles, they were good, too. Plenty of garlic.

He sat at a table close to the counter, chewed his sandwich slow, listening to the men repeat the phone orders. Max had a tuna fish sandwich on roll with pickles every day.

What a bore. What kind of dresses could such a bore create?

Sal noted how the sandwiches were prepared, the type of bag they were wrapped in, and who delivered them.

He spent a lot of time in the library. Never did that when he was in school but there he had no motivation.

On Thursday of the sixth week of his observations, he prepared the identical sandwich that Max ate with one exception. Sal added the results of his library research, ten grains of potassium cyanide, twice the lethal amount, to the Hellmann's mayonnaise in which the tuna fish was always drenched. More onions and sugar helped hide the cyanide's bitter almond taste. Could've used arsenic. Colorless, odorless, and tasteless, but too slow.

It was easy getting the cyanide, and untraceable. All he had to do was pose as a chemistry student at New York University. There were so many students there that he passed through the science building unnoticed. He put on a lab coat hanging in one of the unmonitored laboratory storage rooms, located the chemical, scooped it into a small beaker which he stuck in his pocket, and walked out of the building blending in with many young men his age.

Sal admired himself in his blonde wig and matching mustache. He waited for the delivery boy and knocked into him, scattering his deliveries onto the pavement. He apologized to the boy and helped him collect the sandwiches, careful to switch Max's in the confusion.

Sal waited across the street.

The first half hour felt like a week.

Death would be fast. But when would it be discovered?

Finally. A siren, whooping and whooping.

More waiting.

A stretcher. A body, covered with a sheet, taken into an ambulance. No doubt in Sal's mind that Max would be pronounced D.O.A. at Roosevelt Hospital.



Sal continued to eat lunch at Ira's Deli for several weeks. He read in the newspaper that all the delivery boy could remember was that some blonde, blue-eyed guy had bumped into him. No mention of the mustache. The blonde man led nowhere and an investigation turned up no suspects.

Sal got the word that Max's widow was unable to carry on the dress factory. When she put it up for sale, Al Lombardi's men bought it for a small fraction of its value. The mob gained a business for a bargain, reselling it for a large profit to a buyer more favorable to Onofrio De Nardo's union.

And him, the great Sal Esposito? Smelling like a rose.

CHAPTER 5



Al Lombardi and his son, Lou, invited Sal to a party. His invitation, they told him, was in recognition for a job well done. He dressed for the occasion in a fancy silk suit and tie, his curly dark hair neatly cut and groomed.

“Hey, Sal, good to see you,” Al greeted him, “have a drink, a Manhattan okay?” He began mixing the whiskey and vermouth before Sal had a chance to approve the choice. “You’re good, Sal, know how to do things right. I even got points with the boss for recommending you.”

Al dropped a cherry into the glass, and as he handed him the drink was just about to poke him in the ribs. Sal hopped backwards. Almost nine months since they set him up with that beating, but in that area he was still sensitive.

“Now he’s sure you ain’t got two grains of sand for nuts. Gave Senator Armstrong a generous campaign contribution to get you a draft deferment. That’s why I want you to have a good time tonight.” Al held out the drink.

He took his Manhattan, and Al took drink orders from other guests. Sal circulated, moving from room to room, trying to get away from concentrated areas of smoke.

He checked the house. A white elephant Al must of picked up for a song. All empty rooms. Too big for sit-downs, useful only for par-

ties with a lot of guests. No wall decorations or furniture, just folding chairs in rows or lined up against the walls. If there were any rooms that could make the house homey, they were probably in another wing.

Drinking could dull his brain, and he wasn't much for liquor anyways, so he nursed the Manhattan. This way he could pick up hints as to who the higher-ups in the organization were.

The well-dressed man with the pinstriped suit and white satin tie. Sal was sure he had saw him before. Someone should of told him that spats went out of style years ago.

And the fat guy with his belly hanging out of his belt. He sat in a folding chair, built to hold someone at least a hundred pounds lighter, the blubber on his thighs draping the chair's metal border.

The well-dressed man talked to the fat man, who kept looking around as though he was wondering when the food was coming out. Sal remembered. The thinner man was one of Onofrio De Nardo's capos. He didn't know his name, but had caught a glimpse of him cracking his knuckles the night De Nardo ordered the hit on Max Ginsburg.

Sal kept wandering around the room finally settling in what seemed to be an inconspicuous place. He was just about to sit when he noticed that Lou Lombardi had spotted him. Lou ran up to him, pulled his arm. "Come on, Sal, I want you to meet some people."

Lou led him into the next room where two young girls were sunk into what appeared to be the only couch in the house. "Sal, these are two of my friends, Annmarie and Carmela." And even though that evening was the first time him and Lou had met, Lou turned to the girls and said, "This is my good friend, Sal."

Sal had already eyed both girls. "Hi." He definitely preferred Annmarie who was better looking and had large breasts she didn't try to hide. The other girl was ordinary-looking, had clear porcelain skin, dark hair, a straight nose, blue eyes, and was smoking a cigarette.

He slid them apart and sat between them. "Well, where do you two beautiful women live?"

They both giggled. Annmarie, the more lively of the two said, "Brooklyn, both of us, and what about you?"

"This has got to be my lucky day," he said knowing that most of the people at the party also lived there. "I live in Brooklyn, too. Whereabouts?"

"Bensonhurst." She pointed to the other girl, "And so does Carmela."

He turned toward her. "Does the cat got your tongue, fair damsel?"

Oh, damn. The name of Max Ginsburg's dress business. Sal went to cover his mouth but stopped short. He was still worried that mentioning the name out loud might connect him with the murder.

Carmela cleared her throat and coughed. She took another puff of the cigarette she held between her index and middle fingers.

He tried not to show how much the smoke bothered him. "So it's not that you don't got no voice. All that dragging's giving you laryngitis."

She puffed again, this time molding her lips into a tight circle so that when she exhaled, she blew the smoke directly into his face.

What a disgusting broad! He moved his entire body toward Annmarie. "So what do you do in Brooklyn?"

"I'm an executive secretary."

"Yeah, to who?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Maybe I want to hire you myself, at a higher salary."

"Really, and what type of work do you do?"

"I'm a business manager."

"What kind of business?"

"Several including banking, shipping, dresses."

"Well, I don't really want to change my job but I might be interested in some dresses. Can you get them for me wholesale?"

Before he could answer, Lou came over and took Carmela's arm. "Come on, sweetie, let's leave these two lovebirds alone."

She remained in her seat several seconds before getting up to go with him.

Sal was surprised that at a party hosted by Italians, no food was being served, and it was already nine o'clock. Where was the kitchen? And why wasn't the smell of onions, tomatoes, Romano cheese seeping in from it? Maybe there wouldn't be no food. Nah. Not possible.

After some more small talk Annmarie said, "May I be excused for a while? I've had a lot to drink on an empty stomach and have to go to the little girl's room." She dug both hands into the couch and forced herself up. "Be right back. Promise you won't go away."

"Not a chance."

Sal waited for her on the couch. He might be able to go for a girl like her. Then the image of the redhead came to him. Diane Pinto. Nobody could ever come close to her. Was she still alive? Probably not.

Carmela was on the other side of the room talking to Lou. So the dumb broad does talk. Whenever she could, she glanced at him, and turned her head away when he caught her.

Sal tried to figure out who the important guys in this social gathering were. Two men moved behind him and chatted, first about a meal they had in some restaurant and then about how they thought it was prepared. Serious business for Italians. Was the chicken better in brown gravy or red? Should basil, rosemary or both be added to the gravy?

One of the men interrupted the discussion. "Look at those two." Even though the man wasn't talking to him, Sal faced him and noted he was pointing to Carmela and Lou. The man repeatedly touched lengthwise and separated his index fingers. "That's some match between those two, the match of the century, the Lombardis and the Caputos. What could be better? Two good families coming together. Such power." He made a muscle with his right arm.

So that's who she was! That snotty, boring, plain-looking dame was Carmine Caputo's daughter. Just his luck. Why couldn't Annmarie or that beautiful redhead be Carmine's daughter?

Sal knew of Carmine Caputo. Who didn't? A genius. Made De Nardo look like an ant. The most powerful man in the country yet nobody never saw him.

Sal got up, looked at his watch, then slowly wandered toward the section of the room where Lou and Carmela were talking. He struck up a conversation with a fellow next to them by introducing himself, commenting how familiar the fellow was, and asking if they had ever met. He kept looking around to see if Annmarie had came out. Why did women always take so long in the bathroom? Stupid question. They didn't have the right gadget or they were busy fixing their hair and makeup. After about ten more minutes, Sal aimed for the bathroom and knocked on the door. "Annmarie?"

"I'll be right out." Her voice sounded faint.

"What's the matter, kid?"

"I really don't, don't feel good."

"Hold on, I'll get somebody to help you."

Sal leaped over to Carmela and interrupted her conversation. "Your girlfriend's sick. She needs some help. I'd help her myself, but she's in, you know, the bathroom."

Carmela hurried to the bathroom with Lou following her.

She knocked on the door. "Annmarie, it's Carmela, let me in."

Sal winked at her. "So you *can* speak."

Carmela tried the knob. The door was unlocked. She opened it slow, entered, then stepped out again. "Oh my God, she's on the floor. You can hardly tell her from the white tiles. Lou, you'd better get your guest home."

"And what about you?"

"Don't worry about me." She paused, bent her head, and lifted her eyes. "Maybe your friend here can take me home."

Lou shrugged. "Jee, I hate to ask you, Sal, but could you do me this favor?"

He tried to appear as though he was making up his mind. "Uh, sure, Lou, uh, anything for a friend."

"Thanks, Sal. I'll make it up to you."

"It's nothing. I appreciate the invitation to the party."



Sal leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and put his feet up on the desk. Carmela wanted to see him again. Obvious. But as he did with Theresa, he'd play hard to get, confident she'd find a way of contacting him. Yet he was concerned that Lou Lombardi would get more of an opportunity to win her over. Lou was certainly not as attractive, he kept reassuring himself, not as smart or tall, and didn't have his political skills. Carmela was a bore but he remembered the advice he got from one of his neighbors. "It's just as easy to love a rich girl as a poor one." And Carmela was not only from a wealthy family but she was the daughter of the biggest guy of all.

What a coup! The Sicilian version of marrying the boss's daughter. Could he pull it off? Sure he could.

His initial instinct was on target. Carmela made the first move. She invited him to a party at her house, "to thank you for taking me home that evening even though you would rather have been with Annmarie." She assured him that Annmarie would be present so that she and Sal could continue where they'd left off.

When Sal arrived at Carmela's house, he asked for Annmarie. Carmela opened her mouth and covered it with her hand. "Oh, I forgot. She's going to be a bridesmaid at a wedding tonight."

And Lou Lombardi? Conspicuous by his absence.

Sal recalled that the night he took Carmela home, he passed her house twice before realizing he was in the right place. It was dark and

Carmela, who had also consumed several drinks on an empty stomach, had fell asleep in the car.

He had been expecting a much more luxurious home for the daughter of the boss of bosses, more of a head-turner. Before waking Carmela up, he checked the number on the house and even went so far as to back up to the corner to reread the name of the street.

But once inside the house, he found that what it lacked in luxury on the outside was made up for on the inside, more of what he expected as a reflection of Carmine Caputo's resources.

Sal didn't want to make it obvious that he was taking in the decorations. But when it was safe to look, he noticed velvet couches, Chinese rugs or rugs from some country near there, pictures woven from rich fabrics he didn't know the name of hanging on the walls, fancy statues displayed on curved marble columns. A lot of the chairs had cushions made of some material his mother brang home from the factory once. Said it was expensive, showed him a swatch, called it brocade, brocate, or something that sounded like it. He understood that having expensive furnishings on the inside was safe. There, strangers weren't allowed to enter. They could only guess what the plain exterior enclosed.

The door to a room with a heavy-looking wooden door was open a crack. When he stared at the crack, it creaked closed. He took a few steps, looked at the door again. The crack was open. In a split second it squeaked once more. Christ, he was being watched!

Carmine Caputo. Of course he'd want to know who his daughter's friends were. Would probably check him out, maybe already did.

If he was going to be watched, he'd put on a good show for Carmine Caputo. He'd be his charming self, especially with Carmela.

Only twelve guests were at the gathering, a more intimate occasion than the party where him and Carmela met. She was quite pleasant this time, but smoked one cigarette after another all night.

"Why do you smoke so much?"

"I don't know," she tilted her head and raised her eyes, "guess I'm still rebelling against the nuns."

While she didn't turn him on, he found that he could just about tolerate her, and decided to woo her by being everything she could want. Considerate. A perfect gentleman. Shower her with flowers, jewelry, romantic, flowing words.

At the end of the evening he gave her a respectful kiss on the cheek, but sensed he could've gone further. Had to be careful, though. He was after the real prize, the approval of Carmine Caputo.

The next day Sal ordered a dozen long-stemmed red roses for Carmela. He tried to write the accompanying card himself, but his fingers wouldn't work. He ripped the card into as many pieces as he could. He'd have to dictate the message to the florist. He swallowed hard before he said, "The beauty and warmth of these roses remind me of you. Sal."



Sal wanted to surprise Carmela by picking her up in his new car, a '52 Cadillac. He got a kick out of the photoelectric cell that dimmed the bright lights, and one of the features he had added, a switch on the steering column which could drop sand in front of the rear wheels. He couldn't wait for the first snow to play with the switch. Besides, it was about time he started to enjoy some of his earnings. Didn't want to end up like his mother, saving money and living miserable no matter how much money he tried to give her.

He'd stay on his romantic kick, was doing good with it so far. When he led Carmela out of the house, he pretended to enter an old jalopy parked nearby. He tried to open the door to the rattletrap. "Carmela, the key don't fit."

She turned her eyes to the car, then back to him.

He took the key, opened the Caddy instead. "Let's take this car, my key fits it. I'm sure the owner won't mind if we use it, especially if he knows how in love we are."

Carmela's mouth hung open.

He helped her into the front seat. "It's a surprise, sweetheart. I bought it because when I take you out, I want you to ride in something special."

"I don't care about the car, Sal, I'd ride in anything if it was with you. Just tell me once again about being in love."

It took everything in his power to be convincing. "You heard me right the first time. We're in love, aren't we?"

"Tell me, Sal."

She was a pretty decent chick, but when he looked at her, he always saw what he thought Carmine Caputo looked like. "I love you, Carmela. Even though we know each other just a few months, I know I love you and want to marry you." Just hearing his own words made his skin crawl.

For a few seconds she was speechless. Then she said, "I have to pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming." She moved closer to him and took his hand. "I love you so much. Sal, let's just sit here all night."

"How crazy do you think I am, sitting in a car in front of your house for all the neighbors to see? Let's go to the drive-in, the Whitestone, in the Bronx. It'll give us an excuse to go for a ride and test out the car to see if you like it, and we can see a movie at the same time."

"Before you start the car, say again what you said about getting married."

He hoped she'd mistake his closed eyes for passion. "I want to marry you, Carmela. I did from the first time I saw you." He managed to get the words out without getting them stuck in his throat.

"That's all I wanted to hear. Let's go to the drive-in." She opened her purse, took out a cigarette, and lit it.

When they got to the drive-in, a cowboy picture was the main feature, nothing they wanted to see. It really didn't make no difference what was playing because when he looked around, he couldn't see no heads in the cars.

They began smooching and petting, too. He couldn't stand her cigarette breath or the Sen-Sen that was supposed to mask it, but kept up the kissing anyway. Her lips were pretty full, and soft. Yet how long he could go on with this relationship? Wasn't there a better way of achieving his ambitions?

After a little more kissing, Carmela put her finger into his cleft and played with it. Then she kissed it. "Your chin is so sexy."

She removed the top of her dress and pulled down her slip and bra straps. "Sal, I want you to make love to me."

She had a good pair of snappers. Hard taking his eyes off them, and hard, very hard he was getting just looking at them. For a moment he almost gave in, but had to remember. Patience, not his hormones, had to be in control. "Carmela baby, there's nothing I want more. You drive me nuts." At least that was true. "But I got too much respect for you and your family." He almost said, "your father" but swallowed the words before they could come out. "We'll be married soon, and then I'll make love to you every night."

"Do we have to wait that long?"

"You know we have to. It's not what I want, neither."

"Then ask my father and we'll get married right away."

"I'll ask him."

Having a big car was a convenience. They moved to the back seat, continued the kissing and the petting, but he made sure they didn't go all the way. If her father ever found out, he'd never allow them to get married. There were other ways to satisfy her, and himself. She would think this was a sign of his love for her.

Everyone knew Italian boys wanted to marry virgins.



Sal wasn't expecting it but a man opened the door for them when they returned to the house. Carmela's clothes were wrinkled, and she immediately excused herself without introducing them. All she whispered was, "Ask him, Sal."

Ask him. Jesus Christ, it was Carmine Caputo. Who else could it be? What made him come out of the woodwork tonight?

Carmine Caputo was nothing like the mental picture Sal had formed of his invisible presence whenever he came to the house. For a man with a reputation for having an insatiable appetite, for both food and females, he was unusually thin. He had more brown hair than most men his age with no sign of graying. His nose was pointy and he was taller than Sal had expected, exactly his height. Being on the same level made it easy for them to stare into each other's blue eyes.

Carmine Caputo spoke through a blank, frigid face. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

He took hold of himself. "The pleasure is truly mine. I'm Salvatore Esposito," he said pronouncing his name as though he was speaking Italian. "Everybody calls me Sal."

Carmine Caputo ignored his answer and ushered him into the room with the heavy door that was now open wide instead of a crack, a room that looked as though it was used for business meetings, very important business meetings. Even though there were several lights on, the dark wood walls made the room look dim. Tufted chairs that definitely smelled like expensive leather surrounded a large oval table. The boss of bosses sat at the head of the table in the only leather chair that had a high back. Without inviting him to sit, Carmine Caputo came right to the point. "Well now, Mr. Esposito, I hear you've been seeing my daughter for quite a while now."

Sal turned on the charm switch. "Four months, two weeks, six days."

"And just what are your intentions?" He continued the cold stare.

The real intentions? That the marriage would get him the money, the power he always wanted. It didn't matter that he didn't love Carmela, hardly liked her. But what did love matter anyway? Just made you weak. Only power counted. And that power could get him any woman he wanted.

Sal responded with a practiced facial expression and tone designed to appear sincere. "It's really a coincidence that you should ask. It was just tonight, when I surprised Carmela with my new Cadillac, that I asked her to marry me."

"Yeah? And what did she say?"

"That I should ask you first, of course."

"And just who *are* you?"

"Now Mr. Caputo, I know you're a clever man. I'm sure that you know all about me or you would of never let me set my foot in the door."

"You could bank on that, but I want to hear it from you."

He began picking his brain. What would give him the most credibility? "Well, I'm Sicilian."

No reaction from Carmine Caputo.

"My brother's going to be a priest." He looked for the beginning of a smile but didn't get one, so he added, "And I'm a damn good businessman."

Since there was still no response from Carmine Caputo, Sal attempted a different approach. He gazed into the distance. "I understand what Carmela means to you. She means so much to me, too. I find it hard to explain how I feel about her. Such a wonderful girl, very caring." His speech returned to its normal pace. "And I want to make her happy."

"Don't you think that four months, two weeks, and, what was it again? Oh yeah, six days are not long enough for you two to decide on marriage?"

"For most people probably not. But for me and Carmela, too long."

"We'll discuss this matter at another time." He rose, turned away, then faced him again. "There is one more thing, Mr. Esposito."

"Sure."

"Your girlfriend, the one with the big knobs?"

Sal held his breath. Yes, Carmine Caputo did investigate everything.

“Should you end up getting married to anyone at all, do you plan on giving Miss Petrillo up?”

Sal was ticked off that he was caught off-guard. The boss was the one who was prepared, informed, in control. He couldn’t of came as far as he did without being sharp in those skills.

“Don’t look so surprised, Mr. Esposito. I have a little piece of ass on the side myself. We all do.” Carmine Caputo moved toward him and put his expressionless face right up to his. “But I always make sure I come home to my family. Think about it. Now goodnight, Mr. Esposito.”

Carmine Caputo walked out of the room leaving him to let himself out.

Sal got into his car and slowly drove away thinking about his experiences with the leadership in the organization. He was smart, but not smart enough. First he was duped when they set him up for a beating. Now Carmine Caputo just showed him up by having the upper hand. There was a superstition around that everything comes in threes. Behind the wheel, Sal straightened up.

There wouldn’t be a third time.



Carmine Caputo found himself involved with the Mafia more through necessity than desire.

At first.

His brother had been murdered in their town, Bagheria, just outside of Palermo, by members of the Black Hand for stealing bread his family desperately needed. His mother never got over it. For her suffering he would have his vendetta. He couldn’t fight them, just yet. So he’d join them, learn their ways. Observe, think, be patient. Those would be his methods, until he could worm his way to the top.

In time he began to enjoy his power, his leadership of the organization. How could he best eliminate those he couldn't control? In a country known for its art, why not carry on the tradition? The art would be in the killing. And by all means, let the punishment fit the crime. For those who ratted, families opened doors to a tray holding the tattler's head, a rat stuffed in its mouth. For those who stole, a hand was returned to relatives, skinned. And for those who had sex with the wives of *mafiosi*, or their daughters? Not unusual to have the offenders' lively organs cut off, boiled, then boxed for home delivery. Let the screams of the families chant through the valleys, echo through the mountains, reminding others to think twice, three times before daring to defy rules.

Carmine was a master of opportunity. He had made a fortune during World War II dealing from America in stolen gas-ration stamps, and after the war masterminding from Sicily to unsettled countries the sale of leftover, Mafia-hoarded guns. For these accomplishments he gained a lot of respect, international respect, and made many influential friends. He had enough power and money to rid himself of his enemies and buy loyalty. He would never, of course, have enough money to console his mother for losing a son, but at least he was left to take care of her in comfort and style.

With the laws as loose as they were in the old country, it was easy to bribe officials. Not as easy in America, but not impossible. There were always takers. In the Brooklyn neighborhood Carmine was a person everyone could rely on to help beat the system. Like the time Guido Paolucci couldn't get a liquor license for his small restaurant. Carmine advised him to sell the wine in Coca-Cola bottles. Nobody but the customers would be the wiser. And Guido, the richer.

Carmine considered himself a good judge of people, one who could see through them, a sort of psychologist. Pick the right people for the right jobs. Ruin those who might be trouble. What would be the fate of Salvatore Esposito? Selection, or ruin?

From an upstairs window, Carmine watched the young man leave in his new car. He was concerned. His only other child, Marco, had died of polio at fourteen, making it impossible to have a male heir to take over in the future. He himself wanted to pick Carmela's husband, one who'd have the talent to be groomed for the organization, possibly eventually succeeding him.

Sure, he had investigated Sal. Knew that whatever could move, Sal would organize a betting system on. Knew about his talent in mediating disputes. He was aware of Sal's role in the hit of Don Calabrese and in the elimination of Max Ginsburg. Being Sicilian and having a brother a priest were positive attributes.

And he admired Sal's assertiveness. A man who was assertive in love had the potential to be assertive in business, especially family business.

Something about Sal reminded him of his dead son. Maybe it was just that Sal and Marco were around the same age. How would Marco have felt being in the same position as Sal, asking a prospective father-in-law for his daughter's hand?

But this would never happen to his son. Nothing would ever again happen to his boy. Marco. Surrounded for months by that big iron machine. Even then, always smiling while struggling until his lungs gave out. He wiped away sudden tears.

Carmine didn't want to make a decision about the marriage. He needed time. Sal would have to wait.

It would be a good test for the kid to sweat it out.

CHAPTER 6



Diane Pinto stood in front of the easel painting a garden. She decided to use her favorite colors. A blue sky, yellow sun, and lots of pale pink to deep red flowers with green leaves. The fence she left the white of the paper, but outlined the shape in black.

Bobby Fallon went to the sink to wash his shirt splattered with orange paint. Should she hide his paintbrushes? Behind the bookshelf, under the paint bottles? Next time. She was just about to wash the pink paint splotches off her smock when Sr. Mary Angelica called the class.

“Boys and girls, please clean up, it’s time for our reading lesson.”

Diane hung up her smock, washed her arms and hands, and took her seat.

Sister Mary Angelica shuffled her flash cards. “Who wants to read these words?”

John Murphy volunteered. “Mother, run, go, Spot. Th...th...th...” He shook his head and sat down.

While Sister shuffled the cards again, Billy Houlihan waved his hand furiously. When she called on him, he stood up straight. “Dick, for, Spot, happy. Th...th...” Then he, too, sat down.

Sister’s eyes moved around the room. “Diane Mary, read these words please.”

She stood up, kept pulling on the handkerchief pinned at the shoulder to her uniform. "Sometimes, back, father, house, run, before, and, back, because, car, though."

"Why, that was excellent, Diane Mary, you read your words so quickly, even knew the mystery "th" word. You may have a holy picture. On my desk."

Diane walked up and spread out all the holy pictures. She put those which had her favorite colors in one pile. She kept looking through the pile but became attracted to a picture that was just white and blue, stuck to one of Sister's paper clips. The Blessed Mother with a halo of gold stars, her naked foot squeezing the head of a snake. After staring at the picture for a long time, she picked it up and returned to her seat.

Just before dismissal time, Sister Mary Angelica handed her a note to take home with her holy picture. Sister looked at it. "Diane Mary, that's an interesting picture. Why did you pick that one?"

"Because good is stronger than bad."



A note. From the teacher. Mrs. Pinto stared at it. Meant trouble in her day. She didn't open it for a while. Once again she felt the chill that passed through her body when she kissed her father's forehead in his coffin, his skin so icy her lips almost stuck to it. But an even bigger chill when her mother told her as the oldest child of four, she would have to quit school when she was fourteen and go to work. If there was anything that would make up for that disappointment, it was a good education for Diane.

Mrs. Pinto slowly opened the envelope and slipped out the note. Nothing too informative. Sister Mary Angelica wanted to meet with her and her husband. No reason. The chills returned. Any problem would have to be faced, and the sooner the better. She made an appointment for early the following week.

They were ten minutes early. The secretary informed Sister that the Pintos had arrived. They rose when she entered the room.

Her husband said, "I'm Robert Pinto and this is my wife, Dora."

Sister shook their hands. "Please be seated, I'm so happy you were able to come. We must discuss Diane Mary."

"Is there a problem, Sister?" Her voice broke at the first word but she managed to say the rest without revealing her anxiety.

"No, the news about Diane Mary is excellent. She's the youngest child in the class, a late December baby, but she's way ahead of the group. It seems a waste to keep her in the first grade any longer."

Mrs. Pinto's blood began to sprinkle through her veins again.

Her husband's frown brought some of his freckles together making his forehead appear darker than the rest of his face. Two of his red curls hung over his eyebrow. "So why did you send for us, Sister?" he said.

"We need your permission to skip Diane Mary."

She hesitated. "I don't know, Sister. First I'd like to ask your opinion about something."

"Surely."

"Diane may be ready for second grade as far as her ability is concerned. But she's so shy. I don't know if she's mature enough."

Sister slowly moved her head up and down. "That's a concern of mine, too. The children all like her, but then she's such a beauty. With that coloring of hers," she looked upward and sighed, "Whenever she goes outside to play, she radiates the sunshine. Do you know what all the nuns here call her? Miss Technicolor." Sister faced her husband. "And now that we've met, Mr. Pinto, I know where she gets it from. Very unusual for an Italian."

Her husband laughed. "Everybody calls me Red Flannigan because they think I'm Irish. Even my wife calls me Red."

Sister looked away as though she was trying to dig into the past. "Well, you could probably thank the Normans for that," then faced her and her husband again. "Now Diane Mary will probably out-

grow the shyness but I want to make sure, give it a push. I know she's an only child. Does Diane Mary have the opportunity to play with other children her age after school?"

"Not really," Mrs. Pinto said. "She spends most of the time after school with her grandmother."

"Oh, I see. Then did you ever consider giving her ballet lessons or music lessons? She has a lovely voice, and a good ear. I hear her sing when we have music class. She really should get used to appearing before people, it may help get rid of the shyness."

"I never thought of that," Mrs. Pinto said. "Singing lessons, or ballet. Very interesting. My husband and I will have to talk about it."

"Well, think about it along with your approval to place Diane Mary in second grade."

"May I ask you a question, Sister?" her husband said.

"Of course."

"Why do you always call Diane, Diane Mary?"

Sister stiffened, her smile melting into her skull. "Because, Mr. Pinto, as you should well know, Diane is not a Christian name. I'm surprised that the priest baptized her with that name." Her eyes kept hopping across the room. "He probably didn't. I'm sure that if you check the baptismal certificate, the name is recorded as Diane Mary. After the Mother of Jesus, of course."



Several days after the meeting with Sister Mary Angelica, Mrs. Pinto opened the newspaper. Depressing. The Germans stirring up trouble in Europe again. She turned the pages for some lighter news. There, in the middle of page twelve. An article about a children's opera group which was holding auditions for an operetta. She scanned the article twice with her finger. Should she bring Diane? Maybe she was too young. Might take too much time from her schoolwork. They probably wouldn't take her anyway. But the experience would be good. Even if she didn't make it, she would have to

appear before people. Strangers. Give it a try. She had nothing to lose.

The day of the audition arrived. Mrs. Pinto watched children and their parents line up outside the Manhattan theater. So many people. No chance for Diane. How would she react with everyone looking at her? Probably run off the stage and bury her head in her lap.

Three more children ahead of her. Two. Now, only one.

Diane's turn.

Her daughter opened the music to the marker, and carried *The Merry Widow* score to the accompanist as if she was carrying a sacrificial lamb to the altar. She walked to the middle of the stage. Mrs. Pinto put her hands over her face, spread out two fingers, uncovering one eye. The pianist played a few chords then Diane sang "Vilja" with such ease, as though she was all by herself in the theater. She even held the high note at the end extra long. Oh, God, she was more Jeanette MacDonald's daughter than hers. Or was she just thinking like a stage mother?

Then, the waiting. Tension in the theater.

Twenty minutes.

Half an hour.

Finally, after forty minutes, the director made his way through the crowd. "Thank you all for coming today. I saw a lot of talent here, but as you know, I can't pick all of you. Will," he referred to his clipboard, "Diane Pinto, Joyce Barstow, and Courtney Wilson please come up?" Groans of disappointment filled the hall, along with tears and tantrums, most by the parents. "Now, Diane, please come back and sing for us again."

Diane resumed her position in the middle of the stage and repeated "Vilja" even better this time around. The director beamed. Mrs. Pinto teared a mixture of relief and pride.

After only two weeks of rehearsals, Diane had mastered everyone's part. The day of the performance the audience was immersed in laughter as her supposedly shy little tot, acting as director as well as

performer, stole the show by running around the stage making sure everyone was executing his role properly.

After this operetta run was over, Mrs. Pinto and her husband decided to let Diane remain with the group and become a serious music student. They purchased a victrola for her and removed from the closet the dusty, 78-rpm recordings of the powerful, melodic music of among others Verdi, Puccini, Bizet, and Donizetti. She sang the *Sempre Libera* cadenzas along with Galli-Curci, trilled and staccatoed with Tetrizzini in the Mad Scene, even crescendoed *Bella figlia dell'amore* with Gigli while she acted out whatever the music seemed to have felt to her.



Over the next five years Diane studied music along with her schoolwork. She was finally ready, her singing teacher informed her, to have a recital. Her mother bought her a floor-length white organdy dress with daisies scattered over the skirt. A daisy was bobby-pinned above her right ear. Neighbors, fellow students, their parents, and curiosity seekers filled the hall.

But the most important person Diane had invited was Grandma Angelina. After the recital, Diane ran to her.

Her grandmother hugged and kissed her. "You were so wonderful today. I love to hear you sing, gives me goose bumps." She extended her arm and pointed to the hairs standing up.

"I hoped you'd like it, Grandma, I practiced 'Kiss Me Again' over and over again so it would be good, and when I told the audience I dedicated it to you, you could take a bow."

"Joy of my life. When I look at you, it was worth all the sacrifices coming to this country."

"I love when you tell me about the old country. We haven't talked about it in a long time."

"You come to my house and eat. The two of us alone, just like when you were a little girl. After we eat, we'll talk."

The following week Diane went alone to visit her grandmother. She could never forget the eating rules Grandma had set for the family, had heard them often enough. No touching your food, pushing food on your fork, licking your fingers, picking your teeth, chewing with your mouth open, or talking with food in your mouth. No one in the family dared ignore the table regulations, for the always hidden long-handled wooden spoon, the big one Grandma stirred the pasta with, might miraculously reappear, and come swiftly down on the disobedient body part.

So many times Diane wanted to squish her hand smack in the middle of the mashed potatoes, let them ooze through her fingers just like she wanted to do with that jar of white paste with the red cap they always used in school.

She watched her grandmother eat only the artichoke hearts and white meat of the chicken because she could remove both with a fork and knife with no assistance from the fingers. Diane made sure that she also used her knife and fork properly.

And she admired Grandma Angelina's clothes—starched, immaculate, and wrinkle-free. She recalled the advice. "Always make sure you're well-groomed, dress, and behave properly. And remember your speech. You can have the most expensive clothes and jewelry, but when you open your mouth, if it comes out wrong, you might as well be wearing rags."

After supper Diane sat on the couch and waited for her grandmother to join her. More of Grandma's instructions came to mind. "Clean means there's no dirt left. If you scrub all day and there's dirt, then what you scrub still isn't clean. And wipe right away what you clean till it's dry so there won't be any streaks. Look in the light; look sideways in the light for streaks." It was obvious her grandmother had obeyed her own rules. Immaculate lace doilies of the different American presidents on the back supports of the couch and chairs. Wood of the furniture frames, tables, and floors highly polished.

Windows so clean you weren't aware that there was any glass in them.

Grandma Angelina sat next to her. "So what are you learning in school now?"

"The usual stuff. We read a lot and do math and geography. And now Sister Joan of Arc has us in three groups. One collects newspapers, one cans. And the last one plants victory gardens."

"We all have to do our part. Which group are you in?"

"Sister gave us a choice. I chose collecting cans." She lowered her voice and partially covered her mouth. "But some of the girls don't give all the cans to the war effort. They keep some for themselves and make jewelry."

Her grandmother frowned. "I hope they don't make earrings. You know those *contadini* can't wait to pierce their daughters' ears." She pointed to her ear lobes. "I don't have pierced ears, my daughters don't have pierced ears, and..." she put her fingers on Diane's ear lobes, "my granddaughters will never have pierced ears."

"Why do you get so upset over that?"

"To me it's like not speaking English. The first thing I did when I came here was apply to become a citizen and go to school to learn how to speak English. If you want to do well in this country, you have to learn new ways. Or I would've stayed in Montedisorio, getting the water from the well, washing clothes in the stream. Here I have running water, I don't need the well."

"And you remember," she kept shaking her finger, "you get a good education. People who came here from my town, they're afraid of education. They think it'll ruin the family, learning new ideas. But in our family we get an education and good marks to make all of us proud."

Diane's eyes caught the proud expression in her grandfather's picture on the end table. Showed very clearly his fancy mustache. Think of a bicycle, her mother said. Now Diane remembered what it was called. A handlebar mustache. She was sorry she never knew him. He

was only thirty-seven when he died of pneumonia, leaving her grandmother with four children. And it was just after Greatgrandma Massimina arrived in this country, yet another mouth to feed.

Her grandmother looked at the picture of Grandpa, too. Her eyes filled up. She pressed them with a blue-white, starched handkerchief. "When my poor Giovanni died, all I knew how to do was crochet, embroider, and sew. I learned how to sew in his tailor shop, he did very well then. But your mother, my Dora, she's a saint." She wiped more tears with her starched handkerchief that seemed to soften with each sniffle. "Hated having to give up school to be the breadwinner I think they say in this country. That's why she's always giving you lessons—singing, piano, ballet, teaching you to walk properly with a book on your head, taking you to the opera, museums, plays. Gives me a headache just thinking about it." Grandma rubbed her temples. "Your mother could never do that when she was a young girl. You're only ten years old and you already saw more things than people my age. You make sure you get a good education."

"Grandma, I love you." They hugged each other. "I hope when I grow up I'll be as strong as you."

Her grandmother looked into the distance.

"I hope and pray to God you'll never have to be."



The nuns at St. John's Elementary School made sure that they kept their pupils busy. When it wasn't schoolwork it was social work—wheeling the sick in the hospital into the chapel for Mass and Communion, collecting food and clothing for the poor, singing songs for, or reading stories to the infirmed. The nuns could find a project for anyone with the warning, "God gave you many blessings. You must share them with others."

The pupils got along with each other fairly well. Some tensions between the Italians and Irish resulted in minor skirmishes. But most of the arguments between the two were of a teasing nature such

as who was the better singer, Frank Sinatra or Bing Crosby. For the more highly trained the discussion centered on whether Enrico Caruso was better than John McCormick. The sides were chosen before the arguments began.

The morning after Diane performed the leading part in the school play, Jimmy Shea, one of her classmates, came up to her. "Are you in the Mafia?"

The Mafia. The Mafia. Probably some kind of operetta like *The Mikado*. He must have been asking if the Mafia was one of the productions in her repertoire that year. "Not this year. Maybe next."

She watched him walk away looking confused.

When she went home that day, she took out her copy of *The Victor Book of the Opera*. In the index, The Mafia should've been listed between *Madama Butterfly* and *The Magic Flute*. It wasn't there.

During supper she asked her parents, "Did either of you ever hear of an opera or operetta called, 'The Mafia'?"

Their eyes darted to each other.

"What made you ask that?" her mother said.

"Jimmy Shea asked me if I was in it."

Tension bounced off the walls. Her mother smacked her lips. "Jimmy Shea is a very stupid boy."

"Why, Mom?"

"Because he was being nasty by asking you that."

"Why nasty?"

Her parents kept looking at each other, as though they were trying to decide who would answer the question.

Finally, her mother spoke. "The Mafia is an organization of criminals, all Italian, especially Sicilian. They're horrible people who do horrible things. People like us never have anything to do with them. But there are a lot of people like that Shea boy and his parents who probably put the seed into his head, who love to think that all Italians are involved in the Mafia. It's asked to insult us. And don't you

ever forget it. We never, never, have anything to do with riff-raff like them.”

“What are some of the horrible things they do?”

Her mother remained silent for a while. Then she said, “Do you remember Uncle John?”

“You mean Grandma’s brother, the one who died of a stroke?”

“Yes. He set up a macaroni factory when he first came to this country and the Mafia blew up his factory because he refused to pay protection money.”

“What’s protection money?”

Her mother looked at her father. “Will you please help me out?”

“It’s like a tax,” he said. “You pay them to keep your business safe.”

“From what, Daddy?”

“From them. If you don’t pay it, they’ll destroy your business.”

She tried to make sense of the information.

“And while we’re on the subject,” her mother said, “don’t ever bring it up with Grandma, it upsets her very much. She despises them, will give you an earful on them. Moved out of Little Italy up here to the Bronx to get her family away from them, but they’re here, too. Like a fungus infection you can’t get rid of.”

“Now let’s talk about something more pleasant.” Wrinkles instantly disappeared from her mother’s face. “Sister Mary Paul met with me today. She thinks that you should go to St. Ursula’s when you graduate, practically commanded me to send you there.”

“That prison?”

“What do you mean, prison?” her father said.

“Did you ever see the uniforms those girls wear? I know they won’t let you wear patent leather shoes, but oxfords that make you look like you have clubfeet? And navy blue jumpers and Eisenhower jackets, brown shirts, maroon bow ties? Whoever designed them must’ve been color blind.” She stopped speaking abruptly. “I stand corrected. Just plain blind. And those hats, they’re okay if you want to walk around with an upside-down fruit bowl on your head.”

“Uniforms are not important,” her mother said. “Sister told me that the Ursuline nuns run schools for girls the way the Jesuits do for boys. They have a tough academic curriculum and an accelerated program for the brightest students. You can be out in three years instead of four. Sister’s sure you’ll pass the entrance exam and the test for the accelerated program.”

“The tuition’s high and it’s a real sacrifice for us to send you there,” her father said, “but when you get out, you can get into any college you want.” He knocked over the saltshaker, picked it up, then shook it upside down over his left shoulder three times.

“Daddy, you’re so superstitious. Why do you want me to go to a Catholic high school? You never go to Mass, and you don’t believe in the doctrines of the Church yourself, only your old sayings. I put a list of them on my wall and have them memorized.” She closed her eyes and saw the quotes she had printed on blue construction paper, cut out, and arranged in a staggered design titled, *Red Flannigan’s Bible*, pass in front of her. If you walk with the lame, you begin to limp. Fifty dollars, if you have it, it’s nothing; if you don’t have it, it’s a lot of money. Every knock is a boost. Money makes enemies of brothers. I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet. Never count anybody else’s money. When you spit up at heaven, it comes back in your face. He who eats with both hands chokes. Timing is everything in life.

Her father looked like Grumpy when he growled, “Some day that list will come in handy. For your information you can be a Catholic and believe in old sayings, too. And now, young lady, the discussion is over. You’re going to St. Ursula’s and you’ll graduate first in your class. I’m not asking, I’m telling.”



After her first week at St. Ursula’s, Diane took a walk around the campus. It could have served as the set for *The Long Gray Line*. Only in this east of the Hudson version of West Point, no Tyrone Power

would ever be allowed to set foot, and the students were trained to sharpshoot sophisticated vocabulary words, foreign languages, and mathematical computations. St. Ursula's was the prestigious Catholic high school to attend in the Bronx. Only a hundred students were admitted each year after highly competitive examinations, and all were expected to go on to college.

From the very beginning of freshman year it was clear that the achievement of high academic and moral standards was the prime goal of the school. Diane believed that sometimes the teachers went too far in attempting to maintain the standards, like the time several months into the semester when she was first to arrive at her Latin class, trying to decide where to sit. If she sat in the front, she'd be considered an apple polisher. In the back she'd be trying to get away with something. Since she was neither, she sat in the middle.

She was hardly listening to a question one of the students was asking about the ablative case when Mother Immaculata interrupted the lesson and sniffed around Elly Fitzpatrick's desk. "All right, young lady. Turn your pocketbook upside down and shake it. Right away."

At first Elly hesitated, then she did as told. Out came a bus pass, a few small coins, a handkerchief, two pencils, one with no point, a pen, a vial of perfume, three sticks of Wrigley's spearmint gum. Finally, the contraband. A gold-encased tube of lipstick. The lipstick didn't just come out on the desk but kept rolling back and forth, back and forth.

Elly put her hand out but Mother Immaculata's penetrating eyes made her hand go back. The rolling came to a seemingly never-ending, slow stop. Elly looked like she was clenching her teeth, anticipating Mother's scolding.

"You're lucky I didn't find cigarettes in that pocketbook, or a boy's ring. You seem to have forgotten a section of the regulations manual. If you go back and read it, you'll find on page nine that it says and I quote, 'Boys' rings and makeup are fertile fields of distraction from study.' Now give me the lipstick."

Elly handed it to her.

Mother Immaculata kept squinting. "You think just because you put on a light coat of that lipstick nobody sees it? And don't give me that chapped lips story, you can use Vaseline for that. How many times have you been told that you are not to wear makeup in uniform?"

Mother Immaculata hurled the lipstick into the metal wastepaper basket.

Ping. The echo was maddening.

"Wipe your mouth, Miss Fitzpatrick, and the next time I see you with even a hint of lipstick, you'll be expelled. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

"And as for that chewing gum, start reciting."

Elly faced the class and straightened her maroon bow tie.

"A gum-chewing girl, and a cud-chewing cow,
What is the difference, I know now,
The intelligent look on the face of the cow."

Diane was hit with an attack of giggles, like the kind she had from the tension of all the silence during retreat. When Elly saw her, she started giggling, too. Soon the whole class was out of control.

Mother Immaculata stared at the group. "Tonight you will all do ten extra pages of translations."

A student raised her hand. "Latin or French."

The rest of the class grunted.

Mother tipped her head and opened her eyes and mouth. "Come to think of it, both."

Diane was upset that everyone was going to be punished on account of her. That stank. Take it like a man.

Murmuring scattered throughout the room as she stood up. "Mother, it was my fault. I was the one laughing." She could feel the

laughter bubbling up again so she swallowed hard. “Just let me do the translations, not everybody.”

“No,” Mother Immaculata said. “The whole class will do them. And I’m not surprised you were the instigator. I remember when you almost got expelled yourself for your giggling fits, and for your unlady-like behavior such as licking the top of your Dixie Cup instead of using a spoon. And for being so generous in trying to save your classmates, you, Miss Pinto, can do twenty pages. Naturally in both French and Latin.”

The bell rang and Mother Immaculata pranced out of the room.



Elly came up to Diane after school. “Thanks for trying to bail us out.”

“I can’t believe this place. Great academics but such baloney we have to deal with. We might as well be in the army.” She slapped her knee. “Sometimes I think these nuns got their training during the war, from the Gestapo. They treat you like you’re five years old instead of fifteen.”

Why did the subject of five-year-olds make Mother St. Paul’s World History class enter her head? The rows they sat in—diamonds, rubies, pearls, and what was next? The pebbles and the dirt. The way they had to move from row to row according to how they answered questions based on readings assigned for homework. She wouldn’t dare come to class unprepared so if she didn’t answer a question correctly, she’d have to move to a lower row. Why didn’t it bother the students who didn’t study beforehand to end up sitting in the dirt row? Some day, by God, she was going to find out.

Elly groaned. “And if I hear one more story about the Kennedy family, I’ll go berserk.”

“Which story?”

"The one they repeat over and over again so they can scare you into not disobeying church rules. The one where Kathleen Kennedy marries a Protestant in a civil ceremony."

"Marries a Protestant? I never heard that one. What did they say? Was the Holy Ghost supposed to strike her dead?" She started giggling.

"Come on, Diane, you must've heard it. She dies in a plane crash. Her husband, the Protestant," Elly emphasized, "dies in some kind of accident. And Joseph Kennedy Jr., the only Kennedy who attended the ceremony, a civil ceremony let me remind you, dies accidentally, too."

"I never heard that Kennedy story before. If it's true, that's pretty creepy. My father always said that everything comes in threes. But that's really creepy." The giggles erupted again. "I promise I'll never marry a Protestant, never even date a Protestant, if they stop telling the story."

"I can't stand when they get carried away. Like the time Kathleen O'Hara, you know, the one who graduated last year and went to Wellesley. They made novenas that she wouldn't become a communist. Anyway, when she went to the junior prom here, they thought her dress was too low-cut. So they pinned crepe paper, yes you heard me right, crepe paper to her dress all the way up to her neck. The guy she went with was so embarrassed he never called her again."

"No wonder he never called her, it must've been like dating a charlotte russe."

She was still giggling and supporting her ribs when Elly said, "Listen, Diane, speaking of guys, I have a problem. You're good at figuring out what to do in cases like this."

"I just love problems, tell me about yours."

"You see, I really want to ask Dan Sheehan to the junior dance, but I can't do it. Just thinking about him gives me," she grabbed her chest, "palpitations. What if he says no?"

"Let me think about it. I'll come up with something."

"You'd better hurry up, the dance is next weekend."



That evening Diane made a phone call. "Hi, Dan, it's Diane. Just wanted to know if you and Elly would like to go in the car with me and Ted."

Silence. Then, "Go where?"

"To the dance next Friday."

"What dance?"

"The junior dance. Oh, Dan, didn't Elly call you yet?"

"No."

"Oh, I'm so humiliated. But, Dan, you will go, won't you?"

"Uh, I guess so."

"Good. Now when she calls you, don't spill the beans. She'll never forgive me for having such a bad sense of timing. Promise?"

"Sure."

"Thanks, Dan. The both of you can come with us. See you next Friday. And even then, keep it under your hat."

"Don't worry, Diane, I won't say a word."

"You're a great guy. Thanks again. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

She hung up. Couldn't control the giggling. Would give anything to see the expression on his face.

Time to call Elly. "Guess what."

"What?"

"Dan's going."

"You're kidding."

"No, he said he's going, he can't back out now. But wait a day, maybe two before you call him."



It wasn't long after freshmen arrived at St. Ursula's, usually less than a month, before the nuns began to brainwash the students about the senior prom. Stories began to emerge about girls who became pregnant the night of the prom, those who drank too much, or wore strapless gowns.

By junior year Mother Catherine had told one strapless gown story too many. Diane was fed up. She looked through magazines for pictures of that infamous gown hoping to paste them onto oak tag and hang it on Mother Catherine's office door. But she happened to come across a joke about that strapless seductor instead.

A woman tells her husband that their teenage daughter wants to wear a strapless gown for the prom. The mother is not sure the girl is old enough to wear it. The wisdom of the father exudes when he advises his wife to let the girl try it on, and if it stays up, she's old enough to wear it.

Diane cut the joke out of the magazine. Before class the next day she placed the joke on Mother Catherine's desk, then immediately took her seat.

Mother Catherine came in, a heavy book in her hand. The class began.

It was thirty minutes into *Macbeth* with the students taking turns acting out the parts. Mother stopped the reading to ask a question about Duncan. While waiting for an answer, she placed her book on the desk.

Diane stopped breathing. Had to keep her nose in the text.

Why was it so quiet? Oh, no. Mother Catherine's head was down. Diane kept hers down too, but her eyes up. Holy shit on toast with marmalade on top! Was Mother reading the joke?

Diane knew the answer when Mother Catherine's face turned as white as the bib of her habit. She twirled the paper through the air. "Who is responsible for this?" No wonder the girls nicknamed her

Mother St. Nag. At least give her credit for being alive, not like Mother Rigor Mortis.

Silence.

“Now who’s the perpetrator? Unless the culprit confesses, the class trip to the nation’s capital will be canceled.”

Mother would find out anyway. After some soul-searching, Diane admitted that she was guilty. Mother sneered at her. Diane would do one better, have a whose-eyes-can-fall-out-of-your-head-first contest, stare her down and not stop till Mother would be the one to cave in, look away first. Whatever punishment she got would be worth it.

Diane was the only one not allowed to go to Washington. The hell with it. Some day she’d go on her own. She took her punishment well.

And for some strange reason the subject of strapless gowns never came up again.



Diane gathered some of her friends at a round table in the library to study for a biology test. “Let’s review the parts of the digestive system and their function.”

Elly Fitzpatrick rolled her chair back and forth. “The respiratory, circulatory, nervous, digestive systems. Digestion, digestion, digestion. We all know about the mouth, teeth, tongue, salivary glands, epiglottis, and the rest of it. We’ve seen all the diagrams and’ve put all the parts of the model together, at least five times. I see those parts in my sleep. What I want to study is the reproductive system.”

“You’ll never learn about that here,” Sheila Kelleher said. “There aren’t any pictures of the reproductive system in any of the texts.”

“How do you know?” Elly said.

“I looked already.”

Elly sighed. “What about in an anatomy book?”

“There are a few on the shelf, but all those pages were scissored out.”

Chickie Federico closed her book. “Did any of you ever see a penis?”

“I did,” Sheila said. “My brother’s, he’s twenty.”

“How did that happen?” Diane said.

“He was just stepping out of the shower, and had forgotten to lock the bathroom door. I walked in on him. I was more embarrassed than he was.”

“Do you know if a penis has a bone in it, Diane?” Elly said.

“I don’t even know if it can move voluntarily like an arm or a leg. When we studied the skeletal system, I remember our skeletons, Brunhilda and Homer. But I don’t remember seeing a bone on Homer in that area.”

The girls looked at each other.

Diane turned to Chickie. “You’re always telling us about the great relationship you have with your uncle, better than with your parents. I’m giving you an assignment. Ask him those questions.”

A few days later Chickie reported to the group that the penis was a boneless muscle that could only move when it was excited.

“How does it get excited?” Elly said.

“You know,” Chickie said, “like when after the guy kisses you for a while, it gets hard and moves around.”

Elly’s eyes popped. “Oh, is that what that is?”

Diane thought about her own experiences. Kissing. Fun, but that’s as far as it went, or would ever go until marriage. How could it be any different? For in every nook, and at the end of every hallway at St. Ursula’s was yet another statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Our Lady of Fatima, the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of the Holy Rosary. They got the message. Ladies, pure ladies, pure smart ladies. That’s what they were expected to be. Even her parents and grandmother expected it. And after hearing so many boys gossip about loose girls,

and brag about their sexual conquests, true or not, she decided she wouldn't give any guy the slightest chance to talk about her in that way.

Her mind returned to her friends, sitting around the table. She could almost catch those hormones floating, more likely gushing around the table, hormone problems for which the nuns had a remedy. Don't allow them to occur. Pour on so much work the students would all crave sleep instead of sex.

With four years of tough academic subjects crushed into three, and long summer reading lists from which book reports were due when the students returned to school, the nuns almost always won the battle. And just as well, because she was about to enter college this fall of 1948 with five full-tuition scholarships. Good prestige for the school, and better for her parents' pocketbook.

Bet the nuns were pleased they hadn't expelled her.

CHAPTER 7



College was exciting for Diane. It was fun, freedom. Choosing your own courses, no staircases reserved for going up or down, no keeping to the right in hallways, nobody telling you what to wear, including makeup.

She couldn't wait for the first formal. A pink strapless gown is what she bought. She looked sideways at her breasts in the mirror and smiled a smile Beelzebub himself couldn't have come up with. While her breasts weren't large, they were full, and certainly ample enough to hold up any strapless gown.

After the rigorous education she had received at St. Ursula's, Diane found college relatively easy. Students came from all over the city to attend the Manhattan-based, all women's Maria Regina College. They were all dayhops because there were no accommodations for boarders.

Fiona O'Leary became her best friend. They spent many hours in the laboratory where the professor constantly reminded them that the word 'laboratory' was for labor not oratory.

They were cleaning up after a long, tiring session in the lab. "What made you decide to major in chemistry?" Fiona asked.

"Well, I always wanted to be an opera singer, but I'm a firm believer in knowing what you are and more importantly, what you are not. I had to face the sad reality that I wasn't good enough. And I enjoyed

chemistry in high school. Of course I'll always want to blame my father for not becoming a singer."

"Why, for not inheriting a good enough voice?"

She kept polishing the test tube she was holding up to the light. "Actually, because he thinks that studying music was good for your cultural upbringing, but he's very old-fashioned, thinks women who have careers on the stage have tainted reputations." She put down the test tube, and threw herself into a chair, laughing so hard she had to hold her sides. "You should've seen his face." She stopped to cover hers and shake her head. "His face, the day...we went to the Met to see Lily Pons in *Lakmé*. He almost...almost fainted when she came out on the stage in her slave costume. With her, with her navel exposed."

Fiona laughed, too. "Her navel! Scandalous. The Legion of Decency should put *Lakmé* on the condemned list. But seriously though, Diane, you're a very good singer. I enjoy all your performances."

"I sound good to the untrained ear, but God didn't give me that special piece of gristle to make it in opera. But now that television's revolutionizing America it might be a good time to major in communications. I considered that or taking some electives in advanced writing and journalism. But I don't know what opportunities there are for women in that field. All the news reporters on TV are men."

"You're certainly pretty enough to be on TV, Diane. You should enter the Rheingold beer contest, you could easily be voted Miss Rheingold. I hate you, you're disgustingly pretty, actually beautiful, even in that lab coat. I'm surprised you're not conceited."

"Who can stand conceited people?" Diane placed several beakers she had just scrubbed with Blue Cheer and rinsed incessantly into the cabinet. "And you're too pretty to be a physician."

"Don't say that word out loud, my mother may hear it. She wants to die when she thinks of me considering any specialty other than pediatrics. She justifies my being a physician in her own mind if she

thinks I'm going to take care of poor, sick children because it's more like service to the church. It's my father who supports my goal of being a surgeon."

"Doesn't his opinion matter to her?"

"Only when he wants her to feel guilty."

"How does he do that?"

Fiona's smile widened. "I'm the only one of five O'Leary children who isn't a blue-eyed blonde with a turned-up nose. My father loves to tease my mother that I look more like the postman, the milkman, the insurance agent, or any other male he can concoct, than anyone in either of their families. That's the way he controls her, throws fake guilt on her because she's such a stiff he knows her conceiving a child other than his would've been an impossibility. He's still trying to figure out how any of us were born."

"I have a fabulous mother. And grandmother. My grandmother could've written our psychology text. She already taught the course." Diane climbed on top of the lab table, created a hand megaphone, and placed it over her mouth. "Ladies and gentlemen: Postpone immediate gratification for success later on. Motivation can get you anything. Set high expectations for yourself and if you don't have the need to affiliate, do what everybody else is doing." She felt her ear lobes. "God, like those pierced ears. You have a better chance to achieve."

"What does pierced ears have to do with it?"

She came down from the table. "That was a symbol of affiliating, of being like the peasants who came here. My grandmother thought they were too insular, couldn't participate fully in American life. And she knew where she wanted all of us to be on the normal curve. I can still hear it being drummed into my head. 'Be the best you can be at anything you do.' Between her and the nuns at St. Ursula, it's a wonder I'm still sane." She jerked her head to the side, keeping her mouth and eyes open wide. "Or am I?"

"So you went to one of those schools, too?"

“It’s the weirdest thing. I ran into a girl who went to high school with me and she feels the same way. We couldn’t believe that with all the insanity that went on there, we always had the sense that the nuns really had our interests at heart. It’s the kind of situation you hate while you’re in it but can only appreciate once you’re out. And we did graduate with a tremendous amount of knowledge and skills. It’s incredible how nostalgic we felt about the old prison.”

“Now that you’ve mentioned nuns, Diane, Patty Collins’s mother wants her to be a nun. Patty’s not sure whether she wants to be a nun or a research chemist like her father. She’s so confused.”

“That’s probably because her mother wanted to be a nun herself, never resolved it, and wants to resolve it through Patty.”

“Look who’s a psychologist!” Fiona raised her eyebrows. “Come to think of it you’d make a good psychologist. Everybody’s always telling you their problems.”

“Did that in high school, too. And since you brought up mothers, do you know that Philomena Garofalo’s mother is giving her a hard time? Phil’s so down in the dumps. Her mother’s not supportive of her even going to college, not to mention medical school. Phil says her mother is more concerned with her bowel movements than she is with her intellectual development. Her brother, Greg, is a pre-med student at Fordham. It’s okay for him to be a doctor, but for a woman, that’s another story.”

“That makes me sick.”

“Me, too. Phil constantly complains that when her parents have some kind of ailment and she tells them what to do about it, they always check her recommendation with Greg. It drives her nuts.”

Diane suddenly had a chilling thought. Would her parents have treated her differently, her own education considered less important, if she had an older, or even younger brother? Or expected just to graduate from high school, be a secretary like her second cousin, Lucille, or married at eighteen with a baby at nineteen, like her

father's youngest brother's wife, Nilda? Her cousin's friend, Marisa, selling cosmetics in a drug store as a career.



Diane, Fiona, Patty, and Phil became inseparable as they took most of their courses together and studied together. Diane was sure that Fiona and Phil would get into medical school because they were both super-smart students.

On the weekends they took turns staying at each other's houses, especially if they attended a social event at another college and were coming home late. A convenient arrangement since Maria Regina was located midway between the two major routes where the girls lived, the Third Avenue El and the D train on the Independent Subway. The girls saved their dimes for the ride.

Diane was pleased that even though she was two years younger than her classmates, they always encouraged her to join them. They had told her that she was more than welcome at mixers. The boys would flock around her and she would dance with one of them. Then the girls would meet the overflow of young men who would wait for her to be free again.

But time was passing. Quickly. Why did it always seem to pass more quickly the older you got? She was already completing her third year of college. Would she get a job when she graduated? Probably. Especially in science. But what if nobody would hire her because she was a woman?

Now, the evening of the junior prom, she was not even halfway to nineteen, still the five-feet-five she'd reached by age thirteen. She stood in front of the mirror puffing Coty's powder all over her face. She filled in her heart-shaped lips with Tangee's Pink Passion lipstick, took some of the lipstick off the tube with her finger and blended the color into her cheeks. With her pompadour adjusted and fortified with brown bobby pins, she let the rest of her curly hair cascade over her shoulders.

And wouldn't those nuns at St. Ursula just love her pink tulle strapless gown.



Diane was singing "Because of You" along with Tony Bennett when Fiona let out a screech. Diane lowered the radio and ran into the next room.

Fiona kept stroking the phone against her cheek. "Do you remember that guy I met this summer, you know, Tom Flynn, the one who goes to Columbia? That guy I'm C-R-A-Z-Y about?" Fiona didn't wait for her answer. "He just called to ask me to a dance on Saturday night. And he wants you to come and meet his roommate."

Fiona danced around the room, first as a ballerina, then as a Rockette. She stopped to catch her breath. "Every time I think about his blonde hair and those green eyes, I could die." She threw herself on the floor and kicked her feet.

Diane looked down at Fiona as she then rolled around the floor blaring Tom Flynn's name. It was so unlike her to behave that way. "First of all, we have a physical chemistry midterm Monday, and we have to study. Second, you know what I think of Columbia men. Everybody laughs at them at the American Chemical Society meetings. They're always deliberately mispronouncing the names of the elements so that everybody'll know that they come from Columbia. Really now. *Ox-eye'*-gen. *Chlor-eyn'*. Enough to make you puke."

Fiona got up, beat the dust off her skirt. "These fellows aren't in science or engineering, they're in the law school. And besides, Tom's roommate is Italian."

"Great, so I get to meet another prince whose mother has catered to his every whim and who expects a wife who'll do the same. Thanks, but no thanks. I'll stay home and study." She raised her eyes and put her finger on her temple. "Unless, of course, he looks like Gregory Peck." She paused. "And how did they get to go to law school? Weren't they drafted right after college?"

"I asked him that when I first met him and just again. Hypertension, really abnormally high, both Tom and his roommate."

"Sounds like fun, army rejects and I'm lucky to get one of them as a date who could have a cerebral hemorrhage on me. Don't they have a treatment for high blood pressure, Doc?"

"I asked Tom. No medications yet, but I'm sure some company's working on it so it's only a matter of time. So far it's just eating cooked, unsalted rice, apricots, and keeping away from salt in everything else."

"Yuk."

Fiona placed her hands together as though she was praying. "Please, Diane, pretty please with ice cream, cake, cookies, chocolate, and sugar on top."

She kept shaking her head and Fiona kept begging. "Pretty, pretty, please. I really like this guy. I've been hoping he'd call me for weeks now, even made believe in the beginning that I didn't remember who he was, he had to refresh my memory. Isn't that hysterical?"

"You conniver. Isn't he the one whose picture you use for a bookmark? So now that it's almost the end of October, what excuse did he give you for not calling sooner?"

"He's Editor-in-Chief of the *Columbia Law Review*, a full-time job in itself. He says he has some rough courses this semester and's been studying hard to keep up his rank in class. He's graduating in June and wants to get a good corporate job."

"You think that's a valid enough excuse for not calling you for two months?"

"Listen, I'm glad he still remembered me. Come on, Diane, we'll study the rest of this week and all day Saturday and Sunday. What do you say? We could use Saturday night to give our brains a break."

"Is that the advice from a future physician, give our brains a break?" She took some time to think about it. "Okay, if you insist. I can see Tom's roommate now, a real drip, blown up from too much

water retention, but you owe me one. What time do they want to pick us up?"

"That's another problem. Tom has to go to some kind of law seminar up in Albany and won't be back until later Saturday. We have to meet them there, but they'll take us home."

"Are you sure that won't be too much trouble for the Columbians?" she said with a sneer. "Boy, what I don't do for friendship."

"What're you going to wear, Diane?"

"As usual, I'll make up my mind the last minute. But let me make a suggestion."

Fiona tipped her head forward.

"You make sure you wear Kelly green. Irish guys always succumb to Kelly green. They can relate to it. It'll give you two a connection."

"I don't have anything that color."

"Shame on you, Miss O'Leary."

"But you're right. I'll find something Kelly green before Saturday."

Diane went back into the adjacent room and raised the volume on the radio. Tony Bennett was now singing the song on the flip side of the record, "I Won't Cry Anymore."



Diane and Fiona donned their white gloves and left for Morning-side Heights while it was still light out. It was the last Saturday of Daylight Savings Time.

Diane was anxious about getting over to the Columbia bookstore before it closed at 5:00 to pick up a physical chemistry review book. These books always added perspective or clarified textbook concepts. She suggested that Fiona look through the Low Library. They arranged to meet at the library entrance after they finished.

Even though they began the trip early, with the cross-town traffic tied up, it was almost twenty minutes to five when Diane arrived at the bookstore. On the door was posted the hours: Monday-Friday, 9-9; Saturday, 9-5; Sunday-Closed. Damn. Not much time to browse.

In the next ten minutes she managed to go through several books before settling on one.

She noticed that a young man was watching her. When she caught his eye, he moved his head and looked at a stack of books in front of him.

Then it happened again. But this time, instead of moving his head, he smiled at her.

She ignored him and meandered over to the cashier and checked some of those impulse items that were for sale—Mounds, Chicklets, Hershey bars with almonds, only two left, bookmarks, a Tootsie Roll sign, an empty rack behind it.

A man wearing a ‘manager’ tag locked the store from the inside and only the remaining customers were being served. Several people began to line up by the cashier. She let them go ahead of her so that she could spend more time deciding whether or not the book she chose was really the best.

When she got on line, there were only four people in front of her. She was the last, and while waiting her turn, kept reading through the book she’d selected.

She looked up to see how the checkout was progressing. The same young man who had been watching her was just ahead of her. It was his turn to approach the register.

“\$3.73,” the cashier said.

The young man patted his pants pockets, slipped his hands in them in a way that looked like he was fishing for change, fumbled through his jacket, turned his wallet upside down, and shook it over the counter. All he could come up with was three singles and two quarters.

“Sorry,” the cashier said, “you’ll have to come back Monday.”

“But I can’t wait, I have a big exam first class Monday morning and I need this book to study. It’s a special book that only Columbia carries. Can I bring you the rest of the money Monday?”

"It's not our policy to give out any merchandise without receiving full payment. Sorry. Next, please."

"Great, what am I supposed to do?" He turned to her. "Say, can you lend me a quarter? I'll pay you back."

She gave him a sweeping look from his hair to his shoes and back to his wavy brown hair and soft brown eyes. "I don't even know you."

He looked disappointed, and she felt guilty. How would she feel if she couldn't get a book she needed for an exam? She opened her change purse, pulled out a quarter, and gave it to the cashier.

"Jee thanks. Here." The young man tossed a pad and pen that he pulled from his jacket onto the counter. "Write your name and address down and I'll send you the money. Or come back with me to the dorm and I'll give it to you right then and there."

What a line! Some case, giving this creep her address or going anywhere with him. "It's not necessary, let's just say it's my investment in your future. Good luck with your exam."

"But I insist."

"Tell you what. When you get famous, or if I'm starving, I'll find you."

"How can I ever thank you?"

"Get an A on the test." She handed the cashier her book and a five-dollar bill.

"But how will you know if I got an A on the exam? Hey, what's your name?"

"I'm the goddess, Generosity." She smiled, picked up her package and change, and left her bewildered-looking beneficiary to be ushered out of the bookstore by the manager, who with keys in his hand, appeared to be in a hurry to lock up and leave.



Diane strolled to the library where Fiona was waiting.

"What time are we supposed to meet these guys?" Diane said.

"At seven, and it's not fashionable that we be there on time."

"We have almost two hours to kill. It's safer to stay on campus than wander around the neighborhood looking for a place to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Not particularly, just want a sandwich or something."

"Then let's go to The Lion's Den. I've heard about it but've never been there before."

"Sounds good to me."

When they were almost at the Lion's Den, Fiona said, "Did you get the book?"

"Now you ask? I can see you're really interested in getting a good grade."

"I trust your judgment and noticed you had a package. I assumed the book was in it, but all of a sudden, I wasn't sure. Besides I'm getting very anxious about seeing Tom again and my mind's not on the midterm."

"Well, it had better be because you know that every test adds up when you're applying to medical school. And this semester's grades will be the last chance you have." She leaned toward Fiona and whispered, "You know you have to be better than the men they're going to give preference to, so wake up. You can meet a lot of other guys, especially in med school, you'll be surrounded. But you get your chance to go to medical school only once. Don't blow it."

"You're right. But there's something about Tom that's special. You'll know what I mean when you meet him and speak to him for a while."

"They're all like that when you first meet them. If there's anything I've learned observing my cousins' marriages, it's that the truth comes later."

"What kind of book did you buy?"

"I went through a few and found one that has a clear explanation of phase diagrams as well as practice exercises and answers related to the problems we discussed in class. There's even a brief review of calculus, just enough for our computations."

“Good, I was worried that you wouldn’t have enough time to find anything.”

“I almost didn’t. By the way, I thought Columbia men were supposed to be smart.”

“They have to have high SAT scores and excellent high school records.”

“Well, I ran into one whose father must’ve donated a building to have gotten him in.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was this jerk ahead of me on line. He didn’t figure out until he gets to the cash register that he didn’t have enough money to buy a book he needed for an exam Monday. *Semper paratus* may be the Boy Scouts’ motto, but it surely isn’t Columbia’s. I’m not even one of those rich Barnard girls and I end up giving him a quarter.”

“What’s twenty-five cents in what it costs for an education today?”

“I really felt sorry for the jerk, with our having a test on Monday, too. I knew how it would be if we couldn’t’ve gotten our review book. Anyway, maybe some day someone’ll give me some money, if I should get stuck.”

“Spoken by a girl who’s gone to Catholic school, but one who doesn’t remember her Shakespeare. ‘Neither a borrower nor a lender be.’”

Fiona ordered a corned beef sandwich and Diane, a hamburger.

“I’m really not hungry,” Diane said.

“Neither’m I. Guess I’m worried about holding Tom’s attention for the whole evening.”

Diane kept picking at her food. “Where are we supposed to meet these two?”

“In the lobby of Casa Italiana.”

“Will they let you in, O’Leary?”

“I do have an O in my last name even if it’s in the beginning. Besides, Diane, I’m the one who looks Italian, not you.”

“I guess you’re right, O’Leary-o. Let’s go.”



Tom Flynn had returned late from the law seminar and didn't have a chance to eat because he was concerned about keeping the girls waiting. For a while he stood on the northeast corner of 117th and Amsterdam, then began pacing up and down in front of the entrance to the Casa Italiana.

Tom liked Fiona ever since he first met her but wasn't too anxious to get involved with any females this year, especially since he had too much work as Editor of the *Columbia Law Review*. He was still debating with himself whether or not this whole evening was a good idea when he saw Fiona and her friend approach.

"Hi, Fiona."

"Hi, Tom." Fiona pushed her friend in front of him. "This is Diane Pinto."

"Good to meet you, Diane."

They shook hands.

He got between the two girls and took them by the arm. "I like your dress, Fiona. Kelly green's my favorite color."

"Thank you."

Both Diane and Fiona cleared their throats.



Tom's roommate wasn't interested in his blind date. He had wandered into the lounge of the Casa Italiana and was off in a corner involved in a discussion with one of his former professors, one with whom he had taken some Italian courses as an undergraduate, and the professor who was being honored at the dance this evening for his contribution to Italian culture.

He stood with his back toward the lobby, his right foot perched on the first rung of a stool that was left out after decorating the lounge.

Tom called out. "Mike."

He turned around. His foot got tangled in the stool, and both he and his support crashed on the floor. Boy, did that hurt. The thud surprised him much less, however, than the surprise that awaited him when he looked up and saw Tom flanked by the two girls. The redhead's eyes were open wide and there was a smile that was almost a laugh on her face. Oh, Jesus Christ in heaven, that beauty's Tom's date, that Irish girl he's been raving about.

He hastily got up and shook the dust off his trousers. He avoided the temptation of rubbing the spot where he had just received a significant bump, soon-to-be lump.

"This is Mike Pisani," Tom said. "Mike, I'd like to you meet Fiona O'Leary and her friend, Diane Pinto." He pointed to each girl respectively.

He was more stunned that the redhead was his date than he was with the pain in his right thigh, hip, and buttock. He hardly acknowledged Fiona's presence. "So you're the one Tom said would be my date. You're Diane Pinto."

"Diane Mary Pinto. Now let me try something on you, something I learned in my psychology class. What was the first thing that came to your mind when you first heard the name, Diane Pinto?"

A smart aleck. But she was such a gorgeous smart aleck, he didn't care. "A horse."

She laughed. "A pinto is a horse, a rather motley one. But nobody ever made that association for me before, at least not to my face."

Tom interrupted them. "Mike's in my class at the law school."

"Ah," Diane said, "I'm glad he's in law and not in math or, heaven forbid, physical education."

He really was a clunk their first two meetings. What kind of impression had he made on her? She was justified in saying what she did. Oh, no, was he making excuses for her already? "I thought your name was Generosity, have you come to collect your money so soon? I have it for you now, I went back to my room to replenish my wallet."

Tom seemed confused.

Diane said, "We've already met. In the bookstore."

"Is this the guy you were telling me about?" Fiona asked.

Mike smiled. "So I did make an indelible impression on you. Admit it, I'm in your blood."

"What makes you think I referred to you in a positive context? Now I find that besides not being able to count, and let's not mention your athletic talent, you also have a big ego."

He assumed a humble expression. "I guess I'll have to behave myself, and besides, I already owe you."

"Be careful," she said, "or I'll demand interest."

"How much?"

"Usurious amounts."

They both chuckled. Tom and Fiona watched the bantering for a while, then moved to the side and engaged in their own conversation.

The orchestra began to play, and at the sound of the first few chords, several couples stood up and headed for the stairs. Without asking first, Michael took Diane's hand, followed the couples across the hallway, up the marble staircase past the statue of Dante into the long auditorium with its rusticated plasterwork and coffered ceiling. The auditorium was set up so that there was a dance floor in the middle with tables and chairs arranged in clusters around the periphery.

Thank his lucky stars the first dance was a fox trot, something he could almost do, not a lindy. The pain from his fall was excruciating, and he wasn't adept at the popular fast steps. Better yet, in a slow dance he could hold his fascinating and most pleasantly surprising blind date close to him.

Their first two encounters made him look like a bungling idiot so he tried to be especially careful that for the rest of the evening he present himself as mature, bright, and suave. He avoided the conversations that people of college age usually engaged in after meeting for the first time, often chatting about where they lived, attended school,

and what they majored in. He already knew Diane's major from Tom, when he tried to convince him to take Diane Pinto, the horse, as a blind date. Men were warned to be wary of female chemistry majors. They were too bright and challenging and certainly not feminine. But just looking at Diane exploded the femininity myth.

While he kept trying to think of what to say, something with which he acknowledged most lawyers or prospective lawyers rarely have difficulty, he continued to remain quiet. That wasn't hard to do. The way he felt with her in his arms made his thinking quite muddled. He actually didn't care whether he thought or not. What popped into his head were the lyrics to the song the orchestra was now playing. Ezio Pinza sang them in *South Pacific*. "Once you have found her, never let her go. Once you have found her, never let her go." And he had definitely found her. For a few seconds Michael couldn't remember the name of the song. Then it came to him, "Some Enchanted Evening."

If any of his friends had ever told him about the experience he was now having, feeling this way about a girl, conjuring up words to songs, not wanting to talk, he would've labeled him a stupid idiot. These feelings don't happen to real people, just to people in movies. But now with Diane's breasts against his chest, the soft pink cheek toward which his lips moved ever so close, and the curl with the scent of a recent shampoo resting on his nose, it wouldn't have mattered what anyone would've called him. He had never met anyone like her before. Witty in a provocative way, spirited, and beautiful beyond belief.

When the dance was over, it was too difficult letting her go. Did her silence mean that she had the same feeling, didn't know what to say, or didn't care?

With his hand still locked in hers, he led her to one of the tables that surrounded the dance floor. When they were both seated, he was the first to break the silence. "Generosity, would you care for something to eat or drink?"

She raised one eyebrow. "Will I have to clean the tables to pay for it?"

He raised his palm. "Truce. Now that I know who you are, I can pay you what I owe."

He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out a quarter, and handed it to Diane. She took it from him, opened his hand, placed the coin in his palm, closed his fingers, and placed the fist they created against his chest.

"Truce." She looked at him. He looked at her eyes and held her hand again.

Tom and Fiona joined them. Tom patted Michael's hand, which covered Diane's. "You two seem to be hitting it off."

"You're right, we are." Mike raised the hand he couldn't let go. "I have just proposed to her and she has offered me her hand in marriage."

Diane stared at the ceiling looking like someone praying for patience.

"Have you set a date?" Tom said.

Michael thought for a few seconds. "Actually, it should be the week after graduation. But I wish it could be sooner. I must be practical, however, making sure that I have a super job to support this wonderful woman in the style she deserves."

He and Tom, both wearing gray flannel suits, proceeded with the questioning as though they were role-playing in their law school classes.

He, the defendant, with his right hand raised and left hand suspended over a non-existent Bible, swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth while he watched from the corner of his eye Diane's reaction.

Tom, the prosecuting attorney, probed further. "And how long have you known the prospective bride?"

He pulled a watch out of his vest pocket, letting the watch dangle from its chain until it came to a stop. "Approximately two and a half hours."

"And do you think that this amount of time is sufficient for you to make such a momentous decision?"

"Absolutely. I knew from the instant that I laid eyes on her in the bookstore."

"And does she feel the same way about you?"

He moved his eyes from Tom and focused them on Diane. "She doesn't know it yet, but I will convince her. And I will never give up to my dying day." He kissed her hand. "I will be persistent and will not take no for an answer. She will be my wife and we will live happily ever after."

Diane's face and hair were one color now. "The jury's still out on that one," she said, "but there's one verdict that can be reached. If you don't make it in law, you'll certainly make it in Hollywood."

She, Tom, and Fiona laughed. He didn't. He pulled Diane up by the hand he kept holding, and headed for the dance floor once again.

During the rest of the evening they danced every dance but hardly spoke to each other.

He and Tom took the girls to Fiona's house. Michael walked Diane up to the door. "Diane Mary Pinto, you are an enchantress. My hat goes off to Rodgers and Hammerstein for their song, this was truly some enchanted evening." He sang, "Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, you may see a stranger, across the bo-ok store." He stopped singing, picked up her hand, kissed it. "I'm not quite as good as Ezio Pinza, but I'm much luckier because I was able to share this enchanted evening with you." He kissed her hand again. "I'll call you."

She shrugged. "If you want to."



Diane waited at the door for Fiona to say goodnight to Tom. She and Fiona entered the hallway.

Fiona locked the door, quickly turned around and gasped. "Well, what do you think about Tom?"

She had to think for a few seconds. "Definitely not the type who would drive with the top down, but I like him."

Fiona put her hands on her hips. "That was some strange date you had. What's with him, is he for real?"

"Remember whose friend he is. And if birds of a feather flock together, you're in trouble, too. I'm not sure what he's up to. After that judicial farce he didn't say much for the rest of the night. But frankly," she tried to believe her own words, "I don't care if I ever see him again. Besides, I'm tired and want to get enough rest so we can prepare for the midterm. Let's not forget to change the clocks."

"I can never remember. Do we move the time ahead or back?"

"Spring forward. Fall back."

"That's good. Can use the extra hour sleep."

Diane adjusted the hour hand on her wristwatch. "How did you and Tom get along? You two didn't stop talking all night. I don't even remember seeing you dance. But aren't you glad you took my advice and wore Kelly green?"

"I'll always take your advice, especially if it gets me the wonderful guy I was out with tonight. Tom's even better than I remembered him. I'd love to see him again." Her dreamy look disappeared. "But then, there's medical school. Do you think Mike'll call you?"

She was thinking about Michael's chiseled features. Not exactly Gregory Peck but very well carved. "He said he would, but I never gave him my number. He didn't even ask for it, so I guess he just said that to be polite."

She was annoyed with herself because she was feeling disappointed. But she quickly reassured herself. She didn't care whether or not she ever saw that soft brown, twinkle-eyed, impetuous, wavy-haired, high-blood-pressured guy again.

After all, he was Italian-American, and she was focused on her career.

CHAPTER 8



“It’s for you. Someone named Mike.”

Hearing from him so soon? Diane thanked Mrs. O’Leary and walked over to the phone. “Hi.”

“Generosity?”

“Why don’t you just call me Gen for short?”

“If that’s what you want, anything you want. So tell me, do you miss me?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re really something.”

“Did you spend a sleepless night thinking about me?”

“The only thing that made me sleepless is my midterm tomorrow. But, Michael, really, you’re not busy enough. I have to talk to your dean, they don’t give you enough work in that law school. Excuse me, not just any old law school, that Columbia Law School.”

“I’m busy all right, thinking about you. When am I going to see you again?”

“To tell you the truth...”

“How about Friday night? I’ll figure out somewhere to go. Will you be home or at Fiona’s?”

“Friday’s not a good...”

“Listen, I told you last night I’m not taking no for an answer. Whatever you think you’re doing Friday, cancel it. You’re going out with me and that’s all there is to it.”

"Don't you think that's rather presumptuous?"

"Now you tell me we're going out Friday or I'll keep calling the O'Leary house until you do. Every five minutes until you say yes. And I'll do it, too, every five minutes, until they throw you out to get some peace. Now say yes."

Diane was reluctant, but he was so impetuous he just might do what he said, and she was a guest in the house. "Okay, but how did you get the O'Learys' phone number, from Tom?"

"Sure, that was easy. I even have your home number. That was a little harder. Actually after seeing you in the bookstore, I would've found you even if you weren't my blind date."

"And how did you propose to do that?"

"I have my methods. And I'm glad you mentioned propose. Just a reminder that we're going to be married. I looked up the date already. The first Saturday after graduation, it's June 14th. Right now I have to study for tomorrow morning's exam. I'll call you again tonight."

Michael hung up leaving her holding the phone.

What a nut. How could she get out of going out with him? Maybe she'd pretend to be sick, or give him the wrong place to pick her up, or stand him up.

But she knew she'd be there.



Later that evening Diane's phone rang. She rushed to get it on the first ring but just kept her hand over the receiver. On the fourth ring she picked up. "Hello."

"Gen?"

She tried to sound casual. "Oh, it's you."

"What did you do all day?"

"Studied for my chem exam."

"So did I."

"Studied for your chem exam?"

“Aren’t you a sketch. You know, for my law test. Thanks to you for letting me get my book before it was too late. So what do you like besides chemistry?”

“Music.”

“Me, too. What kind?”

“Opera.”

“Opera? Who’s your favorite singer?”

“Lots. Licia Albanese. Jussi Bjoerling.”

“Never heard of them. I like symphonic music, played the cello in high school.”

“I love the sound of a cello, warm and mellow. I never had time to study an orchestral instrument, just the piano.” She played a scale in the air.

“The cello was Arturo Toscanini’s instrument, before he became a conductor.”

“Did you ever see Toscanini live?”

“No.”

“Fiona and I went to Carnegie Hall to watch him rehearse the NBC Symphony. You can always tell after the first measure, even the first few chords when he’s conducting. You get chills.”

“Why don’t we go to a concert this weekend, orchestral. And next weekend we can go to an opera.”

“Aren’t you rushing things? Suppose you won’t want to go out with me again after this weekend?”

“For a girl who’s a chemistry major you’re not too smart. You still don’t get it, we’re going to be married. I want to be with you every day for the rest of my life. I was never more sure of anything.”

“You hardly know me.”

“I know you enough.”

Time to get on to another topic. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean what am I doing? Talking to you.”

“For a guy who’s a law student, you’re not too smart. You should know what I mean. What are you doing while you’re talking to me?”

"I'm lying in bed with my eyes closed, picturing you. What are you doing?"

"Twiddling the cord on the phone."

"That's not very romantic."

"Who said I was romantic?"

"I know you are, and that's what you like in a man."

"Well, don't you know everything. I bet you even know about my family." She kept playing with the phone cord.

"Not really. Pinto's an Italian name. Is your mother Irish or German?"

"No, both sides of my family come from Abruzzo."

"Where's that?"

"In the middle of the boot, on the Adriatic. They like to believe the myth that because they're in the middle, they're the purest Italians. Not invaded from the north, or from the south."

"Lots of people like to rewrite history. Do you have any sisters who look like you?"

"No."

"Brothers?"

"No."

"How about brothers or sisters who don't look like you?"

"No."

"You mean you're an only child?"

"Yep."

"You must be spoiled."

"Rotten. I told you you don't know anything about me. I also have a temper. Love to have tantrums when I don't get my way."

"They always say that about redheads."

"It's true. Have I discouraged you yet? I'm trying."

"Never. I'll consider it more of a challenge, taming you."

"What about your family, where do they come from?"

"My father was born in Naples. Came here when he was..."

“Naples!” She covered her mouth. “Remember that’s more south than Abruzzo.”

“You’re a snob.”

“That’s another of my shortcomings. Look at it this way. Naples is north of Sicily, that’s really the pits. Anyway, sorry for interrupting you, you were going to say how old your father was when he came here.”

“Thirteen.”

“Was your mother born in Naples, too?”

“No, she was born here, but she might as well’ve been born there. She’s very provincial.”

“Most Italians are. But not my grandmother, she’s really special, very progressive. Speaks English fluently, and is very proud of it.”

“My sister can’t even speak English, properly that is.

“Is she the only one you have?”

“Yes, I don’t have any brothers, either, just the one sister.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older, twenty-eight. She’s married. To a Polish cop.”

“That must’ve gone over like a lead balloon.”

“My father hates his guts, so does my mother. They think he’s lazy, don’t trust him, don’t like his lifestyle.”

“I’ve yet to meet any parent who likes the person his daughter or son’s going to marry. Parents always think their kids can do better.”

“Well, my parents are just going to adore you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, I can’t wait for them to meet you.”

“That’ll never happen, I don’t want to get involved with anyone. Don’t want to commit myself to anyone or anything until my career’s under way and I finish my master’s degree.”

“What do you plan to do with your chemistry major?”

“First I thought I wanted to do research. But after working in a lab this summer, I finally realized I’d rather interact with people than with test tubes. I’m going to teach.”

"It's better you found that out sooner than later."

"And something else I found out. If and when I do marry, it won't be to an Italian."

"Why not?"

"Among other negatives, they're not adventurous. And they're too role-defined."

"What makes you think I'm like that?"

"You all are, it's the culture. You expect your mothers. I've seen too many brides turn into hags, spending the rest of their lives in front of sinks and doing menial chores. That's not going to happen to me, I'm going to further my education and have a career."

"Why are you so intent on having a career?"

"I don't want to end up like my grandmother, widowed with four children at thirty-six, and no education. It was tough."

"What happened to your grandfather?"

She looked at his picture on the coffee table, the same picture her grandmother had. The handlebar mustache. "Pneumonia."

"You're supposed to be a scientist. Don't you think dying of pneumonia is less likely today? You've heard of penicillin, haven't you?"

"Don't be literal. Things happen to anyone. It doesn't have to be pneumonia, that was just a metaphor. It can be anything, and I just want to be prepared."

"I can see another of your positive qualities. You're an optimist."

"No, a realist."

"Not to change the subject, but which is your favorite baseball team?"

"I'm really not into sports. Too much affiliation."

"What?"

"My grandmother again. She goes crazy when people get so over-excited about the games. She always says, 'What difference should it make to you who wins? If it makes too much of a difference, there's something wrong with your life.'"

"I know what's wrong with my life. There's not enough of you in it, yet. And now that you just gave me a shot about my favorite sport..."

"Okay, I give in. Which is your favorite team?"

"The Bronx Bombers."

"Which ones are they?"

"You're impossible. Who else but the Yankees?"

"Most of the people I know from the Bronx like the Giants."

"And a few traitors, the Dodgers. But since you don't like baseball, how about Broadway shows?"

"Love 'em."

"What've you seen?"

"*Brigadoon* for one. Too much with the bagpipes, I find them depressing. *Where's Charley?* And let me think...*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. I'd love to see *The King and I*."

"Well, this gentleman definitely prefers redheads and consider *The King and I* a guarantee. Who did you go to the shows with, Fiona?"

"I'm not telling."

"Did you go with a guy?"

"I'm not telling."

"You're going to go with this guy. We'll see a show after we go to a concert and the opera."

"Why don't we just see how it works out this weekend?"



When Diane opened the door to her apartment late Friday afternoon, Michael felt his heart stop pumping and leap for his throat. He took a long look at her. Bangs and upswept hair, making her eyes stand out. A few wisps of hair near her neck made him want to kiss them away. "You have mellowed with age. You're even more beautiful than I remember."

"How much have I aged in a week?"

"It's not a week, my angel. It's five days, twenty-three hours, thirty-four minutes, and," he looked at his wrist, "seventeen seconds."

Without further discussion Diane led him into the living room and introduced him to her parents. He'd met lots of girls' parents before. A breeze. Why were his teeth chattering now? They exchanged the usual amenities, and questions about graduation, career options, what his parents did for a living. He was in such a hurry to get out of there, but didn't want to seem rude. As soon as the twelve minute interview was over, he helped Diane with her coat, they left the apartment, and entered his father's car.

Michael was still black and blue from his fall and found himself leaning on his left side while driving, keeping him, much to his disappointment, farther away from Diane.

They headed for Mamma Leone's.

Though he'd been very talkative on the phone every evening he'd called her that week, he couldn't speak while they were having dinner.

Diane finally said, "What makes you so quiet this evening?"

"I'm too busy looking at you to talk. I don't want to talk. I don't even want to eat. All I want to do is imbibe your face, especially your eyes. Those incredible eyes."

"Imbibe? That's a sophisticated word. You must be preparing to be a lawyer. Michael, can you ever be serious?"

"But I am serious. Dead serious when it comes to you."

"You said that so well. You must've practiced it often on many women."

"I'm serious about my studies. And I've done lots of...said lots of things to women. But I've never said that to a woman, and I never will to anyone else but you. I love you, Diane." He took her hands and kissed them.

For a few moments she let him continue kissing her hands. Then she pulled them away. "Love? Michael, how did you get to be such a romantic?"

"I'm supposed to be romantic. After all," he brandished his napkin, "I'm Italian."

"You know what I feel about Italian men. I've already told you and I'll tell you again. Role-defined, spoiled to high heaven by their mothers, never changing the routine, wanting you to be submissive, won't let you handle or even know about finances, overprotective to the point of stifling."

"I'm different."

"Tell me another one."

"You'll see." He started kissing her hands again, interrupted by the waiter bringing their order. They ate quickly, then left the restaurant in ample time to attend the concert he selected, an all-Tchaikovsky performance that would conclude with his favorite symphony, the "Pathetique".

Throughout the meal his fork had found its way from the plate to his mouth without any assistance from his eyes. They were too occupied taking in Diane's face.



The next several weekends Michael and Diane dated every Friday and Saturday with Sundays reserved for studying. Weekdays were torture. Michael thought about her every moment. Such a terrible distraction, it could affect his grades. The important thing now was that he remain in the top ten percent of his class. He was determined to get her to marry him and for that he had to make sure a successful career was assured, a career which depended on his doing well in school. He kept consoling himself that enduring the week without her would help ensure having a better life together in the future.



Diane was becoming uncomfortable with the fact that they were seeing each other too much. Michael didn't fit into her plans. He was always talking about marriage, taking away from her ability to circulate more freely.

The next Friday they were to go out together, she called him to cancel their date. She made the excuse that a family matter had come up which would keep her busy for the entire weekend. He told her how disappointed he was but understood and looked forward to the following weekend.

There would be no next weekend. She needed the week to come up with a way of telling him their dating was over. She didn't want to have anything more to do with him.

Actually, she had told him a half-truth. A family matter did come up. Diane herself. She needed to be alone. No, she needed to meet other people. She didn't know what she needed.

On Saturday night that weekend she attended a mixer at Fordham University. Several young men asked her to dance. Did Walter have Michael's sense of humor? Did the other fellow, she couldn't remember his name, have that *joi de vivre*, that spontaneity? But Michael was so serious about their relationship he was interfering with her life. She had to stop seeing him.

A young man escorted her home. She said goodbye and hurried up the steps leaving him with an I-didn't-get-a-chance-to-ask-for-your-phone-number look on his face.

That night she couldn't sleep, kept thinking of Michael, what she would say the next day when she called him to break their relationship. She took out a yellow legal pad, appropriate for a message to a lawyer, and wrote and revised her speech. After rehearsing it over and over again, she finally fell asleep.



At seven o'clock Sunday night Diane took out the pad with her speech and doodled on it as she rehearsed it once again before dialing his number.

"Hello." He sounded sleepy.

"Michael?"

"Gen?" That name again.

She had to sound firm. "Michael, I have to tell you something." She was nervous, never had to say this to anyone before.

She removed the top sheet of the pad, held the speech in front of her, and was just about to read it when her hand started trembling. She tried to steady her hand so that the words on the yellow paper wouldn't be blurred, and began a second time. "Michael."

After she said his name again and without knowing what was happening to her, she crumpled the paper, threw it on the floor and fought back the tears. "I miss you," she managed to say.

"Where are you?"

"Home."

"I'm coming up there right now. I'm leaving right away." He slammed the phone so hard it hurt her ear.

She picked up the yellow paper from the floor and uncrinkled it.

A surprise.

She had doodled a heart.



Diane looked out the window, checked the hallway, looked out the window, checked the hallway again. The next forty-five minutes could have filled a week. Just before eight, the bell rang.

Michael.

She buzzed the lobby door, ran down the steps to meet him halfway.

When they saw each other, they stopped dead in their tracks. She leaped into his arms. He kissed her over and over again until she was sure her diaphragm had given out. He stopped kissing her just long enough to say, "I love you, Gen. We'll never be apart again. Next weekend I'm taking you home to meet my family." His way of formally asking her to marry him. She nodded, pulled him by the back of his neck, and put his lips back over hers. Her way of saying yes.

For no Italian boy ever took a girl home to meet his parents unless his intentions toward her were clear.

And no Italian girl would go unless she understood, and agreed.



Diane ran for the phone when it rang. When she picked it up, Michael immediately said, "Please, let's not be late for that two o'clock eating orgy that always takes place in my house after Mass."

"Wouldn't think of it. It's not polite to be late for dinner, have to make a favorable impression on all the Pisanis. Besides, when have I ever been late?"

"It's just that I don't want them to have anything negative to say about you. Wouldn't listen to it if they did."

"You worry too much."

"Maybe I do. It's just that I love you so much I want everything to be perfect."

"It never is. I'm sure your parents aren't perfect, either. What do you suggest I bring them?"

"You don't have to bring anything."

"Yes I do, that's the way I was brought up. Never show up empty-handed. Besides, I really want to bring something, what do you think they'd like?"

"Really, Diane. It's not necessary, but if you feel it makes a difference to you, bring whatever you want."

For a few moments she was silent. Then she shrugged. “Okay. I’ll get long-stemmed roses for your mother and Italian pastries for your father.”

“That’ll be fine. But before you hang up tell me you love me.”

“I love you.”

“I love you. I love you. I love you.”



The next Sunday followed a vicious snowstorm. Michael picked Diane up early so that they’d be able to navigate through the streets and find a place to park after competing for spaces with the mounds of snow that were shoveled off the sidewalks into the road.

As they drove into his neighborhood, Michael identified some of the landmarks of his life, only partially revealed behind the piles of snow—the church where he was baptized, the schools he attended, his music teacher’s studio, the park where he played ball.

He pointed out the grocery store his family owned. Half buried in front of Pisani’s was his father’s delivery station wagon with enough snow covering the side to expose only P-I-S-A painted on the driver’s door. Diane thought that with only those four letters showing, the leaning tower would have been a more appropriate logo than the semi-hidden basket and bow brimming with provisions.

The store was tidy looking. Brick framed two large windows, which displayed provolone, dried sausage, and salami hanging from the ceiling. Rising from the bottom were thirty-two ounce cans of Pope tomatoes neatly stacked to form pyramids. Graduated-sized cans of Filippo Berio olive oil completed the design.

Michael explained that his family wasn’t rich, they were comfortable. As with most immigrants who set up Mama and Papa businesses, which abounded in the Allerton Avenue area of the Bronx, they lived in an apartment on top of the store.

He took advantage of a parking space directly behind the station wagon. “What luck. Can’t believe I found this space. I hope that’s an

omen that today will be a lucky day, the beginning of a lucky life together.” He made the final maneuver with the steering wheel.

Why did his words give her a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach?

They climbed the flight of steps and approached the entrance to his family’s apartment. He removed his boots first. While she removed hers, he held the flowers and pastries.

“Now don’t forget to kiss my parents. That’s very important in showing respect.”

“Michael, I know that. You’d think I was some kind of WASP or something.”

“Okay, now.” He straightened his tie for what seemed to her the tenth time. “Are you ready? I’m ringing the bell.”

“Ready.”

In a few seconds Mrs. Pisani opened the door. No makeup covered her ruddy face. Her prematurely gray hair was tied back neatly and gathered with a silver barette. Keeping her hair back made her round face appear more oval. She wore a dark blue dress with cream-colored lace trim, and folded over her arm was the apron she had apparently just removed.

Michael greeted his mother with a kiss. “Hi, Mom.”

Mrs. Pisani kissed him back while she stared at Diane, who felt numb except for the sensation of the roses against her cheek.

Michael straightened his tie again. “Mom, I’d like you to meet Diane Pinto.”

She and Mrs. Pisani both began to speak at the same time, some variation of, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Then they smiled at each other.

Diane kissed Mrs. Pisani, then handed her the flowers. “These are for you. I’m grateful for your kind invitation.”

Mrs. Pisani thanked her. “Please, let’s not stand in the hall. Come in.”

“Thank you.” She and Michael gave his mother their coats and followed her into the living room.

Diane hadn’t realized how much Michael’s anxiety had affected her, so much so that she kept her eyes straight ahead, taking extreme care not to appear that she was looking around the apartment. Christmas decorations camouflaged most of the living room anyway. The only exception, a brass mantle clock in a room with no mantle. Rows of holly scalloped the walls, gold wreaths hung in the two windows, and the tree in the corner was so tall that its crowning angel had to bend sideways to avoid hitting the ceiling. Under the tree was the crèche without the Baby Jesus. More decorations were piled next to the couch, waiting patiently for some time during the next week when they, also, would be displayed. Her heels sank into a thick dark green velvet carpet while “Joy to the World” bounced from a radio.

Standing off in the corner opposite the tree was a small group of people. They seemed like a crowd.

Michael approached his father next. “Pop, this is Diane Pinto.”

Before she had a chance to kiss Mr. Pisani, he took her hand, examined her face, then pulled her toward him and kissed her. As she returned his kiss, she was careful not to squash the box of pastries she was still carrying.

“Well, my son, this young lady is more than I ever expected. I must’ve set a good example of excellent taste.”

“Mr. Pisani,” Diane said, “if your wife is an example of your excellent taste, I would have to agree.”

Michael beamed. “You see, Pop, she’s clever as well as beautiful.”

Diane gave Mr. Pisani the box. “Michael tells me these are your favorite pastries. I hope you enjoy them.”

He didn’t open the box but wrinkled his nose and sniffed around the entire perimeter with his eyes closed, as though his sight would interfere with his sense of smell. He took a deep breath, exhaled with his mouth open, while slowly moving his head up and down. “Maria, let’s start dinner, I can’t wait too long for this delicious des-

sert. But first, Diane, I want you to meet my daughter, Carla. Her husband, Steve.” Mr. Pisani whispered to her obviously loud enough for Steve to hear, “He’s Polish. What are you gonna do?” His voice returned to its normal volume. “And my grandchildren, Linda and Paul.”

Diane respectively kissed each person to whom she was introduced. She said to Carla, “Your children are beautiful.”

Mr. Pisani smiled approvingly. He approached the last family member but Michael pre-empted by moving more quickly toward the tall, distinguished man standing in front of the window, blocking the gold wreath. “Uncle Cyril, I’m so happy you’re here. Thank you for coming. I’d like to introduce Diane to you.”

“My pleasure, Diane. All I can say is that Alfred’s comment was an understatement. I must compliment Michael on his guest.”

Thank heaven he was the last one she had to meet, though she wasn’t sure of why he was there, where he fit in. But she made sure that she didn’t omit kissing him, too.

Michael moved between them. “Now Uncle Cyril, remember that she’s my girl, not yours.”

Why did he make that dumb comment? For now she’d ignore it, ask him later. “Cyril is an unusual name for an Italian.”

“My uncle is a mixed breed,” Michael said, “His mother was Ukrainian.”

Mrs. Pisani was quick to say, “God rest her soul.”

“She was married to my mother’s brother. Uncle Cyril is actually my cousin, but since he’s so much older than I am, I call him uncle for respect.”

“Oh, come on, Michael,” Diane said, “Uncle Cyril isn’t so much older than you.”

“Only ten years,” Uncle Cyril said.

She had already figured him to be about thirty-five. “Now you see, that’s not much older.”

Uncle Cyril smiled.

Mr. Pisani clapped his hands twice. "Let's go. I'm hungry. If you don't stop talking about age, I'm going to die of old age before I eat."

He walked into the dining room followed by the rest of the family, then sat at the head of the table. Everyone else took seats with, of all things, place cards. Diane was sure they were not routinely used. She was assigned a seat to Mr. Pisani's right, and Michael was next to her.

Mr. Pisani hugged a half-loaf of round Italian bread. With a knife that looked life-threatening, he sliced the bread toward his chest, cutting pieces that couldn't have been more even if he'd used a machine. Diane held her breath, sure he'd gash himself.

Michael escorted her to her chair. "I'll be right back."

She wondered where he was going.



Michael stepped into the kitchen. Couldn't wait to see his mother alone. She was wearing the apron that had been folded over her arm and was arranging the roses Diane brought her, placing them one by one into a crystal vase.

"I thought I'd put the flowers in the middle of the table as a centerpiece. But they're so tall they'll block the view of the family sitting across from each other."

She put the flowers on the side and began placing Diane's pastries on a serving tray large enough to display all of them.

"Well, Mom, what do you think?"

His mother didn't look at him while arranging the cannoli, cream puffs, and sfogliatelle. "Very beautiful. Hard to tell whether she or the roses are more beautiful. A lot of class. Even though I don't have it myself, I know it when I see it."

She finally stopped fussing with the pastries and faced him. "And I can tell that you didn't bring me home one of those stupidos with her face all painted up. Who looks in the mirror all day fixing her hair, and her nails. With nothing inside, nothing underneath the hair and the nails."

She walked away, stopped, and remained with her back toward him a few seconds before turning around. She simultaneously frowned and squinted. "Are you sure she's Italian?"

He indented his mother's cheek with the knuckle of his index finger. "Mom, you're always so suspicious. But to put you at ease, not only is she Italian, but on both sides."

"They must come from the north."

"The middle. Abruzzo."

"Abruzzo." She hesitated. "Well, at least they're good cooks. My poor son won't starve to death."

"Let me help you take the antipasto out." He took a yearning look at the salt-saturated anchovies clumped in the center of a multicolored oval platter, but decided to pass them up. As a married man, he'd have to be more responsible for his health, and he might as well begin now. He picked up the platter which held a bed of lettuce covered with a medley of cold cuts including salami, capicola, prosciutto, sopressata, and mortadella. Decorating the border were wedges of provolone alternating with sliced tomatoes, hot peppers, and pimentos. Green and black olives filled in any remaining spaces.

He brought out the serving dish, carrying it on the palm of one hand, and just as he began to pass the antipasto around, his father stopped him, stood up and said, "First a toast." Pop walked around the table filling everyone's glass with wine, then raised his glass. "To Diane Pinto."

The rest of the family joined in raising their glasses also.

Michael took his seat next to Diane and repeated, "To Diane Pinto." After he sipped some wine, he took her hand, squeezed it, and held it under the table.



Eating was an intense activity at the Pisanis with little conversation at the beginning of the meal. Diane welcomed the respite because she knew she was on display, being evaluated, and didn't feel

like talking. But as the soup and pasta courses were consumed, stomachs busied themselves, wine relaxed the cerebrum, and words flowed.

Mr. Pisani began. "Maria, this gravy's too tart. What kind of tomatoes did you use? Maybe you didn't cook the gravy long enough, don't you taste what you cook? You should of added some sugar."

"But what do you know about tart?" Mrs. Pisani scowled. "Where did you hear that word? You're always complaining, Alfred. And for your information, you're not supposed to add sugar if you make the gravy right."

"Yes," he said, "You're not supposed to add sugar if you make the gravy right. But you didn't make it right. Next week I'm going to show you how to make gravy, the way my mother used to make it."

Mrs. Pisani stood up with a rapid motion that shook the table. "If your mother came back from the dead and made you a meal, you'd still find something wrong with it."

Diane didn't like the discussion. She already sensed she was being analyzed, like white light being refracted through a prism, and hoped she wouldn't be put on the spot by having either of Michael's parents ask her opinion of the gravy. Didn't want to side with either of them.

Michael spared her the worry by directing the conversation away from food and toward his brother-in-law. "So, Steve, what's new on the New York City police force?"

Without waiting for Steve to answer for himself, Mr. Pisani said, "He has a desk job, he doesn't know about crime."

Mrs. Pisani bent her head toward Diane. "What are you going to do after you graduate? Michael tells me you're graduating in June."

"I'm going to teach and go to graduate school."

"What grade are you going to teach?"

"I'm not going to teach in elementary school, I'm going to teach chemistry in high school."

Mrs. Pisani opened her mouth as though she was just informed that she'd won the church raffle. "Do girls teach chemistry? I don't remember a girl chemistry teacher in my high school."

"How would you know, Mom?" Michael growled, "you never took chemistry in high school."

"We have several chemistry majors in my graduating class, all females of course because I go to a women's college," Diane said. "One of my friends, Patty Collins, is getting married and already has a job promised her as a research chemist. She thought she wanted to be a nun until she met a wonderful guy last summer. And two of my classmates are going to medical school."

"Medical school!" Mrs. Pisani gasped. "That's not very ladylike, having to touch men, look at men, and all their parts. I think girls, when they get married shouldn't work, but should stay home and take care of their husbands."

The radio droned, "The Little Drummer Boy" and Diane felt like drumming Mrs. Pisani. What was so great about her life, scampering in and out of the kitchen every Sunday not to mention the rest of the week? Maybe Diane should try the magician's trick, yank the tablecloth, leaving everything on top of it undisturbed, or better yet, not do it so adeptly, miss, and have everything tumble.

At this point Mr. Pisani began to speak. He had too many glasses of wine and really didn't say anything but rambled in a series of non-sequiturs about the old country. Because he said several consecutive sentences, Diane was able to detect for the first time that he had a slight accent.

It was evident that attempting a normal table conversation was almost impossible.

Uncle Cyril questioned Michael about his job prospects. The two, sitting opposite each other spoke seriously for about ten minutes, while everyone else's heads shifted back and forth.

Diane tried to observe the dynamics and body language at the table. Steve had the look of someone who deliberately wasn't listen-

ing, not wanting to hear the conversation. Michael had told her that his father always threw it up to Steve that Carla should've married a college graduate, an Italian college graduate. And Diane figured that with Michael soon to graduate from law school, Steve could be jealous and resentful.

Carla, who looked exactly like her mother, tried to catch glimpses of Diane but looked away when she faced her.

The children had table manners that Grandma Angelina would not have condoned. Indeed, it was time for the wooden spoon to appear.

Mr. Pisani was busy savoring his food and refilling his plate. His wife kept running into and out of the kitchen lest there be a break in the flow of the meal. Carla didn't get up once to assist her mother. Mrs. Pisani had already told Diane that guests were not allowed to serve or do dishes, but she volunteered her assistance anyway. Mrs. Pisani placed a forceful hand on her shoulder, wouldn't let her get out of the chair.

Uncle Cyril spoke as someone who had considerable business acumen. He appeared to be going out of his way to keep his body toward Michael.

When dessert finally arrived, Mr. Pisani was quick to comment that his espresso was not strong enough and that the strip of lemon rind his wife had placed in the saucer was not large enough. The patience of most of the family was sparse at this point, their groans more audible. He did note, however, several times how good the pastries were.

Diane didn't know whether he was trying to be polite or whether he really was enjoying them. Frankly, she didn't care. Many people enjoyed eating. She was one of them. But anyone whose life was so focused on food had to be compensating for some void. What was Mr. Pisani's?

As soon as the dinner was over, Michael got up. "I have to go back to school and study." She knew he'd use that as his excuse to leave. It would be readily accepted and believed.

She thanked the Pisanis for their hospitality and made the kissing rounds again. They told her what a wonderful girl their son had brought home. Her sense was that they really meant it. More important to her, Michael looked pleased.

The first question he asked when they got into the car was, "So what did you think of my Uncle Cyril?"

She was totally unprepared for that question. "Why are you asking me about him? And as long as you brought him up, why did you make that remark about my being your girl and not his?"

"Well, as you've probably already noticed, my uncle is a very good-looking man. He has a lot of money and women throw themselves at him all the time. He just has to look at them and they melt. He has so many women and I just don't want him to get any ideas about you."

"You know, Michael, I never heard you say anything so ridiculous."

"Since you brought up ridiculous, how did you enjoy the deep intellectual discussion you heard today? I wanted to get close enough to my parents to kick them under the table. They're always bickering, especially about food. I wish they'd get into politics or the economy." He looked aside for a moment. "Nah, regardless of the subject, the conversation would be equally inane."

Diane took his hand, and rubbed it against her cheek. "Now Michael, they're no different from any other family."

He kissed her free hand. "Thank you for helping me get over my embarrassment over my parents' behavior. You just turned an awkward situation into a graceful one. I love the way you did that."

He kissed her hand again. "No, I love just everything about you, and I always will."

CHAPTER 9



Valentine's Day. A day singled out for lovers. A good day to become formally engaged.

That evening, when Michael was supposed to present Diane with her ring, she noticed he appeared very edgy. "What's the matter with you? I've never seen you so fidgety. Are you having second thoughts?"

"About marrying you, Gen, never. But, but I do have something to tell you."

His pet name for her again. Now what?

He looked away from her. "You know I adore you, want to make sure that everything in our relationship is open and honest."

Was he now going to tell her he was married before, or that he had spent time in prison?

He lowered his eyes, then raised them. "Do you remember when we first met?"

She nodded.

"We were in the bookstore and I turned my wallet upside down and shook it to show you that I didn't have any more money?"

She nodded again.

"Well. Well, Gen, I had a...had a five-dollar bill there all the time. I didn't need your quarter."

She kept staring at him.

"I was so desperate to find an excuse to meet you, to find out who you were and what you were doing there that I pushed the money up with my thumb as I shook the wallet. Can you ever forgive me?"

Slowly her stare became a smile. "Michael, somehow, down deep, I think I knew it all along."

From his pocket he removed a black velvet box, opened it, and slipped a ring on her finger.

"Oh, it's gorgeous, you have excellent taste. And it fits perfectly."

"That's why I picked you, Gen. But since today's my day for being honest, I have to admit that Uncle Cyril helped me select it, made sure it was a good investment. My parents always rely on him for important financial decisions." Michael took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. "He also got me an appraisal slip, for the insurance."

"It was kind of him to take the time to help you, even though," she winked, "I'm your girl and not his."



The wedding date, as Michael had predicted on their blind date, was scheduled for the week after his graduation. Diane was thrilled that Tom and Fiona agreed to serve as best man and maid-of-honor. They were responsible for bringing about this union, and since Michael didn't have a brother, nor she a sister, it was customary to select best friends as witnesses.

Diane and her father entered the church that warm, sunny day in June. The swish of her silk taffeta gown, resting on top of its bouffant underskirt, accompanied each step down the aisle. Her dress had a slightly off the shoulder sweetheart neckline and a bodice of re-embroidered Alençon lace which was also appliquéd in a random pattern on the skirt and on the chapel-length train. Her veil was attached to a pearl tiara. After her father lifted the veil and kissed her, he handed her to Michael, who appeared mesmerized as he stepped forward to claim her.

Uncle Cyril presented them with a honeymoon cruise to Bermuda, a welcome change of pace, a brief interlude between their studying for final exams and Michael's preparing for the bar.

And she, in keeping with her desire to be the best that she could be in whatever undertaking she chose, decided to learn to become the best lover she could be. Grandma Angelina would've given her consent, even though when she hammered that being-the-best message into her grandchildren's heads, lovemaking was probably not what she had in mind.



The post-honeymoon adjustment began the first day Diane began teaching in September. Michael came home from work. He sniffed around the apartment before closing the door. "Where's dinner?"

Her blood started to boil. "I just got home. It should be ready in an hour."

"An hour! I'm starving."

"I'm sure you won't wither away in the next hour. And tomorrow night's your turn to cook."

"What!"

"You heard me, I'm in the lab till 10:15 tomorrow night and won't be home until eleven."

"Do you have to take courses that end so late?"

"I have to take the courses I need when they offer them. Don't want to finish my master's when I'm fifty."

"Well, maybe I'll eat at my mother's."

"Your mother's?" The perfect moment to kill two birds with one stone. Smash him in the head and at the same time rid herself of that vase she despised, the wedding gift his Aunt Matilda had given them—a rococo piece that left nothing to the imagination. "Instead, why don't you go directly from work to Long Island and eat at your sister's? Carla thinks that hard-boiling an egg is a culinary coup. And don't you dare, even consider eating at your mother's. I can just hear

her complaining about her poor son's new wife, working and going to school."

"But I can bring home something for you to eat from her house."

"I have a better idea. Why don't you move back in with her? She has nothing else to do but cook."

"At least she knows how."

"Your father doesn't think so. Besides, you should learn how to cook yourself. Most of the greatest chefs in the world are men."

"I work hard all day."

"And what do you think I do? Dealing with the football crowd in the lab, then going to grad school? You know, after all you said before we were married, your promises to help and be understanding, all that talk about how you knew what it meant to have to study, that was all hot air. You're just like the rest of them, another goddam Italian prince. We didn't know each other long enough before getting married, didn't eat a pound of salt together, we should've waited longer. I always said the truth comes later in everyone else's marriage, why couldn't I see it in my own?" She crushed her head between her hands. "Why didn't I take my own advice?"

"Come here."

"No."

"Come here. You're right, I'm sorry." He took her in his arms. She struggled but he held her firmly and kissed her passionately.

They made love before supper.

And after.



The following Saturday Diane handed Michael a pile of clothes stuffed into a white net sack pulled closed with a drawstring. "Take these to the laundromat while I do the marketing." He really wanted to read his newspaper and some cases he'd brought home, but he went.

A disaster.

“You have to separate the white clothes from the colored,” she said without losing patience. “You can’t mix them together or the colored clothes’ll run.” She held up several white T-shirts that had now become multicolored. “And don’t forget to pull your sleeves out of your undershirts and open your socks so that the water’ll go through them.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It’s just common sense.”

Common sense. Never thought about laundry. Just throw stuff in the machine, no?

He folded the clothes, several tries to get it straight, and did the heavy work while she did routine cleaning. His mother should see him doing housework. She’d have a nervous fit. Couldn’t even get him to put his socks in the hamper.



Diane took one of Michael’s stained T-shirts and shoved it into the bottom dresser drawer. Every time he’d go to the laundry, she’d wave the shirt in front of him. Reinforcement. An important reminder in education, and an important reminder for the laundry. Besides, how many T-shirts did he want to replace?

She fussed over dinner that evening, prepared stuffed eggplant, veal marsala, and roasted potatoes. Even baked an apple pie, though it did look a little pale around the edges. She should’ve brushed more egg-wash there.

While she was pouring his coffee she said, “Michael, what’s that mark on your neck, did you cut yourself shaving?”

“What mark?”

“This one, here.” She traced her finger over it. “Looks like a scratch.”

“Oh, that? I think it’s from those stiff collars. You should really send my shirts to the Chinese laundry.”

"At twenty cents each? Every time I press one, I put twenty cents aside. It adds up, for our house."

"Well, if you have to iron them yourself, use less starch."

"And disappoint my grandmother? I want to make sure your shirts are perfect. You should look like a professional man. Can't stand those men whose collars roll up at the edges, wear wrinkled shirts, have spots on their ties. How can their wives send them out like that?"

Shocker. What did she say?

Look who was sounding like an Italian housewife! And what was so bad about being one, at least some of the time. Meant that you cared.

"But if they bother you, sweetheart, I won't make them so stiff. Don't want you to get hurt." She kissed his neck.

"The only thing that would hurt me is if you stopped loving me."



Michael had taken the bar exam shortly after they came back from their honeymoon. He had already begun working as an associate for a prestigious law firm, Sweeney, Barber, and Gill, starting at \$15,000 a year, an indication of his potential earning power in the future. Diane earned \$4,000 so their \$19,000 annual salary allowed them to save all of hers and half of his.

She made their first savings deposit. "I feel as though we're already on our way to a house in Westchester. Maybe then I can stop working and go for a doctorate."

"Please," he went for his jugular, "I can't do any more laundry."

"Maybe with a doctorate I can get a college teaching job. That would be a very convenient job to have with a family."

"A family?"

"In about five years."

She opened the large gray box she had placed on the table, and removed her wedding gown, which she draped over herself. "Do you

think I should have my gown preserved? It's expensive. Forty dollars."

"Only if you make me a promise."

"What promise?"

"That you put it on every anniversary." He pinched her cheek. "Knowing that you'll have to wear it every year may motivate you to avoid becoming matronly."

"Won't you love me if I'm fat?" She puffed her cheeks, then poked the air out. "And I'll agree to put the gown on every year only if you weigh in at the same time and I can measure your waist. I don't want any pot-bellied masters around."

"Isn't there a tradition about wedding gowns, that a daughter often wears her mother's wedding dress?"

"Yes, I forgot about that."

"Well, some day we may have another Diane who would want to carry on that tradition."

"Maybe some day."



Another Diane was a thought that pleased Michael. He adored her. Sometimes he'd watch her as she slept. She was such an incredible work of art that her existence affirmed his formerly tenuous belief in the Almighty. Only a God could create such a thing.

Anyone who met her complimented him on her personality and beauty. "She's easy on the eyes," his associates would say.

He wasn't a particularly religious person, but found himself thanking God for having found her, and prayed for her health and safety. It had to be odd for someone so newly married to dwell on his spouse's longevity, but he felt so lucky and so happy that it couldn't be that he'd have her too long. Life without her? Couldn't imagine it. The thought of losing her made his eyes moisten.

He wanted to be successful, for her. Wanted to give her everything. If he didn't make her happy, she might lose interest in him. Maybe another man would entice her away.

How could he demean her by thinking this way? She had too much character to succumb to that. But every once in a while that fear surged in him anyway. He wanted to achieve so much so that no other man could compete with him. No one else could be better in her eyes.



The first weekend in October, Diane and Michael invited to dinner their first guest, Uncle Cyril. She wanted to express their gratitude to him for all his efforts on their behalf—giving them the honeymoon, selecting the ring, the apartment, helping them buy furniture.

Diane went through the apartment, removing every speck of dirt. “When I come to your house, I hope I won’t have to lift my skirt to climb over the dirt,” her grandmother always said. Diane didn’t want Uncle Cyril to have to roll up his trouser cuffs.

Her first meal for someone other than Michael! And since Uncle Cyril didn’t have high blood pressure, this time she could add salt to her cooking. He would be good practice material before she invited her in-laws. She prepared his favorite dish, eggplant parmigiana and kielbasa sausage, a strange combination, one her mother-in-law had told her Uncle Cyril’s mother, always surrounded by Italians, made occasionally to remind him of his Slavic background. While the meal wasn’t one she would’ve made for her and Michael, it was one that would please her guest.

She also served a dessert that wasn’t her or her husband’s favorites, but definitely one of Uncle Cyril’s—strawberry shortcake. Then they showed him the honeymoon snapshots, many of the Queen of Bermuda from all angles. She wanted him to see how much they appreciated his gift.

Uncle Cyril smiled, laughed, commented on some of the pictures as Michael explained every detail that occurred before, during, and after each shot.

Well, almost every detail.



In November Michael received a letter advising him that he had passed the bar exam. He immediately called Tom Flynn to see if he had passed as well. He wasn't able to reach Tom right away.

Quick. Check The New York Times.

Michael ran his finger down the page. Tom's name. Tom's name.

There it was. Official. In print.

Michael's company rewarded him with a three thousand dollar raise. Having that house in the suburbs might come sooner than anticipated. All he could think of was that he could hire someone to help Diane with the housework and he'd never have to cook or do laundry anymore.

Two days later, Michael called Tom again, and this time he answered. They made arrangements to celebrate in style, Saturday evening, dinner at the Stork Club.

Throughout the meal Tom appeared tense with forced smiles and conversation like someone pretending he was enjoying himself. Michael kept reading Diane's reaction to see if she was picking up the same impression.

Toward the end of dinner Michael said, "Tom, what's the matter?"

Tom looked down, then up. "Does it show that much?"

"Maybe I should excuse myself," Diane said.

Tom put his hand on her arm. "Please, Diane, stay. You and Mike are my closest friends." He picked up his whiskey sour, swished it around, and took a series of sips until it was finished. "In a way I'm glad you asked. I've been thinking about it for a long time."

Michael ordered another round of drinks.

For the first time this evening Tom began speaking with excitement and spontaneity. "Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to be a lawyer. My father wanted me to be a lawyer. He would always say that Tom Flynn's kid should be better than a cop. Actually he's a great cop, been decorated many times. Maybe it's because being a lawyer is what he wanted for himself, that he wanted to get it through me."

Tom hesitated, and Michael used the opportunity. "Are you trying to tell me that you're sorry you went into law, that there's something else you would've liked to do?"

Tom shook his head. "That's not it. It's this job I have, been at it for five months, make a hell of a lot of money. That's why I went into corporate law, to make a lot of money. I always saw my father struggling to make ends meet, so I decided to get a job that paid a lot. But my heart's not in it. I made a mistake." His taut face relaxed. "I want to go into criminal law, be a district attorney."

Michael was pleased that Tom was not considering giving up law altogether. "You have to do what'll make you happy. Money isn't the answer to everything, you have to find satisfaction in your work."

"When I was a kid, Tom, my father, I call him Tom. He used to tell me about some of the cases he worked on, how the police often battered their heads against the wall trying to pin crimes on the mob in our neighborhood. Literally got away with murder, they were so slippery." He dragged his spoon back and forth over the tablecloth, then took a knife with his other hand and chopped at the neck of the spoon, as if to separate the head from its handle. The spoon came to a clanky stop. "I want to get those guys."

"Go for the jugular, Tom," Michael said, "if there's anyone who could do it, it's you. Personally I can't stomach the way they give all us Italian-Americans a bad name. No matter what we do, we never seem to be able to disassociate ourselves from them. I'm sick and tired of having people ask me if I was becoming a lawyer so that I could get rich defending Carmine Caputo."

"Who's Carmine Caputo?" Diane said.

"The American connection to the Sicilian Mafia," Tom said.

"Mafia," Diane whispered under her breath.

"Tom, do you remember my uncle, Cyril Siano?"

"Sure, isn't he the one who helped with all the wedding preparations?"

"Yeah, a talented guy, a degree from Wharton, has a business that makes a fortune. Everybody keeps asking if he's in the Mafia. God damn it, I resent the implication that nobody with Italian blood could be smart enough to be successful without being associated with organized crime. I'm sick to death of it."

Michael hadn't realized how shaky his voice had become. He smashed his fist on the table so hard that the utensils rattled and a tall empty glass turned over. Diane covered his fist with her hand and picked up the glass.

"Tom." He was trying hard to calm himself. "I think it's great what you want to do. The more of those bastards you get, the happier I'll be. When will you start?"

"I thought I'd finish out the year with this firm. I'm working on a big case now so I'll complete the job for them. Figure it should take about ten more months. I can stand it that long if I know that I'm going to do what I want after it's over."

"Ten months, that makes sense. It'll give you some more time before you make a final decision."

"You know, Mike, I'm glad you asked me what was on my mind. I've been dying to talk to someone about this. I know that most people would think I'm crazy to give up the opportunities and the money I now make in order to pursue the impossible, but I could always count on your support. Thanks."

He and Tom reached for each other's hands and gripped them. Diane stood up and put her arms around both of them. People in the surrounding tables gave them odd looks.

Diane said, "I've been meaning to ask you, Tom, and please tell me if I'm being personal, I can take it, but what, if anything's going on with you and Fiona?"

"Fiona, as you know, is in medical school up in Albany. It's her first year and it's rough."

"It must be. I wrote to her a few weeks ago and she hasn't answered yet."

"We agreed that we wouldn't make any decisions about our relationship until she finished two years of med school. By then we should both be in a better position to make a sound judgment."

"Good clear thinking, Tom," she said. "Knowing both of you, I'm sure you'll do what's best."

Tom then returned to being the pleasant, joking person Michael knew.



While Tom and Mike continued talking, Diane kept thinking about the Mafia. Some operetta! A vision of her great-uncle's macaroni factory being blown sky-high flashed through her mind.

Rumors abounded that the Mafia was involved when her high school girlfriend's father was never heard from again. And then there was her neighbor's cousin, his perforated body found in the trunk of a car. The scuttlebutt was that he was supposed to have been killed because he was a stool pigeon, whatever that was. She couldn't forget reading about the man merged with cement, discovered at the bottom of Jamaica Bay. Hot flashes ran through her. It was the Mafia, the police said.

How could Tom Flynn even begin to make a dent in that type of organization?



One of the senior partners in Michael's firm called him into the office. "I wanted to be the first to tell you that we're making you a junior partner."

"Why, Mr. Gill, I don't know what to say."

"Say yes to another three thousand dollar raise. I know you and your wife are saving to buy a house. The way you're performing here, that house should be coming your way very soon."

"I appreciate your confidence, Mr. Gill."

"Actually I have a 95/5 rule when I hire someone."

"Which is?"

"Simply that you're ninety-five percent sure you'll get a winner if you hire someone who graduates in the top five percent of his class."

"I'll keep that in mind, if I ever get to be a senior partner."

"There's another reason I called you in here, Mike."

Michael straightened out in his chair.

Mr. Gill smiled. "I know your anniversary's coming up and I heard you talk about taking a vacation."

"We were hoping to..."

"I have a proposal to make. Instead of taking your vacation in June, if you wait until August, the company'll give you an all-expense-paid vacation for two weeks in the Bahamas. There's a luxury resort I know you and Diane will love. Mrs. Gill and I spent some time there and found it to be one of the most pleasant experiences of our lives. Every guest accommodation is a suite with its own private pool, and you can walk directly onto the beach."

"That's very generous of you."

"Not really, we have our own selfish motives. The Warner case you're working on now, we want wrapped up no later than the end of July. It's very important for the firm that we do that. What do you say?"

"I'll work on it until it's finished, even if I have to miss my vacation."

"You won't regret it."



Michael couldn't wait to tell Diane.

"We can celebrate our anniversary twice," she said with great enthusiasm, "once on the official date in June and again in August. And all expenses paid? That's great. And in August I'll be through with summer session, free to relax and enjoy myself for a change."

When they arrived at the resort, it was fairly uninhabited, not surprising for August. Like having their own paradise.

They took long walks on the beach and spent some time lying in the sun. Michael would watch his wife with the sun making her hair a bronze crown. He could never be bored looking at her, the long lashes, the classic design of her nose, those eyes. Perfect from every angle and a knockout when she strolled on the sand wearing that large-brimmed straw hat.

His willingness to help her with the household chores was a definite testimony to his virility. He hated doing those chores but wanted to make it easier for her to achieve. Unlike so many other men, he was secure enough himself not to find her accomplishments threatening. Diane always reminded him how unique and progressive he was for his generation, so much so that even Grandma Angelina was crazy about him. He had to admit to himself that though he had started out as a prince, he wasn't one any longer. Just knowing this made him feel he had grown.

A taxi ride into town brought its purchases of trinkets for his love, even though she needed nothing to enhance her. Whatever covered her body detracted from it, for nothing could improve nature's creation.

The evening before they were to depart for home, they had to face the reality that their vacation would soon come to an end. They took

advantage of every precious second. He found a classical music station on Bahama radio. A recording was to be broadcasted. Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto performed by Rachmaninoff himself.

Their last night, last swim in their private pool. He wanted every moment to linger.

Diane was first in the water but he caught up with her. She escaped and he captured her again. She slipped away once more under the water and this time she begged to be caught as he wrapped his arms around her, pulled her up on the side of the pool. He kissed her lips and as he slowly removed her bathing suit, he kissed every inch of her body as it became exposed, lest one part be envious of another. He couldn't stop, and she wouldn't let him. And their kissing, accompanied by balmy tropical breezes, undulating palm trees, and Rachmaninoff pounding his concerto, led to lovemaking into the night.

In the morning he wakened her with his mouth and they were one again, each of their corresponding body cells fused, losing their individual identities, chemically and irreversibly altered.



Back in New York life had become routine again. Diane resumed her teaching position and began the last semester she needed to complete her master's. Michael encouraged her to apply for admission to the doctoral programs at several universities. Her one year of teaching experience made her decide to specialize in science education so that she could become a more effective teacher herself and help others become more effective, too.

She applied to three universities.

But by mid-September she was irritated by the fact that the third thing she said she'd never do she had done. Everything comes in threes, she'd heard often enough. First she had married young, second she married an Italian-American, and now after a little more than a year of marriage, her breasts were suddenly swollen.

How could she and Michael have been so careless, seduced by romantic music on a sultry tropical evening? A baby didn't fit into the scheme of things just yet. They were still saving money. She had to study for a doctorate, get a job in a college.

Besides, what kind of mother would she be? She had little contact with young children, was an only child herself, and had hardly played with dolls. She was terribly disappointed about being pregnant, sick over it.

Maybe she had made a mistake, had miscalculated? The change in temperature in the Bahamas had screwed up her menstrual cycle.

But soon the idea began to grow on her. Little by little she found herself adjusting to the prospect of motherhood. Already had a name for the baby. What else but The Bahama Kid?

Michael, would he be disappointed? How would he react? How would she break the news?

The opportunity afforded itself a few days later. When Michael came home from work, she greeted him with an extra long series of kisses, and surprised him with his favorite dinner, one that took an unusually long time to prepare.

He looked at her with suspicion. "Is this the night you tell me that you have another love, or is it the night you tell me you got into graduate school?"

"Maybe to the first question, and it's too early to the second."

"Gen, what do you mean 'maybe you have another love'? You know I don't like when you tease me about that. What's all the fuss about?"

She opened her eyes as wide as she could. "How would you feel about getting another degree?"

"What do you have in mind for me now? Don't you think I've done enough studying?"

"You won't have to do any studying for this one. In fact it's already been awarded."

"Gen, you're not making any sense."

“Well, you see, I’m getting status conscious. I want to have a den in our new house with our degrees on the wall. Michael Paul Pisani, B.A., L.L.B., D.A.D.”

Oh, God, did it sound corny! Why couldn’t she have led up to it more dramatically, been more creative?

It took some seconds for Michael’s expression to change from confused to knowing. “Gen.” He held out his arms and she filled them. “Gen, Gen, I love you.”

“You see, Michael, I have another love. We have another love.”

He held her, and their child. Tightly.

CHAPTER 10



Frankie “Nine” La Rocca strutted into the corner candy store for his daily routine, ordering a chocolate egg cream. While he waited for the soda jerk to mix the chocolate syrup and milk together, he glanced at the magazines mounted on the wall, and moved over to the racks hoping to find hidden under the regular magazines the ones with the dirty pictures. The fizzing foam created by the up and down movements of the seltzer knob redirected his attention.

The Daily News, tied in a stack, hurled from a delivery truck onto the floor, almost struck his feet. He looked down to see how far the newspapers had missed him, and was just about to yell his usual collection of four-letter words at the driver when Frankie’s eyes scooted back to the front page.

“Hero Cop Tom Flynn’s Son Appointed Assistant D.A.” Under the headline, a picture of father and son, broad smiles, arms around each other’s shoulders. Within the picture, a cameo shot of the son in a cap and gown.

The name, Tom Flynn, gave Frankie a knot in his gut, but the voice of the soda jerk momentarily took his attention off the page.

“Egg cream’s ready, Frankie.”

“Thanks.” He sucked on the straw keeping the liquid in his mouth for a long time so that he could fully enjoy the flavor. After he swallowed, he looked again at the picture and began to read the copy.

Police hero, Thomas Flynn, twice commended for distinguished service, told reporters today that his dream had come true. He had always wanted to be a district attorney, but family obligations had made it impossible for him to attend college. His son, Tom Jr., a graduate of Columbia Law School, after working for almost a year and a half in corporate law, had decided to make the switch to criminal law...

He stopped reading. Too many words gave him a headache. Besides, he'd read enough.

He pushed the rest of his drink to the side before pounding on the counter. Big-time lawyer. Bet he thinks his shit don't stink.

Over the years he'd thought about Tom Flynn, how he might get even with him. Frankie removed the top newspaper from the pile and placed the paper on the counter. He skimmed over the details of Tom's success, each sentence feeding his anger.

While Tom was growing up, too many thugs in the neighborhood were pushing their ways on innocent people.

Tom was going to go after the mob, would be the champion of crime victims.

He had given up his Manhattan apartment and returned to the old Brooklyn neighborhood. Hm. Only a few blocks away.

The soda jerk requested payment for the partially consumed egg cream. "Do you also want the paper?"

Frankie threw it back on the pile. "Nah, there's nothing interesting in it."

He took a walk around the neighborhood, examining it as though he was passing through it for the first time. He turned a few corners and found himself on the street where Tom had beat him up and sent him home bleeding and humiliated. The same rage he had felt that day stirred within him along with the words he'd yelled out, "I'll get you, you Irish prick."

Revenge, that's what he wanted.

He walked back past the candy store to the bar next door. In the poolroom in the rear he was sure he'd find Louie Rosso. And he was right. "Hey, Louie, how's your Corvette?"

"Goes great. Want to go for a drive?" Louie smoothed back his over-Brylcreemed dark hair and stood up straight, making him look taller than his five feet.

"Sure, I want to check my investment." Had to do something with the cash he got paid for blowing up safes.

Louie opened the door for him. After he entered the passenger's seat, Louie pushed the door shut, got in on the other side. "Maybe you want to drive?"

Frankie thrust his hand upward. "No, you drive. Go."

"Where to?"

"Head for a highway so I can feel these wheels."

"You're the boss."

They drove toward the Belt.

After riding a several-mile stretch Frankie said, "You really like this car, Louie?"

"It's my life, the first of its kind, a real fun car. Got a long hood. Makes me feel like I can say fuck you to the world with this long hood."

"Bet you get a lot of snatch with this car."

"Yeah, the broads really go for this red beauty. You can't believe it, Frankie. Can't keep 'em away."

"That's great. Makes me feel good to see my friends happy." He rubbed his cheek. "You tell anybody how you got this car?"

"I swear on my mother I didn't tell nobody."

"That's smart, real smart." He hesitated. "How much did I give you for this fancy sports car?"

"You know, Frankie, twenty-nine hundred, three thousand clams, something like that. Who's counting?"

Frankie remained silent for a long time.

Louie wiped his sweaty forehead with his arm. "Why? Have you come to collect?"

"Nah. Relax. In fact, I got a business deal for you. Something to clear your debt."

"Yeah, what is it? Hey, what do you mean clear my debt? Is this some kind of joke?"

"This ain't no joke. All I want you to do is help me on a job and you won't owe me the three grand. No, it was actually thirty-two hundred smackeroos. And no interest. Whatever, you won't owe me nothing no more."

"Go on, Frankie, what kind of job is it?"

"Very easy. You just watch some guy for me and we wipe the slate clean."

"What's with this guy? Anybody I know?"

"Nah, you don't know him. Some jerk lawyer. I gotta even the score with him. He's no friggin good, a troublemaker for guys like us."

"You mean if I watch this guy for you, I don't have to pay back the money?"

"Are you dumb or something? That's what I said. Or maybe you just wanna pay me back."

"No, Frankie, you got a deal. Just tell me what you want me to do."

"You're in on this deal?"

"In like Flynn."

"In like Flynn?" He couldn't stop laughing. "You mean out like Flynn."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

He opened his four-fingered hand, pulled it slowly over his face, wiping away any smile that was left. "Shut up and listen."

Louie looked as though he was really paying attention.

Frankie was pleased. "You follow this guy and find out where he goes and what he does and is gonna do. In fact, if you do this job

good, there may even be a bonus in it for you. A couple of hundred bucks.”

“No kidding, Frankie. Tell me, what’s with this guy?”

“He forgot the primo rule. Nobody fucks Frankie Nine and gets away with it. And that means you, too. Got it?”

“Got it. You tell me who he is, where he lives, and just leave it to Louie.”

“Now that we’re business partners, pull over and let me show you how to drive this pussy pick-upper.”

Louie stopped the car, walked over to the passenger side while Frankie slid over to the wheel. He pushed down on the accelerator and screeched onto the road, thrilled at the thought of scaring the shit out of Louie.

Frankie was a skillful driver, could stop on a dime and avoid hitting a wall by a hair. Always bragged about how skillful he was.

When they arrived in the same parking space they had left in the back of the bar, Louie exhaled. “I thought you were going to wrap us up.” He pulled a chamois cloth from under the seat and wiped the fins.

“I’m glad you take such good care of this car. Just make sure you take good care of our deal.”



During the next few days, Louie got nowhere. He couldn’t find a pattern that Tom Flynn followed. One week. Two weeks. At the end of the third week, Frankie called to get a progress report.

“Look, Frankie, if you want me to do this job right, you got to be patient. We don’t want no mistakes. Don’t worry. Louie Rosso won’t disappoint you.”

Louie kept following Tom’s trail. Checking the newspaper. Listening to conversations about him in the neighborhood. He wasn’t making much headway. Frankie would go along with that, for the moment. But Louie had to produce. Fast.

Two weeks later he followed Tom into the Buick showroom. Louie pretended to be looking for a car as he watched Tom purchase a 1953 Buick Special, beige color. Real wishy-washy cunt color. The salesman promised delivery in a week.

That night the newspaper reported that in two weeks the Knights of Columbus was going to honor Tom's father at an awards dinner. Something clicked.

He picked up the phone, reported to Frankie about the car, the dinner, when and where it would take place. Did he need more information?

Frankie told him that was enough.



Michael had never heard Tom sound so excited. "That was Tom, Diane. He just called to tell me that his father's going to be honored at a testimonial dinner, and I'm invited."

"What about me?"

"It's only for men."

"When is it?"

"Thursday night."

"Thursday night? I'm going to a bridal shower and I need the car. You know how I hate taking the subway home by myself."

"You can have the car, I'll go straight from the office. Tom wants to show me his new car. He's going to give me a ride home and stay overnight."

"My God, Michael, we only have one bedroom." She paused. "Guess I'll have to put him up in the living room. Do you think he'll stay longer than Friday? I don't want to rush him out, but don't forget we have an appointment with Mrs. Coster Saturday. If Tom's still here he can come, of course. But I don't know how much he'd enjoy house hunting, and I don't want to postpone that. Want to be settled when the baby's due."

“Don’t worry. We’ll go this weekend, even if we have to drag Tom with us.”



Diane returned from school Thursday to be greeted by good news. When she saw the thick envelope from Fordham University with triple the postage, she was almost sure she’d been accepted. A rejection letter would’ve been in a thin envelope.

Her breathing quickened. She ripped open the envelope tearing part of the cover letter as her shaking hands unfolded the many pages of documents. She matched the torn pieces together. Oh, God. Not only was she admitted to the doctoral program, but she was also awarded a full scholarship. The letter explained the conditions—taking twelve credits a semester, not having any job at the same time, and maintaining at least a grade of B in each course. Traveling all the way down to the City Hall campus for classes would be a real pain in the ass, but nothing worth having ever came easy.

She had to reread the letter several times. Still couldn’t believe it. All that worry about getting into a doctoral program, and now not only was she admitted, but there’d be no tuition. Michael would be so proud of her.

Would Tom and Michael get home before her that evening or would she be sleeping when they got back? Her third month was just about ending and she was tiring more easily. Better not wait up for them.

She prepared a folding bed for Tom in the living room, and pinned a congratulatory note to the red satin bow of a large floral arrangement she bought for him to take home to his father.

She made two sandwiches on well-mustarded white Wonder bread filled with mounds of Boar’s Head ham and Land O’Lakes yellow American cheese topped with iceberg lettuce. She sliced the sandwiches in half, wrapped them separately in waxed paper, and

put them on a low refrigerator shelf. On the door she scotch-taped a message. "Snack inside. Open to find your surprise."

Oh, damn. It would be Friday already by the time they got home. She opened the refrigerator, took out the sandwiches and removed the ham, adding more American cheese. The best she could do. Not much of a surprise.

Should she also tape the letter from Fordham onto the refrigerator? No. It would be better if she told Michael about the scholarship when they were alone, and he in his pride for her would smother her with kisses.

She looked forward to that.



Frankie needed somebody else's car, just for one night. Artie's black Pontiac would be perfect. He told Artie the car needed a tune-up, gullible idiot. Stupid enough not to check the odometer. He'd give it a good tune-up anyway in the garage where he hung out, but Artie didn't have to know that it wouldn't be till the next day. Then he'd also put back the license plates he lifted and switched, just in case, with a different black Pontiac waiting for several days worth of repairs in a distant garage.

Him and Louie, they were ready. Frankie hid in the Pontiac's back seat while Louie kept driving around the Knights of Columbus area trying to spot Tom's car. Frankie crossed himself praying that Tom wouldn't walk or take a bus to the joint that night.

Then Louie slowed down. "There it is, there it is, he's parking right now. What fuckin' luck, couldn't be in a better space, as though we had chalked it out for him, right across the street from the building."

Frankie looked out the window for a moment then dropped down again. "Check the license plate. We don't want to hit the wrong car."

Louie drove some more, even more slow. "That's it, that's the one."

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

A little after eight o'clock it was nice and dark. For a while a few people were still going into the building. Then it became so quiet as though everyone who was going to the dinner was already there.

Frankie told Louie to keep an eye out for passerbys and warn him if anyone came close. There wasn't much time, had to be quick.

They pulled up behind Tom's car. As soon as the coast was clear, they began the routine they'd practiced and timed at least a dozen times.

Frankie got out. He opened the hood and placed dynamite in it, attaching the wires in its blasting cap to the two terminals on the ignition coil. Too bad he wouldn't be around to see the explosion.

Boy, he was doing some job! A real pro he was. Would of made some top World War II hero, or some great spy. Ernie Pyle would of wrote a story about him.

Frankie got back into the Pontiac. He told Louis to back up a distance far enough away so he could still see the building and yet be out of the explosion's path.

The instructions were brief and clear. As soon as the blast was over, get the hell out of the neighborhood but keep within the speed limit. He'd already figured that Louie had plenty of lead to drive away before the mess and confusion that was sure to follow.

Finding Tom's whereabouts was enough to pay for the Corvette. If Louie could give him a blow by blow description about how the blast went off and guarantee that Tom was dead, he would get an extra three hundred smackers.

Frankie cleaned himself up as much as he could. Besides, everybody knew he was a car freak so even if he had any grease left on his nails or shirt, nobody would even notice, think nothing about it. He was creaming in his jeans with excitement as he left for his usual

haunt a few miles away to make himself visible there at the time of the explosion.



Sitting in the unlocked Pontiac, Louie continued watching the Buick. It seemed a never-ending wait and he caught himself dozing off a few times. He panicked that he might really fall asleep and goof up witnessing the job.

The thought that he would screw up this deal scared the crap out of him. Besides taking back the Corvette and not paying the bonus, Frankie was the type of guy who could be very spiteful, come up with all kinds of vendettas. This fear gave him the drive he needed to keep his eyes on Tom's car. When he wasn't looking at the car, he forced his fingers deep into his forehead and temples so that the pressure would keep him awake. He should of brang a thermos of coffee. But then it would of made him have to take a leak.

He checked his watch every few minutes.

The night was dragging.

And dragging.

But by 10:12 a few men began leaving the building.

Louie perked up.

More men left. Some stayed in front of the building, still talking for a while before leaving.

Then the target appeared.

Louie lifted his eyelids to help him focus better. His eyes, well-adjusted to the dark, checked the target out.

Tom shook hands with several people who then walked away. He remained standing with two men. One was probably his father. At least it seemed that way.

Tom hugged the older of the two men who finally got into a car that pulled up and drove away. The other man Louie didn't recognize.

The other man and Tom chatted for a while. Louie tapped his foot waiting for the second man to leave.

He didn't.

Instead, he got into the front passenger seat of the Buick while Tom opened the back door and threw a small suitcase inside. He then entered the driver's side.

Holy shit!

The deal wasn't for two guys.

Should he warn the other...?

But that would warn Tom, too.

And if he didn't do what Frankie wanted, he would take the Corvette away. All the broads would go away, too. And so would the bonus he was going to use to take his girlfriend on vacation.

Frankie had made it clear that he wanted this thing witnessed. And what good was this other guy anyway if he was Tom's friend? Any friend of Tom's had to be Frankie's enemy, too. And didn't he say that nobody fucks Frankie Nine and gets away with it?

When was Tom going to turn the...?

Boom!

Even though Louis was expecting it, the strength of the explosion stunned him. The blast was so powerful it shattered most of the streetlights and a lot of windows, blowing glass all over the street. He remained stiff, staring at what he could see of the huge black puff the beige Buick had turned into.

Then, without waiting another second, he U-turned off into the dark.



A knock on the door.

Had to be a dream.

But then Diane heard it a second time. She flicked the night table lamp on to look at the clock, then turned the lamp off.

Two in the morning. Michael probably forgot his keys. Hoped he hadn't had too much to drink. He was a social drinker, never drank to excess.

She was just about to open the door when she realized that Tom would be there, too. She groped in the dark through the closet, and pulled her bathrobe off the hanger. A seasoned New Yorker, she didn't open the door but asked who was there, expecting to hear Michael's voice.

"Mrs. Pisani, open up, it's the police."

She was still in a daze, having been awakened so suddenly. But the voice on the other side sounded imposing. She felt for the living room light switch, turned it on. Then she looked through the peephole.

Two men were standing there all right, but they weren't Tom and Michael.

They were in police uniforms. One was in his twenties, she guessed, the other somewhat older.

She opened the door. The policemen identified themselves and asked if they could come in. She moved out of the doorway hoping that she was still sleeping and that this was a dream, a bad dream. "What's the matter?"

The older of the two stepped forward. "Are you Mrs. Pisani?"

She nodded.

"Mrs. Michael Pisani?"

"Yes."

Dead silence. The kind that made her feel this was the lull before the storm.

"There's been an accident." He stopped for a moment and looked at her. He took her hand and his partner looked down. "Your husband is dead, and so is the man he was with, Thomas Flynn."

At first she kept her hand in the officer's. Then she slowly removed it to clutch the part of the bathrobe covering her breasts. "There must be some mistake. What kind of accident?"

There were tears in the younger policeman's eyes.

The older officer said, "An explosion."

"What do you mean, an explosion?"

"Dynamite, we think. Under the car."

She stumbled backwards. "You're telling me this was deliberate?"

She allowed them to lead her to the couch. "I want to hear everything."

The two men glanced at each other. The older continued. "All we know so far, it only happened around 10:20, is that the car exploded. Most of the car," he swallowed hard, "was reduced to...only the frame is left."

She forced her eyes shut. "Where are the bodies?"

"In the custody of the medical examiner. Believe me, there was nothing anybody could do."

"Do they know who did it?"

"Not yet. Mrs. Pisani, do you want us to call someone?"

"Do my in-laws know?"

"No. The officers in Brooklyn are telling the Flynns."

The Flynns.

She held her head. God help them. She'd have to visit them, comfort them. "Then don't tell my in-laws tonight. They can hear it tomorrow."

"Would you like us to call someone to stay with you?"

"Thanks, but I really need to be alone."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

The officers left.

She closed the door, not bothering to lock it, and stood in front of it. Grief sapped the blood from her head. She was so weak-kneed, if she didn't hold on to the doorknob she'd be sucked into the floor that felt like quicksand.

An urge was creeping up in her. Run, run, Diane, as far away as you can. But where could she go? She rushed into the kitchen. There,

on the refrigerator, the note about the snack Michael and Tom would never eat. She ripped the note off the door, tore the paper to shreds, opened her hands to let them snowfall to the floor. And the letter on Fordham stationery she didn't tape up? There'd be no smothering with kisses for the news Michael would never receive.

She darted into the bedroom, flipped the light switch. On the dresser. Their wedding picture shot a spear into her heart. They were together. Michael! That last magical night in the Bahamas. There wouldn't be any more nights like that. They would never be together again. She slammed the picture face down, buried it in the lowest drawer. A live wire struck her when her finger touched a piece of cloth in the drawer. Michael's T-shirt. She pulled out the white shirt smeared with the rainbow and rubbed it against her cheek. Then she wrapped her arms around the shirt and hugged it.

It was deflated, empty.

She noticed herself in the mirror and almost smiled. Ludicrous. The bathrobe she'd yanked off the hanger in the dark, inside out.

Her life, inside out.

Nowhere else left to run but the living room. No peace there either. Her eyes caught the congratulatory flowers she had purchased for Tom's father. They were beginning to wilt and already smelled stale.

Mr. Flynn would need the flowers.

But not for a celebration.



Michael's wake was an event about which Diane remembered little. The closed coffin, the throngs of people who expressed their sympathy, her parents, and of course, her in-laws. They were so distraught that she had to spend most of her time comforting them.

Uncle Cyril was a special asset to both her and the Pisanis, since he seemed to be the only one coherent enough to know what was going on. He had made all the arrangements for the wake and

funeral. Thank God for Uncle Cyril. He was the one who held her up during the entire proceedings, a mass media event with newspaper reporters, photographers, and TV newsmen all over the funeral parlor and the church.

Fiona came down from Albany for both the wake and the funeral. She and Diane couldn't look at or speak to each other, just kept holding each other. What was worse, being in her predicament, pregnant and alone, or being like Fiona, never having Tom whom she loved for even a little while? Less than two years had passed since she and Fiona had graduated from college, but both of them seemed to have matured at least twenty.

Uncle Cyril took her home the evening of the funeral and left. She needed to be by herself. She locked the door and pressed her head against it in the attempt to squeeze out the strains of Chopin's "Funeral March". She undressed, took a shower, put on a nightgown and went to bed. But didn't sleep.

Now that she was alone, the reality of the week's events finally reached her. Her mind went over how she and Michael first met, how disappointed he looked in the bookstore, how shocked he appeared when his foot got caught in the stool and he landed on the floor, their first date, how she thought she wanted to stop seeing him, their honeymoon, his laundry fiasco, their plans.

How she'd always kept the salt hidden, afraid Michael'd be tempted to use it. Always worried he'd have a stroke from his high blood pressure. Even that would've better than such a violent death.

The old adages her father kept repeating started to come back to her. "Timing is everything in life." So true. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time had destroyed her husband.

How would she manage without him, especially now that the baby was coming? How difficult would it be for her baby not to have a father? How would she pay her bills?

There was not to be that house in the suburbs. Oh, no! She had forgotten to cancel the appointment with the real estate agent. She'd

have to call Mrs. Coster and explain, but how would she explain what she couldn't understand herself?

The nuns. What had they taught her? "God never sends trials to anyone unless He knows that person can take it," she could still hear them saying. Well, He was pushing her to the brink now. With Thanksgiving less than a week away, what did she have to be thankful for? And how would she ever get through Christmas?

What if she had let Michael use the car? If she hadn't been so selfish, he might still be alive. She could've taken the subway, or tried to find a ride to the shower with someone else. Or stayed home altogether. She rolled herself into a ball and put her arms over her head.

Then Michael appeared.

He was floating on the ceiling, the twinkle gone from his eyes. He looked serene. Then he vanished.

Why did he come?

What was he trying to tell her?

Grandma Angelina. It had to be about Grandma Angelina.

She, too, had been left a widow. Only she had four children, no education, no job, no insurance, and she made it work. It wasn't easy but she and her family survived.

Yes, Grandma Angelina was a survivor, and so it would be with her.

"I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet."

"Every knock is a boost."

The old sayings she had ridiculed so often were making sense to her now.

Maybe God was testing her faith. "O ye of little faith." Matthew's gospel. She'd pass the test. She had faith that God had a plan in all of this and prayed that some day she'd discover what it was.

In that prayerful moment she suddenly felt a fluttering within her. This was what the doctor told her to expect at the beginning of her fourth month.

First she thought she was imagining it, but then she felt it again. Life.



Seven weeks after the murder, Frankie La Rocca phoned one of his girlfriends. "Hey, Andrea, wanna go for a spin? Have a good time?"

"No, I got too many things to do."

"Got a new Cadillac Fleetwood." Just waiting for her to say something made his ears pop.

"Don't jerk me around, Frankie. Really?"

"Yeah, a ride in this car will take away the January blahs."

"A Caddy? When can you pick me up?"

"How about now?"

"Sure, I'll get ready."

A snood covered the curlers in Andrea's hair. Her stockings had so many runs, stopped in their tracks by dots of red nail polish. Her legs looked as though only they had hives.

"This is some fuckin' car," she said before getting in.

"Now that I'm older, twenty-six to be exact, I'm too mature for hot rods." He loved showing off his car and driving skill, especially in front of broads.

He revved up the engine, then shot for the Belt Parkway where he began driving way over the speed limit.

Get on top of the slow-moving shifts.

Force them to move to another lane.

He passed them. On the right. On the left. Cut into and out of the lanes to demonstrate his great coordination. "I should of entered the Indianapolis 500. Nobody could beat me."

"You're right Frankie baby. Wheeee." Every time she popped her bubble gum, it sprayed a mist of peppermint into the air.

Not until he heard a siren did he look at the speedometer. "Holy Christ, this car's so fuckin' heavy I didn't realize I was doing ninety-five."

The policeman signaled him over to the shoulder. Frankie remained silent, showed his license and registration, and waited patiently while the officer filled out a speeding ticket.

After receiving the summons he got off the parkway, drove onto the local streets. “Frankie feels bad, needs to feel better.”

“Don’t look so sulky, Frankie baby, Andrea’ll make you feel better. Andrea’ll take care of you.” She spit her gum into a Kleenex, stroked his cheek with the outer part of her hand. “You just stop acting like this and show that mean old police officer that he can’t stop Frankie Nine from doing nothing. He’s just picking on you because he’s jealous he ain’t got such a fancy car. You just floor it, baby. Don’t worry, Andrea’ll make you feel real good. You’ll be flying.”

“Yeah, I’ll show that dick of a cop that nobody can stop Frankie Nine.”

He pushed his foot hard on the gas pedal, drove through crowded streets, red lights, stop signs. Nobody was going to tell him what to do.

The elevated trains were next. Screeching and zigzagging in and out of the pillars for several blocks was real fun.

Instead of getting back on the Belt, he headed for the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, more of a challenge as he, repeatedly blowing his horn, swerved in between and passed trucks. The bigger the better.

He checked the speedometer. Eighty-five, ninety, up to ninety-five again. He kept blowing the horn and jerking the gas pedal as Andrea found new ways to comfort him. He was blinded by his comfort and when it reached its heights, his right foot jammed the pedal against the floor.



The New York Times didn’t consider it news that was fit to print. But on page four The Brooklyn Eagle had a column with the headline, “Couple Killed in Crash.”

The copy contained a short report of the incident. It described how Frank La Rocca, who had received a speeding ticket only twenty minutes before, was decapitated when steel girders from a truck went through the windshield of his speeding vehicle, shearing off the top. The driver of the truck was in such a state of shock at the appearance of the car and victims that he had to be taken to the hospital for treatment.



The police report provided further details.

Fly open.

Penis exposed.

Semen on trousers.

Female's head crushed between male's body and steering wheel.

CHAPTER 11



Five o'clock, Friday afternoon. Three months almost to the day that Michael was buried. The drapes were drawn, the shade pulled down over the living room window. Just about enough light seeping through for Diane to play solitaire on the coffee table with the sound of the ticking clock keeping her company. After almost two hours she hadn't won one game. Maybe she should cheat, turn over one card at a time instead of three, move a group of cards to an empty space even though the top card wasn't a king. But cheating would really be losing.

Why were Tom and Michael killed? It could've been a case of mistaken identity. Was she being punished because she wasn't happy about the baby in the beginning? She and Michael had too much, too soon. Could it really be the mob was involved even if they avoided doing anything against DAs? If she had the facts, maybe she could solve the crime herself.

The persistent ringing of the doorbell interrupted her train of thought. Who could be coming without calling? She gathered the cards in no particular order and put them away. Still not used to being alone, she approached the peephole cautiously.

The face, familiar.

The expression, unusual for him.

Frazzled.

He kept running his fingers through his hair. She opened the door. His hand was still on his head, but had stopped moving. When she greeted him with a quick hug and peck on the cheek, she got a whiff of Canoe. "Hi, Uncle Cyril."

"How's the future Mom doing?"

"The standard answer is some days better than others. There really are no better days, in fact they're all pretty horrible. But there's nothing worse than hearing someone complain. What can I offer you...something to eat, coffee, tea, maybe something stronger?"

"Thanks, I really don't want anything. Has there been any progress on solving the case?"

"No, they questioned everybody whose cases Tom might have had anything to do with, everybody at the dinner, people in the neighborhood, with no luck. As soon as I hear anything, you'll be the first to know." She reassured him with a smile.

Uncle Cyril returned it. "I wanted to check up on you to see if you needed anything."

"Besides having my husband back, I really don't need anything. Michael had a \$10,000 insurance policy with his company, no double indemnity. I'll invest that for the baby's education. He was going to up the policy to \$50,000 when he heard about the baby, but never got around to it. Part of the money we saved for the down payment on the house I had to use for funeral expenses, but there's some left."

She shrugged. "I can't wait to get out of this tight apartment but I won't be able to buy a house now because I can't afford it, my job's just paying expenses. So far my principal hasn't said anything about my leaving. You're supposed to leave by your fourth month and I'm starting my seventh. But they need chemistry teachers, and I've worn a loose lab coat from the very beginning, so maybe they didn't notice. I'll have to go back to work after the baby's born, but I'll manage all right."

She turned on the living room lights and led Uncle Cyril to the sofa where they sat facing each other. "It's not an ideal situation but

others've survived with much less. I'd like to spend more time with the baby. And I'd like to get a college teaching job, and I have a scholarship for the doctoral program at Fordham University, and..."

She hadn't realized how fast she was talking, and how fast she was blinking back the tears. But she felt them coming. As their warmth reached her cheek, she gave in to them. "I'm scared to death." She tried to control the outpouring by taking a deep breath and holding it while covering her mouth.

Uncle Cyril took her into his arms. She felt secure in the firmness of his grip, relaxed enough to let the tears keep spilling out. The more she cried, the more tightly he held her, releasing her only when she finally stopped.

She knew her eyes were swollen and red, but she kept rubbing them. "Can you imagine my poor baby growing up with no father?"

His silence let her go on.

"Michael would've been such a loving father, a wonderful role model. He was so happy about the baby. Oh Uncle Cyril, I'm so afraid. I can't tell my parents or my in-laws, and don't you tell them either, but I'm scared out of my mind."

The tears flowed more profusely than before.

He held her once again.

With her lips near his ear, she began to whisper. "I have to tell you a secret, something I feel guilty about."

He didn't move, or say anything.

She paused, then spoke as though she was in the confessional. "Uncle Cyril, every day, when I walk along the street, or go to a store, or just about anywhere, and I see women with their children, I think, I, I think how lucky they are to have husbands who'll come home to them. When I see elderly couples walking together, I think it's wonderful that they have someone to share their golden years. And I'm, I'm jealous. Yes jealous. And I..." She hesitated to fortify herself for something that was totally antithetical to her very being. "I hate them all. N-now, isn't that mean and rotten of me? I feel so bad that I

hate people I don't even know. And me, never jealous of anyone or anything in my life. I'm jealous of every last one of them."

More sobbing erupted.

When her tears subsided, Uncle Cyril moved her at arm's length. "Look, Diane, your reaction is absolutely normal, nothing to feel guilty about. I sometimes, in fact everyone has these feelings once in a while with much less of a reason than you have. And I understand your being afraid. It's scary out there to bring up children even when there are two parents involved." The look on his face was on the borderline between intense and desperate. "I want to help."

"My mother and father want to help me, too, but they need the little they have for their old age. Besides my father has terrible arthritis and doctor's orders to move to a warm climate. The Pisanis want to help me but I know that their business isn't going that well now, and my father-in-law wants to retire soon. I really don't need any money, but thank you anyway."

"That's not the way I want to help."

The muscles in her forehead tightened.

Uncle Cyril kept circling her hands with his. Unusual. His hands were sweaty.

"Under other circumstances I would've waited longer. But Diane, Diane," he said softly, "I want to marry you."

All that sobbing had given her a headache. She felt as though her head was being squashed between two boulders, tighter and tighter. Did she hear this right? She felt dizzy, almost faint when he held her again, this time kissing her forehead, her cheeks, and lastly, her lips.

She couldn't get a handle on what was happening. Carrying the child of one man and being kissed in this way by another made her feel as though she was being violated. She was about to push Uncle Cyril away when even in this emotional state she was concerned about not hurting him. All she could do was remain limp in his arms and add more tears to his jacket she had already dampened.

In the moments that followed he removed his arms from encircling her. She couldn't dare look at him, just stayed on the couch, with no strength to get up. The sound of her blowing her nose amplified the silence.

"Uncle Cyril," she eventually said, attempting to sound as calm and rational as the situation would allow, "you'll never know what your visit today means to me. You've always been so kind to both Michael and me. And I appreciate your wanting to protect me and my child. But I really don't believe you've thought through what you just said."

"But I have, Diane, ever since Michael introduced us. When I gave you the honeymoon, and helped select the ring and the apartment, I felt I was doing it for us. Maybe that was selfish of me but it was the only way I could share anything with you. I enjoyed seeing how happy you were, how the things I was able to get for you and Michael pleased you. I knew I was fifteen years older and that you were already spoken for, but I also knew that no one else on this earth could ever mean more to me."

"But you have so many women."

His hand rushed to his forehead. "So that's what's bothering you. Those women are just a...I mean they have been a diversion. They fill a void when there's no real relationship. But I swear to you that if you marry me, I will never have anything to do with any other woman as long as I live."

"I love you for that, Uncle Cyril. But I don't love you," she lowered her eyes, "in that way."

"Maybe in time you could learn to love me, I'm a very wealthy man and could provide every comfort and luxury for you and your baby. You would never have to worry about anything again."

Uncle Cyril paused, scratched his forehead. "And if you feel that we could be married and keep a platonic relationship. Until you were ready, if ever, for a conjugal one, that would be all right with me, too. I just want to be with you."

A tempting invitation, an easy way out. She had constantly avoided thinking about the hardship she'd have to endure.

Uncle Cyril was certainly an attractive man. No, he was actually handsome, outright debonair. He was well-educated, had a great sense of humor, and could charm anyone. And if she married him, she could have what she always wanted—a house, a house in the suburbs, a home of her own where she could raise her child. God in heaven, how she wanted a house!

Her son or daughter could attend an expensive Ivy League college. She could take trips to Europe, go for an advanced degree when it was convenient, wouldn't have to work anymore, just if she wanted to.

Wouldn't she be elegant in those dresses in the window of Bergdorf Goodman? And having a maid would give her time to pursue what she enjoyed. Maybe it would work, she could give it a chance.

And she was already missing waking up to a man's touch, a man's embrace, a man's...

But she knew herself too well. She could never love Uncle Cyril, never the same way she loved Michael.

She forced herself to look directly into his eyes. Wasn't sure what she was going to tell him, but trusted herself to say what would come out naturally. "Uncle Cyril, I could never marry anyone unless I could be a complete wife, no compromises and with total commitment. It wouldn't be fair to any man to settle for anything less. I'm honored by and appreciate your offer, but it isn't in me to marry for convenience. It's something that in time we would both regret. Please understand that my refusal is best for both of us."

Relief crept through her body.

Uncle Cyril stood up abruptly. He looked drawn, couldn't stop wringing his hands. "You're not in the most receptive state of mind right now. Maybe I should've waited until after the baby. Think about what I said, if you change your mind, I'll be waiting, no matter how long it takes."

Diane squeezed his hand, kissed it, then let it go. She turned away without looking at him again.

She heard the door close behind him.



All the way home Cyril thought that in the two years he knew her, Diane had never indicated in any way that she was interested in him. Yet, he'd been hopeful.

He hated when she called him Uncle Cyril instead of just Cyril. Maybe that was it. The avuncular relationship had colored her attitude toward him. It might seem incestuous for her to see him as her husband and lover.

He was devastated, numb. All he could think of was her smile, her eyes. He desired her more than ever, even when he felt Michael's child against him as she greeted him. He wanted to fill her one day with his child, one who would be so much like her that he could have more of her.

He arrived at his apartment physically and emotionally exhausted. The place looked stark, the furnishings bland. He removed his jacket, still damp on one shoulder from Diane's tears. Cyril clutched the jacket and held it against his face as his tears began to moisten the same area.

When the tears stopped, he hung up the jacket, gently pushing it to the end of the closet. It would remain there as a shrine.

It might be the only instance where any parts of their bodies would ever intermingle.



"Dr. Goodman, it's Diane Pisani. The pains've started."

"How much time in between?"

"Twenty minutes."

“Go to the hospital. I’ll keep checking in to make sure I’m there in time.”

She took a taxi. Didn’t want to worry her parents or in-laws. They’d be told when it was all over and wouldn’t have to suffer any anxiety on her account. Besides she wanted to be alone so that she could not be distracted by anyone from imagining that Michael was with her, his spirit somehow present.

She picked up a novel she had taken with her, an inspirational story about Esther, a Jewish woman who had to deliver her baby standing up in a packed train on the way to Auschwitz, not fortunate like her to be in a warm, cozy hospital room.

A contraction. A bad one.

At least she was in a hospital where there were trained people and sterilized equipment. She stopped feeling sorry for herself.

More contractions. Each one worse than the one before. She was satisfied with herself that she had followed the instructions not to eat when the pains began, for the smell of the antiseptics alone was making her nauseous.

She kept reading about Esther until the pains became so severe she couldn’t keep her eyes open. She kept her lips tightly pressed to squelch the screams. The book she was reading in bed thumped onto the floor.

Dr. Goodman arrived in the labor room wearing green scrubs. “How often are the contractions coming?”

“Almost continuously,” she said.

He then helped her roll onto a stretcher and wheeled her into the delivery room with the assistance of a nurse.

When she had the strength to open her eyes, Dr. Goodman and another man in scrubs were standing over her wearing white masks.

“Dr. Goodman tells me you’re a chemistry teacher,” the other man said, his voice slightly muffled by the mask.

She forced her eyelids to open and close.

“Well, if that’s so,” he said, “I’m not going to give you any ether until you can give me the formula for ether.” He stood over her holding a plastic mask with a hose.

The anesthesiologist, the son of a bitch. She’s in agony and he’s offering a quiz. Leave it to a man to ask such a question. If a man ever had to have a baby, he’d probably...

The worst pain yet.

She screamed as loud as she could, “C₂H₅-O-C₂H₅.”

The two appeared surprised by her response. She wasn’t sure whether they wanted a different name for the chemical so she shouted, “Diethyl ether, you bastards.”

The last thing she remembered was a smile from both men’s eyes, the only part of their faces that was visible, and the questioning anesthesiologist placing over her nose the mask with the hose.



Diane awoke to a warm face on her cheek.

Dr. Goodman said, “I want his touch to be the first experience you have coming out of the anesthesia.”

His touch.

A boy.

The warmth of the baby’s body diffused from her face to her toes and through all her organs, providing relief from her chills. She immediately loved him.

The nurse placed her hand on Diane’s abdomen and massaged it. A resurgence of pain. Such pressure, there had to be a truck parked on her. She couldn’t get her brain to start functioning. That confusing ether. Yet, the sensation on her cheek was exhilarating. She felt herself fading, fading...

The next time she opened her eyes, Michael was sitting next to her, holding her hand. She raised her other hand to touch his cheek. As her eyes became more focused, she noticed the resemblance. It was her father-in-law’s cheek she was touching, his eyes that were

staring at her. She and Papa Pisani looked at each other for a few moments, then they spewed tears.

Papa Pisani kept holding on to her. "Thank you for the grandchild." He took out his handkerchief and patted his eyes and face. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine, tired but fine."

"I have another grandson, but he's a, a Kawalski. Your boy is a Pisani and is supposed to be named Alfred, after me."

He stroked her hand, looked embarrassed. "I want to ask you for a special favor. Would you name the baby instead, after Michael?"

Diane read the anguish in her father-in-law's face. He seemed to have grown so much older in the past six months.

She embraced him. "If that's what you want, you'll have another Michael."

The tears came back to their eyes. She clenched her father-in-law feeling some guilt. She was pleased that he'd brought up the subject because it certainly wasn't too early to discuss the baby's name. Thought of it constantly since Michael was killed. And whether her father-in-law or anyone else would've liked it or not, there was no way on this earth she would've named her and Michael's son anything else.



The years following Michael's birth were more challenging than Diane could ever have imagined. She didn't want to miss participating in the amazing development and nurturing of a human being. She had to reorder priorities. First was her son, then her job, and finally furthering her education. So the first two years after Michael's birth, Diane didn't take any courses at all. Hard enough preparing for her teaching and finding time to play with him. Maybe in the future he'd understand why she had to leave him with a sitter most of the day.

And when they did spend time together, the times were special. She made sure that they were with stories, games, loving, kissing, cuddling, talking, taking walks, visiting grandparents and other activities limited to what a young, working widow could provide.

Whenever she and Michael walked through the park across the street from their Pelham Parkway apartment, Diane would watch fathers and mothers playing with their children.

Interesting.

On the monkey bars fathers were encouraging their children to climb to the top, while mothers kept calling out, "Be careful, watch out, don't fall." Would she inspire her son to take risks, or would she stunt him by being an overprotective worrywart?

When the fathers played ball with their sons, she wanted to go up to them and ask them to play with her son, too. But she never did. She tried to play ball with him herself, even if they both ended up covered with mud or grass stains.

It just wasn't the same.



On Michael's fourth birthday Diane received a phone call.

"How's my godson?"

A pleasant surprise. "Fiona! How wonderful to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Doing well under the circumstances. But you probably thought I died or something, you haven't heard from me for so long."

"Listen, nobody understands more than I do what you have to do. But you should be through soon."

"Can't believe how the time has gone. Almost finished with my residency."

"I'm so proud of you, how many other female surgeons are there?"

"None, not even in the next class coming up."

"Is there someone special in your life?"

"No, how about you?"

"Can't even think about it, too many responsibilities. Michael needs every second of my time when I'm not working."

"What are you doing about your doctorate?"

She hesitated. "Nothing. I had to give up my scholarship because I couldn't afford to go full-time, and that was one of the conditions. And there's no way right now I can take courses and keep up with work and mothering."

"Diane, I don't believe what I'm hearing. If I told you that, you'd be on my back telling me that I was making excuses."

"Really though, I..."

"You're talking to *me*. I don't want to hear this garbage. You go back to school, and before you know it, you'll be finished, too."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It is, and don't call me until you've applied for readmission."

"Yes, boss."

"Now that we have that matter straight, tell me, how's Michael?"

"He's a great kid. Stubborn, a mind of his own, wants to try everything. But he's warm and loving."

"I have his picture but can't tell from it who he looks like."

"His father, a constant reminder."

"I bet he's smart."

"Aren't they all, until they go to school? But I really think he's bright. Catches on to everything right away."

"Good, like his parents. How are your in-laws?"

"Their business is terrible. You know my father-in-law, that provincial mentality. Doesn't understand, or want to understand, that he has to offer what the market wants. Can't recognize that he has to modernize so he can compete with these large supermarkets that are popping up all over his neighborhood. He seems to be deteriorating physically as well as financially, and the sad thing is that I don't think he cares. Ever since Michael died, he doesn't seem to think his life or his store mean anything."

“He still has his wife, daughter, and grandchildren.”

“That’s another mess. Steve left Carla for another woman. He doesn’t support her and the Pisanis have to help her and the kids.” Diane felt worse for Carla than she did for herself. It was one thing to lose your husband through an accident, even a violent one. But there had to be a horrible sense of failure losing your husband to another woman.

“What a rotten break. But life does have a way of playing tricks on you.”

“Don’t we both know that? Now tell me, how are your parents?”

“My father’s fine, but my mother is still telling everyone I’m going to be a pediatrician. She still can’t handle surgery.”

“You know what they say about denial, it keeps our sanity. But let me tell you, Fiona, if God forbid, I ever needed surgery, I’d use you in a minute.”

“Only if I operate on another doctor. So you go back to school and get that degree. And I’ll check up on you, no, I’ll hound you until you do. Promise?”

“All I can promise is that I’ll look into it.”



The letter from Fordham University readmitting her arrived in August, six weeks after Diane had reapplied. She dreaded what she was in for, though now determined to get her doctorate. In the long run it would lead to a better job and better life for her and Michael.

She just about survived the stress of the semester. But at the end of the next semester, on the first Friday of May, one of her students seriously injured himself in the lab. His arm was cut by a broken beaker and he had to get eight stitches. The principal held her responsible and yelled at her in front of the students.

She looked forward to going home that day, but as soon as she arrived, the sitter rushed out, leaving the apartment in shambles, toys and books all over the place, crusted dishes in the sink. Michael

wouldn't stop yelling that he was hungry. When Diane went to the refrigerator, she was reminded of the fact that she hadn't shopped Thursday, her usual day, because she had to work on a research paper. Another paper was due for her Monday class and she had one more week to prepare for her two exams.

Michael kept demanding food. Diane rummaged through the refrigerator looking for some morsel to calm him. His yelling was getting worse, and so was her migraine. She emptied what little was left on the shelves by hurling their contents onto the floor. Then she slapped Michael's face. He was startled into silence.

"Find whatever you want on the floor and fix it yourself." She climbed over the broken mayonnaise, mustard, and ketchup jars, ran into the bedroom, and hurled herself onto the bed.

It collapsed. The tall headboard keeled over giving her shoulder a jolt.

She held her head and cried, and cried, and cried.

A few moments later she felt soft warm arms around her. "I'm sorry I made you cry, Mommy."

She grabbed Michael, hugged him. "Maybe we should both be sorry. You for acting like a brat, and me for losing my temper." Her lips brushed his forehead. "Michael, please be patient for just two more weeks, just till the end of the semester. Then I'll give it up and we can spend more time together."

"But Mommy, didn't you tell me you're going to school to get a better job so we can spend more time together?"

"I did, but it'll have to wait, my going back go school that is, until you're older."

"I love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too, baby."

Dear God, where is his father?



After her last exam Diane made an appointment to see the dean to explain that she'd once again have to postpone her graduate school aspirations. She walked down the hall to his suite. One of the secretaries was posting a job opening outside the career placement office. Diane passed by without looking.

Then she stopped. Backtracked.

Something urged her to read the 3x5 card that was just thumb-tacked onto the bulletin board. Marymount College in Tarrytown was looking for an Assistant Professor with a background in science to teach in the Teacher Education Department. Marymount...A women's college...Similar to the one she had attended herself...Salary \$5,000 a year, not great but reasonable...Fifty percent reimbursement of tuition leading to a doctoral degree...Faculty housing...Subsidized meals.

She reread the announcement several times. Always wanted a house in the suburbs. Not in the cards. Perhaps this opportunity would give her a chance to raise Michael in the suburbs, where he could play on campus in a safe, enriching environment.

She kept her appointment with the dean but with a different agenda. Instead of explaining to him why she wanted to postpone her graduate work, she found herself asking him for a letter of recommendation for the college teaching position she had just read about. It was with pride that he said he would do so.

That day she returned home overjoyed. Didn't want to feel too enthusiastic because she had no idea whether or not she'd be hired, and didn't want to be disappointed.

She took out a long sheet of paper and listed two columns, on the left one with her public school teaching salary and list of expenses—rent, food, full tuition costs, dollar equivalent for time spent shopping, cooking, and cleaning up. On the right she listed the expenses she'd incur if she took the college teaching position.

With less salary, she'd be about even. She checked and rechecked her calculations several times.

Choices. Choices. She was comfortable where she was in her job, respected, even had tenure. Should she risk the unknown of a new faculty, administrators, environment? She'd have to postpone getting an updated wardrobe, but that wouldn't matter since no one at the college would've seen her clothes for the past five years anyway.

She prepared a revised copy of her resume, a cover letter, and forwarded them to the academic dean.

An interview followed two weeks later.

And on a warm, sunny day in mid-August, she and her son, in their seven-year-old Chevy, followed by a small moving van, arrived on campus.

Between the summer and fall sessions, the campus was quiet, with the grass, trees, and buildings taking a brief breather before the arrival of the student deluge for the fall semester. And that view of the Hudson, deep blue instead of muddy gray, clumps of blue-green covering the palisades, like freshly-harvested broccoli, a few houses poised on the cliff. Just about. She couldn't see the point where the river met the shore, but imagined how houses there would look in the reflection of the water.

Only a trickle of cars parked sporadically in various locations. Many members of the administration must have been on vacation.

Michael opened the Chevy door, left it open, and began running around the grass. He looked like a freed animal, finally let out of the captivity of apartment living. Diane was thrilled at his reaction, and while the home she was about to move into wasn't hers, she had a place in suburbia.

When Michael completed his five-minute running spree, they and the moving van made their way to 5 Sunnyside Place, their house behind the library on the street where faculty accommodations were located. How fortunate she was to have a library for a neighbor.

The homes were all the same, brick row houses on both sides of the street, with front porches and small back yards, characteristic of the homes which proliferated in the housing crunch that followed the end of World War II. A side hall to the left, and on the right a living and dining room separated by an arch. The hall was interrupted by a small eat-in kitchen with a door that led to the back yard. A half-bath hid at the rear of the flight of steps that led up to three bedrooms and an off-the-hall full bath. No basement. Ample room to park one's car in front of the house made up for the fact that there was no garage. The rooms were small, definitely a no-frills home, but the house effused the residue of Clorox and Spic'n Span, and was freshly painted for its new arrivals, and to her it was the closest she would ever get to heaven on earth. Before unpacking, she sought out the maintenance staff to give them a tip for their thorough work.

The occupants of most of the other houses had to be taking advantage of the two-week pause at beaches, theaters, or whatever renewed them for the next semester.

Diane was about to enter the house again when a gentleman appeared on the porch carrying a large brown paper bag. "Welcome to the neighborhood." He handed her the bag. "I'm Phil McGrew from the history department. I live across the street."

She extended her hand. "Diane Pisani."

"Open it, you must need it by now."

"Please come in." The bag was heavy. She rested it on the kitchen counter. She laid the bag on its side and pulled out two sandwiches wrapped in plastic, three peaches, some plums, a package of Fig Newtons, and a ripe-smelling cantaloupe, which rolled off the counter before she had a chance to catch it. "I'm overwhelmed by your kindness. And your timing is perfect, I'm starving."

"My wife and I thought you'd be. We're just about the only faculty on campus right now, so we welcome some company."

No sooner did he finish the sentence than a blue-eyed, curly-haired blonde girl with a tiny ski-jump nose ran into the kitchen and jumped into Phil's arms.

"This is our daughter, Maureen." The child buried her head in her father's armpit.

Diane knew what Maureen's mother looked like, for the child had none of her father's coloring or features.

"You have to excuse her behavior," Phil said, "she's only two and kind of shy."

Diane raised her hand. "I've been through that stage. Believe me, it passes."

Her comment was verified by the arrival of Michael, bouncing down the steps, his hand making a squeaking sound, rubbing against the banister.

"Hi, I'm Michael Pisani. What's your name?"

Phil appeared taken with the child's outwardness. "Phil McGrew. Pleased to meet you."

As he attempted to release his arm from supporting Maureen to shake Michael's offered hand, the little girl squirmed down to the floor. She turned around to look at Michael. The two children seemed pleased to have a companion, and began running around the house together.

Michael, now five years old, was much sturdier on his feet than his younger playmate. Both Diane and Phil watched Michael help Maureen climb the steps. He remained behind her with his arms extended. It seemed to be love at first sight.

Shortly afterwards Phil and his daughter left and Diane began settling her belongings. Michael tried to assist by emptying his box of toys, and putting his clothes, in no particular order, into the dresser the moving men had placed in his room. Diane thanked him for his help, but later rearranged his clothes so that similar items were in the same drawer.

After supper they drove to the village. Diane wanted to buy a plant for their new neighbors, as a token of appreciation for being so thoughtful and generous. “Let’s go visit your new friend, Maureen.”

A woman opened the door, definitely Mrs. McGrew, a larger version of Maureen—fair skin, penetrating blue eyes. Only, the mother had blended blonde and graying hair that she tied in a ponytail.

“Well, after hearing about you all afternoon from my daughter, I can’t imagine who you two could be. I’m Eileen McGrew.”

Maureen and Phil soon joined them.

Diane gave Eileen the plant. “Thank you for welcoming us so graciously today. You’ll never know what it meant to us.”

“The pleasure was ours. It’s wonderful having you for a neighbor and colleague. I’m sorry that I didn’t have a chance to welcome you myself, but I was in the midst of summer cleaning, trying to straighten out the house before the semester starts again, and didn’t want to scare you with my appearance.”

“From what I’m looking at right now, you’d never have to worry about that.”

Diane entered the McGrews’ house, a mirror image of her own. They chatted over iced tea and pound cake. Diane learned that the McGrews had met while they were both doctoral students at Syracuse University, he in history and she in English literature. They married in their thirties and Maureen came along when Eileen was forty, after which time she had the menopause, considered premature by her physician. Therefore, Maureen would be their only child. The couple adored her and admitted that she was a bit spoiled.

Diane was always private about her personal life, but the McGrews had been so open with her that she felt comfortable telling them a limited truth. She bit her lip. She still couldn’t talk about all the details, but managed to say that her husband had been killed in a car accident. She hadn’t spoken about it in such a long time that she hoped she wouldn’t choke up. She did, and so what?

Diane and the McGrews became very close.
And so did their children.

CHAPTER 12



Carminc Caputo and his bodyguard wandered into the Capri social club. Carminc deliberately didn't call a meeting that night. Several of his capos would be there anyway, and he wanted the informality of their interaction to allow his hidden agenda to unfold.

Vito Tripodi, Claudio Arena, and Fred Paterno were sitting together. When he joined them, they stood up. He motioned them to sit again. No sooner had they done so than Frank Di Lorenzo brought them several glasses and a bottle of ten-year-old Gaja.

"As long as we're together," Carminc said, "let's have Frank make us something to eat. What do you feel like having?"

"You decide, Carminc," Vito said.

"No, you guys look so relaxed that I want to eat whatever you feel like having. There's nothing like being with your friends while you're enjoying some good food."

"Boss, are you sure you want me to order?" Vito said.

"Sure I'm sure." Carminc put his arm around Vito. "So what's it going to be?"

Vito signaled Frank. "Make us some pasta piselli, steak pizzaiola and string beans marinara, heavy on the oregano." Then he looked at Carminc. "Okay, boss?"

He patted Vito on the back.

Fred Paterno poured himself a glass of wine. He tilted his chair back. "Boy this job's getting easier and easier. There used to be a time when I was always looking around to see if someone was behind me, now things are much calmer."

Claudio mumbled through the toothpick in the corner of his mouth. "I feel the same way. And we're making a fortune."

Finally, his opportunity. "Why do you think things are so good?"

"You really want to know?" Claudio said.

"Sure, I want to hear your opinion."

"We have good leadership. Not that you haven't always been good, Carmine," Claudio said, "but your son-in-law's a smart fuck. He knows we can't make money with guns in our hands so we're in more sophisticated operations now, more legit, and you know we're cleaning up in the labor rackets and in bid-rigging in garments, meat, and cartage."

"Get him, high-falutin." Vito said. "Cartage. Such a sophisticated word. You mean garbage."

"Whatever," Claudio said, "it's the same bucks. Not that we've gave up the old stuff, but we got more class now."

"And Sal," Fred said, "with your backing of course, Carmine, I don't mean no disrespect, has got us so many new businesses from these lobs who can't pay back their loans."

Carmine was beaming. They were falling right into it.

"I know you know this, Carmine, but," Vito turned to the rest of the men, "Sal's up on the latest in crime technology. He hired experts to tell who's bugging and how to debug." He swirled his wine glass around and laughed. "I still can't get over the night Sal set up the FBI with that phony conversation he allowed them to bug. They got such fucked-up information that it got them off the track for months."

"Yeah, Carmine," Claudio said, "you're a lucky guy. The lawyers Sal picks are good, too. Know the rules, the techniques. Make sure everybody—the judge, the jury, witnesses for the prosecution, every-

body's on trial except us. Even had the foreman in Catalano's trial in his pocket."

"I guess I am a lucky guy. My own son," Carmine made the Sign of the Cross and the others followed him, "may he rest in peace, probably couldn't of did as well."

"What's Sal going to do next?" Fred said.

Carmine looked away. "What do you guys think he should do?"

"I don't think we got to tell Sal nothing," Vito said. "He knows what to do. Got good guts for what's right. We got to give him more responsibility."

"But to tell you the honest truth, Carmine," Fred said, "maybe to make him feel like we all appreciate enough what he's doing, we should make it, you know, formal."

"What do you mean, formal?"

"You know, make it official."

They had taken the bait. Carmine was delighted. "You mean *make* him?"

"Yeah, make him," Vito said.

"But don't you think he's too young?" Carmine said, "he's only twenty-five."

Claudio's hand shook back and forth under his chin as he tried to make his point. "It don't matter how the frig old he is. He's sixty in brains."

Carmine tried to continue looking surprised. "So you think that, too, Fred, Claudio?"

They nodded.

Perfect. Sign of a good leader. Make them do what you want them to do, but let them think it was their idea. "I'll really have to think about this."



The ceremony took place two weeks later. Sal made sure he wore a black suit, black shirt, and white tie. He was ushered into the same

room where him and Carmine Caputo had their first conversation five years before. The room felt as though someone had turned off the heat.

Only eight capos were present to witness his second baptism, this time not with water but with blood.

One of the men lit a white candle and placed it in the center of Carmine Caputo's desk. Another man turned out the lights.

Then everyone stood up and held hands. The capos looked on, their faces glowing admiration as Sal repeated in Italian the oath of allegiance administered by his father-in-law.

"I swear not to divulge this secret and to obey with love and silence. As burns this saint, so will burn my soul. I enter alive into this organization, and will only leave it dead."

His father-in-law then cut Sal's finger with a sharp knife and spread his blood over a gun and sword placed on the desk to form the shape of a cross. Sal wrapped a white napkin around his finger and shook hands with and kissed on the cheek everyone present.

Only six minutes. The ceremony was over. He was made.

They all celebrated with wine.

While he was just about to take a sip, Sal thought about his brother. What would he of thought if he was there? The image of the line Joey drew across the bed came to mind. The line in the sand, Joey'd said. Sal had just confirmed the side he was on by taking his oath.

Joey had also taken an oath that year. Poverty, chastity, and obedience. He also celebrated with wine, his first Mass. Supposed to have turned that wine into the blood of Christ, if anybody could believe that crap.

Even though Sal was now officially associated with the family, he couldn't leave any stone unturned in his clawing to the top. He wanted to make sure that he had a final hook into Carmine Caputo, one that would ensure an automatic succession to the throne.

A grandchild.



Sal was very excited. After three miscarriages in four years of marriage, it seemed as though Carmela would finally carry a child to term. She had the best doctors, expensive, Manhattan-based WASPs whose expertise was considered responsible for the success of this pregnancy. The physicians were handpicked, some would have said bought, by Carmine Caputo himself who had investigated their qualifications thoroughly so that his only daughter, now only remaining child since Marco's death, would have the proper care she needed.

With just a few weeks left before the baby was due, Sal couldn't hardly wait. He dreamed of having a son, one who might take over some day. His celibate brother would never be able to produce another Esposito for the family so it was important that at least one of his children be a boy. His son would have all the advantages he never had. And Sal made sure that he himself had and would continue to gain enough power and control to have anything he wanted.

Carmela's pregnancy was the only time he was happy in his marriage, with the baby a bond between them, providing a break from a boring relationship. Carmela had always made sure he was properly and promptly fed, and that his clothes were ready for any occasion. And she always did these willingly. But now even she seemed happier. Possibly those juices circulating in her. He kept telling her to "think blue," bought boy toys and spoiled her with other gifts to relieve the burden of her pregnancy.

He was most grateful to her for carrying this child and found himself spending more evenings at home, visiting Theresa less frequent. Every so often he would put his hand on Carmela's stomach waiting for a foot to cross what was formerly her waist or a fist to push up against her navel.

He imagined all kinds of wonderful things his son might do, some of the things that he hadn't had the opportunity to do. Maybe travel

across the country and to Europe. Go to an expensive prep school. Of course there would be music lessons and tennis or some other sophisticated sport. He could walk into the family business, if he wanted.

Just witnessing the development of the miracle inside Carmela reduced his doubts about the existence of God. Did the kid have hair yet? Fingernails? All the people his father-in-law had ordered killed. Weren't they once like this tiny baby? Nah. Those people weren't human.

Three days before her due date, Carmela was serving dinner. "Sal," she put her hand on her pelvis, "I think it's time."

He sprung out of his chair, phoned his father-in-law. "Pop, she's ready. I know you want to come with us to the hospital."

"I'll be right there. I'm not going to tell Luisa where I'm going, don't want to worry her. I'll give her the usual business meeting excuse, and tell her when it's all over."

Dr. Jeffrey Wheatley and his associate, Dr. Lance Brewster, were already waiting when him and his father-in-law arrived at the hospital. Dr. Wheatley said, "I advise you both to go home. Judging from her condition, it's going to be a very long wait. You'll be better off if you're occupied, I'll call you as soon as there's any news."

Sal was disappointed. He wanted to be there panting when the doctor pushed the delivery room door open and yelled, "You have a son, Mr. Esposito, a son."

Carmela, holding onto a small suitcase, sat in a wheelchair. Him and his father-in-law kissed her goodbye. Then they returned to the house.

Sal made a large pot of espresso and opened a new bottle of anisette, imported from Sicily. He passed over the small coffee cups for larger ones. The espresso would keep them awake and the anisette make the numerous cups they were drinking tolerable. But they needed something to dunk in the coffee. He searched through the cabinets for the package of biscotti he had bought.

They fidgeted. This was his night to be in charge, so he decided what to do. First they watched television. Then they played a few games of rummy.

His father-in-law picked up the newspaper. He threw it on the floor, the first page still unturned.

“Pop, imagine if you were the one giving birth. You’d probably be a nervous wreck.”

“At least I’d be where the action is. Maybe I’m just too superstitious. I had a bad dream last night that the baby wasn’t right.”

Sal stood up so fast he almost knocked over the glasses and cups. “Yeah, what was wrong with the baby?”

“Hey, Sal, relax, it was only a dream. It’s not real, all in my head. I have grandfather jitters, come on, take it easy.”

Sal drank some anisette without the coffee. He offered his father-in-law a glass. They drank more than half the bottle.

“We’d better stop drinking this stuff,” Pop said. “And you’re not a drinker anyway. One of us has to drive to the hospital.”

“Then stop telling me about your nightmares.”

Sal put the television back on. Jack E. Leonard was a guest on the Jack Paar Show and kept him and his father-in-law entertained for a while.



At about twelve o’clock Jeff Wheatley was still in the delivery room, frustrated and worried. “Just our luck. Of all the patients it could’ve happened to, it had to be just these lowlives. Couldn’t’ve been any other family. They were probably the ones who inspired that joke.”

“Which one?” Lance Brewster asked.

“The one where you ask someone why Italy is shaped like a boot, and then when he can’t answer, you tell him because they can’t fit all that shit into a shoe.” He couldn’t help chuckling.

"This is no time for jokes, Jeff. This is serious business, that's why I wanted you to be here with me, just in case something would go wrong.

"You have no sense of humor, Lance. Now we've got to hurry. Who's going to call her husband?"

Lance shook his head vehemently. "No way, not me. They don't prepare you for things like this in medical school. You're the senior partner, you do it. I'd rather lose my license than make that call. And to make matters worse with these dumb WOPs, all they ever want is boys. They should have nothing but girls. We should work on fixing it so that's all they ever get, one way we can get rid of the whole bunch of them, make them extinct. Then we can dedicate the Guinea Room in the Museum of Natural History to them, next to the dinosaurs."

"Good idea, let's work on it. Don't need more of those horny bastards contaminating all of us. Probably win us the Nobel Prize."



Sal was drowsy but the jingling phone jolted him. Him and Pop jumped up.

"You're the new father. It should be your pleasure."

He yanked the phone off the hook. "Hello."

"Mr. Esposito?"

He recognized Dr. Wheatley's voice. "Yeah, it's me. Is it a boy?"

A brief pause.

"Listen, Mr. Esposito, there's been a complication."

His heart took a break. "What complication?"

His father-in-law put his ear near the receiver. Sal couldn't hear too clear so he pushed him away.

"As your wife was completing her delivery, she experienced post-partum hemorrhaging."

Those fancy words. How he hated them. “So what the hell does that mean?” His father-in-law kept tugging at his shirt but Sal ignored him.

“Her uterus is bleeding. We tried everything but we can’t stop the bleeding. It means the only way we can prevent her from hemorrhaging is to remove the uterus.”

He didn’t answer.

“But Mr. Esposito, you must understand that if we do this, you won’t be able to have any more children.”

His throat lumped up. He was just about able to make the words come out, “Isn’t there nothing else you can do?”

“There’s no other choice. If we don’t remove it, she’ll bleed to death. But we need your permission to perform the surgery, Mr. Esposito. Will you give it to us? We have a nurse here as a witness.”

“You’re sure you can’t stop it? Can’t you give her a blood transfusion?”

“We couldn’t get the blood into her fast enough. Believe me, if there were any other way we’d do it. Now we don’t have much time, Mr. Esposito...Mr. Esposito?”

His voice cracked as he said, “Then, then do what you got to do.”

“We’ll do our best. And by the way, you have a beautiful, healthy baby daughter.”

Without answering, he hung up. The anisette started to back up on him, its licorice flavor now bitter. He related to his father-in-law the other side of the conversation.

“As long as she’ll be all right, I don’t care about the sex of the child,” his father-in-law said.

It was bad enough for Sal to have been informed about having a girl. But instead of being concerned about his wife, the thought that this girl would be his only child made him cry. He hoped his father-in-law would think he was crying for Carmela. Instead he was thinking, to never have a son. NEVER HAVE A SON.

Pop paced up and down the living room. "Maybe I should of got Italian doctors. They're more *simpatico*. These damned WASPs, personalities just like their lettuce and celery food. Think they're hotsy-totsy, got no warmth, cold fucks. Think they're real class."

Sal blotted his tears and looked directly into his father-in-law's eyes. "Pop, let me tell you something." He put his hands firmly on his father-in-law's shoulders. "The only difference between us and them is that they smile and are polite when they screw you."

"Yeah, sometimes I think we should remind those snobby bastards who civilized them, took them out of the caves. Let's go wake up Luisa and take her to the hospital. Do you want to call your mother and brother?"

"No, let'em sleep. They can't do nothing anyways. I'll call'em first thing in the morning. You go get Luisa and I'll meet you at the hospital."

They hugged each other. Then his father-in-law left.

Sal went into his office and sat at the desk. Stuck with a wife he didn't love and who couldn't give him no more children. She could have an accident. He could arrange one. But who would take care of the baby?

A girl. How could he play baseball or bocce with a girl? He stood up, kicked the fire engine truck and baseball mitt into the corner.

He sat at his desk again, put his head in his hands, tears surging. He wiped the tears off his hands by rubbing them on his desk. Smooth except for one spot where he could feel friction. He'd had the desk refinished, brought from the social club to his house with instructions not to refinish the part where he had etched the name.

Diane Pinto.

Ringin in his ears were those five words. See you next week, Charlie. As though she had just said them right there in the room.



Theresa Petrillo never did figure out if she was named after St. Teresa of Avila, the Carmelite nun, or St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower. Her name had a combination of both their spellings. It really didn't matter because either of them would've cringed if they'd observed their namesake taking seriously her enormous responsibility as Sal Esposito's concubine.

The rules were clear. What one did in private was one matter, but nobody publicly disgraced his wife. Therefore, never was there to be discussion of anything about their relationship, including its existence. Also, there could be no sexual contact with any other man. Sal was insistent about this because in addition to being immaculately clean himself, he was paranoid about contracting any sexually transmitted diseases.

Besides being celibate save Sal, Theresa was expected to please her man. This took place usually once a week on a Thursday night, but she had to be available at a moment's notice if he called or dropped in at any other time. Not too much to ask for a woman set up in a beauty parlor business with an apartment over the shop.

Sal himself exhibited a middle class lifestyle. His own home on Avenue U was most modest, in keeping with the rule of not being showy to attract attention. But her apartment was his home away from home, and even if it might not be in one's taste, it was expensive taste.

Theresa considered herself lucky. She had an influential boyfriend, even if he was married, furs, makeup, clothes, and jewelry that came from the pages of Vogue, and a Lincoln Continental replaced every year.

Sometimes she gloated over her lifestyle. How revolting to have to dress like so many other women in the neighborhood—polyester skirts and slacks, chintzy shirts. How could they be satisfied married to blue-collar workers, with children who constantly demanded

attention? Most of these women couldn't even afford to come into her shop, saving their patronage for special occasions like weddings or christenings.

One Thursday Sal came over earlier than usual so that they could go over the books. She watched him go through them carefully. His smile was so wide the edges of his mouth almost touched his ears.

"You're unbelievable. Should of been an accountant."

"A CPA. The nuns always told me I was good in math."

"They were right. Did they teach you how to write, too? I never saw nothing so clear and neat."

"Didn't you learn Palmer penmanship before they threw you out?"

"Palmer penmanship, is that what they called it? Never thought much of it then, but I'm real proud of you. Got a good head for numbers and good management skills. You're turning out a good profit." He looked upward and massaged his chin. "We should of went into business together."

"Together, I love that word, Sal."

"Now don't start up with that again. You know I don't love Carmela, but I got to stay with her for the sake of the family."

"The family, the family. I'm sick of hearing about the family. Which one anyway, the one with the small or the capital 'f'?"

"Both. And the last thing I need is another pain in the ass, so stop hounding me."

"Jesus Christ, Sal. I know your situation but did you ever think of mine? Alone all the time except on Thursday or whenever it strikes your fancy."

"Ah, shut up. Take it or leave it. Find somebody else if you want to." A smile grew from his scowl. "And then there's my daughter. You never seen such a kid. I'm nuts about her, play with her, read to her."

"Are you nuts about me, Sal?"

"What are you going soft on me? It don't make no difference, you got what you want. Who's got the bathrooms you got? Gold fixtures,

marble. And this French provincial furniture you're always talking about, look around you."

"Sal," she began twisting his hair with one finger while kissing the back of his neck, "I think I was in love with you from the first time I saw you, the new kid, walking into our social studies class."

"Yeah? Then stop bitching and show me how much you love me."

"Do you want to see one of your films first?"

"Nah. We seen enough of them."

They began removing each other's clothes, leaving a path that led into the heart-shaped bathtub they entered together. Theresa adjusted the water to a luke-warm temperature and handed Sal scented soap and a soft washcloth. He swirled it over her neck and breasts before reaching her stomach where she was ticklish. She tried to avoid his hands by ducking under the water. When she came up, she took the washcloth away from him, rubbed more soap on it, started making number eights on his chest, sudsing the few clumps of hair he had there. After she had worked up enough lather, she massaged his hard part, just enough.

After the bath, she damp-dried her hair, and they retired to her huge, custom-made, round bed. He examined her breasts with his tongue, pushed them together, and sucked her nipples hungrily, as a man who had definitely been weaned too early. The sucking drove her crazy, dizzy with passion. Two, three, the orgasms wouldn't stop coming. And he wasn't anywhere near her vagina.

When she was satisfied, she wrapped her breasts around his uncircumcised penis, massaged it up and down over and over again. He appeared to be in ecstasy when he filled her chest with potential Espositos. Just watching him, she couldn't control convulsing again.

After another bath, they took a nap. When rest time was over, she and Sal ate the meal she always prepared as part of their evening together. It was the only other thing she could do to pretend she was his wife.

During the meal Sal did most of the talking. He never spoke about business. She knew he'd obey his own rule, one that he insisted upon with everyone in the organization. Sal complained about his wife, bragged about his daughter, and shared his plans for the future, when he'd be old enough to retire.

She tried hard to be a good listener. While he spoke, she caressed and fondled him. Most of all she loved poking her finger into the cleft on his chin, kissing it, nibbling on it, licking it. His cleft made her wild.

She wanted to arouse him with her persistent touching. Afterwards they had sex once again, nothing preplanned, whatever occurred spontaneously.

She didn't look forward to Sal leaving that night, or any other night. She understood that he could never leave his family, and that she could never be part of it as long as Carmela was alive. The price she would have to pay for being a kept woman.

After he left, she tried to recall what he'd said about his retirement.

Retirement.

What would hers be like? Theresa tried not to think about her old age, the prospect of which was lonely and depressing. She avoided thinking about the future. It was the here and now she could think about, one that was secure and certain.

She rarely prayed, but when she did it was that she may die young, before her time with Sal would be over, a time she couldn't face but knew would one day come.

CHAPTER 13



The beginning of the academic year was always exciting for Diane. A renewal, a rebirth, with new faces, new preparations. Her year never started in January but in September, and this September of 1959 was particularly stimulating.

The day before classes began, she finally met the Chairman of the Teacher Education Department. She tiptoed up to his open office door that supported a polished brass plaque that shone his name, Dr. Joseph F.X. O'Brien. She knocked.

He signaled her to enter. "Do you need your program signed?"

"I hope not. I'm Diane Pisani."

He stood up, an imposing 6'7", she estimated, a retired Knickerbocker looking down at her. "I was expecting Diane Pisani to be older. Sorry I wasn't able to meet you before you were hired. My wife and I rented an apartment in Venice this summer and just got back."

"I would certainly think that Venice is more exciting than meeting Diane Pisani."

His arched bushy-gray eyebrows moved up and down along with his eyes. "I'm not so sure." He cleared his throat and sat down again after buttoning his jacket, which covered a potbelly. "But my wife, Francesca, is Italian-American. I've been promising her for years that I'd take her to Italy, and I finally did."

"She's one lucky woman. I'm dying to go there myself. Maybe some day."

"Are you a Republican?"

"Uh, why?" She was upset that she'd answered so reflexively, but his question startled her. "Is that a prerequisite for going to Italy or for employment?"

"Neither, but we'll get along much better if you are. I believe in self-reliance, initiative, and not using family situations as excuses for absences or lack of preparation."

So he'd already heard that she was a widow with a child. "Dr. O'Brien. If you check my references you'll..."

"Don't get defensive, I'm always on the attack. Can't help it. That's why my two daughters, about your age, don't bother with me so much." His full head of salt and pepper hair moved in every direction as he shook his head. "I've already decided you'll be my surrogate daughter, take you under my wing."

Just what she needed. Another father. Why couldn't he have been a young, single romantic with whom she and Michael could ride off into the sunset?

"Besides, I need a friend. The faculty doesn't like me. I'm not liberal enough for them. They think liberals are intellectuals instead of horses' asses. You see, Mrs. Pisani, I spent time in the real world, first in business, then as a social studies teacher, principal and fifteen years as school superintendent. When I retired, I came here."

He had the kind of resounding voice that made her wish she'd never be assigned a class next door to his.

Somehow she knew, though, that underneath the wolf's skin was a lamb.



After a few days of faculty meetings and registration, the semester officially began. Then came Diane's first classes teaching at the college, something she had always wanted to do. It was one thing to

want to do something, another to do it and, as Grandma Angelina had constantly said, be the best you could be at it. But now it was time to prepare. She had taught the disciplines, chemistry, general science, even pitched in with some math. But education courses, they had a rep and a bad one. Too theoretical, too boring, students making up for lost sleep in the education classes she had taken in college.

She was now a teacher of teachers. If she couldn't teach well, couldn't teach the way students learn, she wouldn't be worth her salary. There was content to consider, and process. Substance and style. Couldn't have one without the other. She mulled over how to make her classes come alive. How could any person be credible telling students that when they teach, they should keep lecturing to an absolute minimum, if that person always lectured herself?

The fourth week of the semester her class entered the room. It took her no time to note that all thirteen students were present and she began the class immediately. "We've been discussing memory techniques you can use in the classroom over the past week, and today I'd like to add another, give you an example for your consideration, and I'm going to take the example from math. But first I'm going to ask you a question, and I'd like you to write the first answer that enters your mind."

The students took out paper, pens, pencils, and opened notebooks. Kelli dropped her pencil, picked it up. They looked up, ready, when...three steady gongs. Suppose they had to do it before the weather got cold. What a time to have a fire drill.

Susan remarked, "Damn, just now, Mrs. Pisani's class. Couldn't be in boring Bob's history class."

The students looked disappointed as they, with her, left the building.



At the end of the second month of Diane's employment, Joe O'Brien conducted a routine checkup on her performance by calling a group of her students into his office.

"I really enjoy her classes," one reported.

"Me, too," another said. "She avoids lecturing, involves us in the class. Wants us to challenge her, not accept blindly everything professors have to say. She complained that accepting was too much a part of her own education and she wants us to have a different experience. And last week when some students were griping about the text, she organized a team of us to find a new one and defend the choice."

Other comments were duly noted.

"Always models the type of teacher she wants us to be."

"Is demanding yet reasonable."

"Gives us a lot of time. We feel we can go to her even with personal problems."

"Dresses professionally, which is more than I can say for many other professors on this campus. Makes us respect her more."

Joe was pleased. By the time Christmas had arrived, Diane's reputation had spread through the entire campus. He complimented the dean for hiring Mrs. Pisani, even without his having met her, and suggested that since the dean had done such a good job in the selection process, he might relegate the hiring for his department to her permanently.

Joe developed an enormous respect for his young colleague. Even though she needed his recommendation for contract renewal, promotion, and eventual tenure, she often openly disagreed with a decision, a policy, or a comment he made. If there was something she had to say, she said it to him directly.

Occasionally, he'd try to get her goat. All he had to do was hint of lowering standards and the hair, eyes, and face became one hue.

She'd let him have it swiftly and articulately, only laughing when he put on an innocent smile, and she realized he was baiting her.

He enjoyed her feistiness and her spunk. Felt doubly sorry for her late husband, who lost not only his life, but also this particular wife.



Diane enjoyed lunchtime at the college. Most faculty always sat with the same group of colleagues, but she deliberately joined faculty groups at tables where she knew there would be differing viewpoints and stimulating discussions on all subjects. For the most part she remained reflective and quiet at lunch tables her first years on campus, trying to absorb the way people approached political and social issues from their own particular disciplines, a wonderful broadening learning experience.

When Joe O'Brien joined a group for lunch, it always ended up being an amusing encounter. Whatever the conversation, he manipulated it to reflect his conservative, if not outright cynical point of view.

Diane noted that while Joe O'Brien and Phil McGrew liked each other, they did not agree on any issue except their fervor for Roman Catholicism. Year after year, exposure to constant arguing was in store for anyone who joined them in the cafeteria, their disputes serious and loud enough to produce indigestion in those who, despite their stomach tapping, didn't seem capable of tearing themselves away.

Yet Joe and Phil always found time to go out for a drink together once a week. A love-hate relationship in which she was always caught in the middle—a neighbor to Phil, a member of the department supervised by Joe, and a friend to both.

Even though Joe O'Brien couldn't stand John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Phil McGrew's idol, both Joe and Phil spent the entire weekend consoling each other and her in November of 1963, as she watched the

TV with incessant crying another young widow endure her husband's funeral on account of a senseless murder.

What would the nuns at St. Ursula's have made of that Kennedy incident?



An invitation.

The Sunday after graduation at Marymount, May 1964. At Francesca and Joe O'Brien's. A party to celebrate the end of the academic year with a supper at 5:30.

Diane and Michael arrived bringing a huge Boston cream pie, one of Francesca's few weaknesses, and a bottle of scotch, one of Joe's.

There must've been over twenty cars in the driveway, even on this Memorial Day weekend, when so many people would be away. The house door was unlocked. No one was in the kitchen or even in the house for that matter when Diane deposited her pie in the O'Briens' refrigerator and the scotch in the liquor cabinet.

Noise. A lot of it. Coming from the rear of the house. Then, a hushed silence. She and Michael wandered into the back yard.

"Surprise."

A large sign was strung from one tall maple tree to another. "Congratulations, Diane Pisani, Ph.D."

She became so emotional that she couldn't hold back the tears. Michael was still shaking from the yelling and when he saw his mother crying, he clutched her, and buried his face in her arm.

Soon everyone was coming up to both of them, kissing them, and offering best wishes.

Joe offered a toast. It was obvious that he had already had too much to drink. "To my wonderful colleague, Dr. Diane Pisani, friend and adopted daughter. Our love to you as you are awarded this degree. And if I were thirty years younger..."

Francesca gave him a shut-up-you've-had-too-much-to-drink look.

He apparently took the hint and completed the statement in its original vein. "Some of you may not yet know that Diane's dissertation was awarded the dean's prize. We're all so proud of her."

The crowd applauded, then sipped their champagne. Maureen McGrew tugged at Michael's shirt and the two of them started chasing each other all over the property.

Several guests began to yell, "Speech. Speech." Everyone else chimed in as a few of the faculty led Diane to the center of the group.

In one way she was pleased to have been surprised. But if she'd had a clue, she would've had time to prepare something coherent to say.

"I'm sure that most of you know how it feels to complete this degree. It's such a sense of relief that I don't know what I'm going to do with myself, since it's the first time in years that I'll have a summer when I won't have any papers to write.

"There were many times that I wanted to quit, throw in the towel, tired of the work and the sacrifices. But now that it's over, I'm glad I didn't give up.

"Though I have my degree less than two weeks, I've had time to reflect that the sacrifices I think I made weren't that great after all. The people who made them are the people who really deserve this degree." The tears returned. "The people who came to this country so all of us could have a better life. My grandmother, who lived by, and set high standards for all of us to follow, and my parents who worked hard so that I could get an excellent education. They're the ones who should be awarded doctorates, and I thank them for making it possible. And I thank all of you so much for being here today."

There were tears in everyone's eyes, and in Francesca's, who as a good Italian hostess called out, "Let's eat."

Joe lifted his glass. "I'll drink to that."

The guests snickered, then entered the house to feast on the elegant buffet the O'Briens had prepared.



A month after she was granted her doctorate, Diane received a telephone call from her mother-in-law—an invitation for a special Sunday dinner to celebrate her degree.

She was surprised that Maria wanted to celebrate. Might have felt obligated to do so. Might even have resented her doctorate. Women of Maria's generation had few opportunities to do anything outside the house. She recalled Maria's comment the first time they met, that women shouldn't work when they married but stay home and take care of their husbands.

And there had also been some digs about her leaving her child to attend school. "Too much education makes you stupid," Maria once said. Would she ever have said that to her son?

The afternoon meal at the Pisani's apartment was nothing that Diane had anticipated. The change in her father-in-law, shocking. He appeared shrunken, much older since the last time she had seen him, only several weeks before. He was still in his bathrobe, unshaven, and hardly got out of his chair to greet her. He stared through the television set that had snow on the screen and was tuned so loud that its vibration caused some of the hurricane lamp crystals on the opposite side of the room to resonate. The apartment itself was disheveled, even morbid, in sharp contrast with the first time Diane had entered it, vibrant with Christmas decorations.

Chicken soup filled the air instead of the usual pasta gravy.

The celebration consisted of just the four of them. Diane had assumed that Carla would be there, maybe even Uncle Cyril. On second thought, even if he'd been invited, considering the occasion, she was sure he would've found an excuse not to come. He had been conspicuously absent from any Pisani function the past ten years.

After dinner she found out why no one else had been invited. While she and her mother-in-law were cleaning up, her father-in-law fell asleep in front of the television. Michael kept adjusting the pic-

ture and switching channels finally settling on an Alfred Hitchcock thriller, "The Birds." Diane asked him to lower the sound he had turned up so he could hear over his grandfather's snoring. Michael did so with one hand, while yanking with his teeth and other hand the blue and yellow bag of Wise potato chips Grandma Pisani had given him over Diane's protests.

Maria beckoned her into the bedroom. The carved walnut furniture and hunter green velvet bedspread with matching draperies absorbed the light. A small ray emanated from a tall votive candle placed in front of a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception, her hands extended sideways, a halo of stars, her foot digging into the head of a serpent. Just like her first grade holy picture she still had, faded though it was.

The candle flickered. Devoid of its own energy, it self-extinguished, leaving a trail of dark gray smoke rising to and disappearing into the ceiling. Maria replaced the spent candle and lit the new one with a match she removed from a matchbook she took out of the top dresser drawer.

Diane kept looking at the statue.

"I was named after her, you know," Maria said.

The time was not right to remind her mother-in-law that she was named after her, too, her middle name, though. "A good choice. If there was ever a mother who needed strength from another mother who lost her son, it was you, Mom."

"She helps me, Diane. I keep a candle lit in front of her all the time."

Diane pushed away all the extraneous material. "Just be careful, it could be dangerous. Always keep the glass protector around the candle and keep any flammable materials far away. You'd be better off with a small electric light bulb."

"You know your father-in-law. He hates spending money on electricity. Goes around closing lights all over the place, even in the store."

"I know. That's why so many people might've thought you were closed and shopped elsewhere. How's the store doing?"

"We're losing money all the time. I had to go into our savings to pay the bills, keep things afloat. Even had to sell the station wagon we always bought new every three years. There's nothing left now. I don't know how long I can hold on.

"Alfred doesn't know it, he's in his own world, thank God. There's only so much I can do. He hasn't listened to Cyril's advice in years, if he did, we wouldn't be having any problems. He doesn't care anymore, doesn't even care about food, and you know how he always made a fuss over that. He was never the same after Michael was killed, couldn't get over the way he died."

Neither could she. "Now that I've finished paying my school expenses, I'll be able to send you some money each month. I'm going to get three hundred dollars from the university as a prize for my dissertation, so I can give you that."

"If I need something, I'll ask. But I didn't invite you into my bedroom to ask for something but to give you something."

She couldn't imagine what Maria meant but watched her remove a mink jacket from the closet and a small white box from the top night table drawer.

Maria spread the autumn haze jacket on the bed and ran her fingers down the fur. She picked it up and handed it to her. "Here, try this on, I want you to have it."

"But, Mom, you keep it, you may need it for weddings or some other occasions."

"I'll never go anywhere again. Your father-in-law, he isn't well, our days of going out are over."

"Mom, you mustn't say that, you mustn't believe it. You're still a young woman with a lot of life left in you to enjoy nice things."

"My life was over when Michael died."

"But you have your daughter, her children. And you have Michael's son."

“True, and that’s why I want to give you this, too.” Maria opened the white box. In its red velvet interior rested her three-carat, pear-shaped diamond ring with tapered baguettes on the side, purchased during better times for the Pisanis. “I want you to have this.”

“Now, Mom, I really think that you should give the jacket and diamond to Carla. After all, she’s your daughter and might feel hurt if you gave them to me. You know that she doesn’t like me so much, and I want peace in the family. You know how these situations can breed resentment.”

She could still hear her father saying, “Money makes enemies of brothers.”

“Carla disappointed me when she married that, that thing I can’t even call a man. I warned her about that no good trash, and I’ve never forgiven her for that.”

How could a mother ever say that she could never forgive her own child no matter what the offense?

“Carla’s your daughter, your flesh and blood, she deserves the precious things that you’ve accumulated in your life. You worked hard for them. There’s nothing like the relationship between a mother and daughter. I wish that I could’ve had a daughter. Sure, we have a good relationship, but I’m your daughter-in-law.”

“You made our son very happy. You made us proud, even if you did go to work after you were married.”

Diane ignored the comment.

“Your child is a Pisani. Carla’s son is a,” Maria coughed, swallowed hard, almost burped out, “Kawalski, if the bum ever comes back to her, and she should throw him out if he does.”

Maria was working herself up into a sweat. As she kept talking about Steve, her pitch got higher. Then in an aggressive way that was so against her nature she said, “I order you to take these things. I want your son to give the Pisani ring to his wife. Tell him it’s from his grandmother who loves him. I trust you to do that for me, do you understand?”

She had never seen her mother-in-law like that. Her face, a deep red, veins protruding from her throat and temples. She could have a stroke!

"Thank you, Mom. I'll make sure it happens as you ask." To pass over the hostility that was still on Maria's face she said quickly, "Do you have something I can wrap them in?"

"I'll make a package for you. Let my husband think there's some food in it, that he'll understand."

Maria removed a large box from under the bed. She put the white box into the jacket pocket before turning the jacket inside out and gently placing it into the larger box. She covered the box and placed it into a "Pisani's" shopping bag.

"Now make sure you wear the jacket and...I, I won't mind if you wear the ring before you give it to Michael's wife."

"Maybe I'll have use for the jacket, but I have no occasion or reason to wear the ring. Tomorrow I'll put it in the safety deposit box with my important papers. This way I won't have to pay to insure it. You shouldn't have left the ring in the house, it could've been stolen."

"Your father-in-law, he doesn't believe in banks. But now that I give these things to you, you do it how you want."

"It should only be about fifteen years or so when Michael could become engaged." A vision of a grown-up Michael putting that ring on a grown-up Maureen's finger flared through her mind. "When that happens, even though I'll keep the ring for you, I want you to give it to him personally."

Maria stared through her for a moment. "I'll be dead long before that."

Why did her mother-in-law say that? Had she sensed a change in her body? Diane was disturbed by her statement and about to disagree, but instead embraced her firmly. She wanted the confidence of the embrace to inform Maria that what she'd said about her death was not to be believed.

CHAPTER 14



The fall semester that year was relatively easy. For the first time, Diane didn't have any coursework of her own to worry about. There'd be more time to do the things she enjoyed—going to the theater, the opera, and reading more of what she wanted instead of what she had to.

"Diane, you really should have some fun," Joe O'Brien kept telling her. "You're a young woman and maybe it's time to begin dating again."

Dating. She hadn't thought about it for a long time. Not yet. Too young when she got married. Too many responsibilities. "I have enough to keep me busy. Everybody's always trying to match me up with somebody, I can't get involved. Michael needs my attention."

"Michael already has more attention than he needs. He's the center of attraction on campus with that personality of his."

"He does seem to be happy. I've always worried about his not having a father. It's so important for a boy to have a strong male role model, but I've been lucky. Between you and Phil it's been a blessing."

"He's a great kid, a joy to be with. I missed not having a son."

"Oh, is that a big deal with the Irish, too? I thought it was a Mediterranean monopoly."

"I think every man wants a son, just as every woman probably wants a daughter. It's something like, like living your life all over again."

Diane had mentioned wanting to have a daughter to Maria only to make her appreciate Carla. But now that she thought about it she said, "I guess it would've been nice to have had a daughter. Even preserved my wedding gown for the prospect."

"It's still not too late for you, Diane." His voice bellowed out, "You may have one yet."

"Go on, go to work." She shooed him away. "You're not busy enough, coming up with these crazy ideas. You need more reports to read, more assignments to correct."

She returned to her office. Papers seemed to have accumulated from nowhere. Couldn't stand a messy desk. Too confusing, it clouded her thinking. She began to straighten out the pile.

About ten minutes into the sorting, the telephone rang. The secretary had stepped out for a few minutes so Diane picked up the phone herself. "Dr. Pisani." She was still not used to hearing her new title.

No response.

She was about to repeat her name when someone whispered, "Diane?"

"Yes?"

More silence before the voice said with a little less breathiness, "It's Carla."

Why was Carla calling her at work? She hardly called her at home, and when she did, it was usually for something ridiculous like whether or not she should allow her daughter to participate in a class trip on Friday the thirteenth. Sometimes Diane couldn't believe that Carla and Michael were brought up in the same family.

But Carla's voice sounded throaty. Maybe she was sick. "How are you, Carla, I haven't heard from you in a long time." Could it be that after all this time Carla was calling to congratulate her on her degree?

"Listen, Diane, I need your help."

As she'd suspected, this was not a congratulatory call. Probably another problem with Steve. "What's the matter?"

Carla spoke incoherently through her crying. "Mom and Pop."

"What about them?"

After considerable stammering and sputtering on Carla's part, Diane finally got the details. The Pisanis died while sleeping, as a result of a fire in their apartment. A neighbor reported the fire when she saw smoke coming from a bedroom window. By the time the firemen arrived, it was too late. The Pisanis were found in bed, the bed and their bodies badly burned. The firemen didn't know yet how the fire started, but knew it started in the bedroom.

Carla received a call from the police. They wanted her, as the next of kin, to identify what was left of the bodies and make arrangements for a funeral. She couldn't leave Long Island until the children came home from school, didn't want to panic them by picking them up in the middle of class, and most of all, she couldn't look at bodies burnt so badly. She needed Diane for comfort and support.

Even as Diane began to process the incomprehensible events, she assured Carla that in an hour or so she'd go to the 49th police precinct to see for herself what the situation was, and would call her back as soon as she had more information.

Carla thanked her and hung up.

The click made Diane's head throb. With the tip of the phone she was still holding, she messed up again all the papers she'd just straightened out.

That feeling again. Like the night Michael was killed. Blood leaving her head, flooding her feet. She imagined the odor of burnt bodies, the aroma upsetting her stomach.

She rested her head on the cluttered desk. Even though her eyes were tightly closed, she saw her in-laws, as they were the first time she'd met them. Then she saw the votive candle in their bedroom, what they must have looked like when their bodies were discovered, and wept.



Diane always kept a duplicate address book in the top drawer of her office desk. She thumbed through the pages to the S index. Two telephone numbers were next to the name she was looking for. She dialed the work number.

"Hello?"

Thank heaven he was there. "Uncle Cyril? It's Diane."

Several seconds passed. "It's good to hear from you, Diane. How have you been?"

"I've been okay, how about you?"

"Busy, but that's good, keeps you out of trouble. I...can't believe it's been about ten years since we spoke. What made you call?"

So he remembered how long it was.

"Uncle Cyril, when I last saw you, you said that if I ever needed anything, I should call you."

"And I meant it. What can I do for you?"

"There's some bad news. I just got a call from Carla." Her voice cracked. She waited to get her emotions under control. "Mom and Pop Pisani were, were killed in a fire in their apartment. Carla's supposed to come to the city to identify the bodies and make funeral arrangements."

A long period of silence. Too long.

"Did you hear me, Uncle Cyril?"

"Yes, Diane. It's just too much of a shock."

"It was a shock for me, too. And Carla really seems at a loss for what to do. I'm surprised she didn't call you first. She doesn't seem to be able to handle the whole situation, not that I'm sure I can, either. I told her I'd help her and go to the police station to get more information. I'm going down there soon. Uncle Cyril, I have no right to ask you this, but, but I really need you to be there with me."

"I'll meet you there, I can leave in about an hour. I should be there by...one-thirty or so. Which precinct is it?"

"The 49th, on Eastchester Road. Oh thank you, Uncle Cyril. I'm so pleased you're coming. See you around 1:30. Thanks again. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."



Diane needed him. That's all Cyril had to hear. Of course he knew from the Pisanis every move she'd made in the past ten years, but he couldn't bear to have seen her. He gathered his composure.

Cyril took care of a few business matters, then left for his apartment to shower and put on fresh clothes.

He was about to see Diane again. So exciting. But he couldn't help wondering if she had met anyone she was interested in. If she had, though, the Pisanis would've mentioned it. How could a woman like her, even with a child, not be hounded by dozens of men?

He was thrilled at the prospect of kindling a relationship with her. Maybe after all these years, she'd be more open, and it would be possible.

After he got dressed, he opened the closet to get a coat that would match his change of outfit. He pulled the coat off the hanger, stopped, and carefully moved the other hangers out of the way to reveal the jacket untouched for ten years. The jacket that still held what was left of the tears both he and Diane had shed.

But for different reasons.



Cyril closed his eyes when Diane kissed his cheek. He could never forget the only time he had really kissed her, with her pregnancy not her lips pushing against him.

His feelings for her had never diminished. Seeing her again only reconfirmed them. She was wearing the appropriate black attire for

the occasion, and though pastels enhanced her coloring, the black contrasted with the magnificent glow of her face.

"You're more beautiful than ever, Diane. And you haven't aged a day," he said as she removed her lips from his cheek. He placed his finger over the spot where her lips had just touched his skin.

"Well, you know what they say, 'Working with young people keeps you young.'"

"You're living testimony to that. Tell me, how are you getting along? Tell me about your son."

"We'll have plenty of time to catch up. I have a feeling. No, I know Carla'll be useless in settling this whole situation. You and I should do it together, let's just get on with this unpleasant task. I'm sorry for being so abrupt Uncle Cyril...Cyril.

He liked her removing the Uncle from his name. Did it represent a change in attitude toward him?

"I'll feel more relaxed and sociable when this matter is taken care of," she said. "Besides, I have so much to tell you, you'll probably beg me to shut up."

No chance. He always enjoyed the ebullient way she described an event, the soft voice, its modulating tone, the expressiveness of that face, and of course, those eyes. The only way he wanted her to shut up was with his mouth on hers.

His intervention allowed the funeral arrangements to proceed smoothly. He completed all the forms and took care of all the details from identifying the bodies to selecting the undertaker and scheduling the funeral Mass and interment. By the time Carla arrived, all she had to do was sign her name in a few places.

Carla and her children, minus her husband, attended the wake that it had been decided by all parties involved would be held only one day. Many neighbors, customers, and former customers came to pay their respects.

Diane entered the funeral home with Michael at her side. When Cyril first saw the boy he had to force his teeth together to keep the

tears from running down his cheek. He regretted not having taken more of a part in the boy's upbringing, leaving Diane to fend for herself, not even being able to be assisted by the declining Pisanis.

His own feeling of rejection had been so painful that he carefully avoided any occasion that might have given him contact with her. But now as he looked at her son, with Michael's face and Diane's eyes, Cyril missed the years. Maybe if he'd taken a more active role in the boy's development, his mother might've seen how beneficial that would've been for the three of them. They might have become a family. But he had decided to bury himself in his work, building his business more and more for a loveless, empty life of meaningless relationships with women.

Michael kept shaking his head. "I never saw Daddy, and I'm not going to see Daddy's parents on Sundays anymore."

Diane cuddled him. "I know how you feel. They were very dear to me, I'm going to miss them, too."

Cyril put his hands gently around Michael's cheeks, kissing first the left, then the right. "I'm your Uncle Cyril."

The boy looked up at him. "I know. I never met you before, but I like you."

Cyril glanced at Diane wanting to say, "See how things might've turned out?" But she was looking in another direction.

Then he, Diane, and Michael went to view the two closed coffins that contained the remains of the Pisanis.

Closed coffins seemed to have become routine at Pisani wakes.



Torrential rain accompanied the day of the funeral. So much flooding made it possible for only an occasional granite cherub atop a tombstone to keep its head above water.

Even though many people had come to the funeral home for the wake, the downpour probably kept most of them away from the Mass and burial. Diane hated funerals on rainy days. Bad enough

placing people you loved into the ground, but wet ground made it feel so much worse.

After the burial, Cyril took her, Michael, the still husband-less Carla and her children to a restaurant. Straw-covered wine bottles suspended from the ceiling, and red and white-checkered tablecloths removed some of the solemnity from the occasion. The glass-sheltered candles on the tables presented Diane with a sad reminder of her in-laws' bedroom. She scurried about blowing out all the candles, taking such a deep breaths she felt she might pass out. Too bad if the restaurant owner wouldn't like that she had snuffed out his attempt at atmosphere.

While the children carried on their own conversation at one end, at the other the adults reminisced about the dead couple.

Carla chewed on her fingernail. "It was a horrible death."

And Cyril answered, patting her hand, "At least they're in peace."

Why did people usually say something like this comment of consolation at wakes and funerals? Was it supposed to make them or the bereaved feel better? It would probably be better not to say anything at all.

Then Carla chattered on and on about how much she had disappointed her parents by marrying someone they didn't like, and how sorry she was for not listening to them.

As long as Carla seemed to be in a guilty mood, Diane decided to tell her about Maria's gift. She wanted Carla to know about it before she searched through what was left of her mother's possessions. Also, Diane wanted such an important subject to be discussed before a witness—Cyril.

How casual Carla was about the matter! It made Diane feel guilty because she knew that Steve wasn't paying any expenses for the house or the children. If Carla could sell the ring, she'd receive enough money to considerably reduce her mortgage, making easier her monthly payments on the pittance of a salary she received as an office receptionist. She could even invest the money for the children's

education. But it appeared as though Carla accepted, even welcomed not getting the fur and diamond as just punishment for making her parents so miserable.

Diane was careful not to say much about what she was doing at the college, aware that Carla always resented the achievements of others. Instead, Diane kept emphasizing the negatives in her life—how little money she earned, especially how she always wanted a house but had to settle for faculty housing. And she was careful to find just the right moment in the conversation to remark, “Carla, you don’t know how lucky you are to have your own home.”

Later that day, after Carla returned with her children to Long Island, Cyril drove Michael and Diane to the funeral parlor parking lot where she had left her car.

“Do you want me to follow you back?”

“Thanks, that won’t be necessary. Besides, you must be exhausted.” She kept her head down. “You know, Cyril, you did an amazing job getting this wake and funeral organized. How can I ever thank you? Having you here took such a burden off Carla and me.”

“Diane, I told you a long time ago that I’d do anything for you. Remember, if you ever need anything, I want you to call me.”

She looked up. “I just did, Cyril, and I will again.”

He weaved his hand into hers. “And if you ever decide that you want a father for Michael, my offer still stands.”

With her free hand Diane caressed his cheek and kissed him goodbye. Then she and Michael got into their car.

After they had driven a few minutes Michael said, “Mommy, do you love him?”

“Who, Cyril?”

“Yeah.”

“What would ever make you think that?”

“Because he loves you, I can tell.”

“Well, you have some imagination.”

He remained quiet for a few miles. Then he said, "It might be nice having a real father."

They drove silently back to Tarrytown.



Someone was knocking on her window.

Diane jumped out of bed.

It was only sleet attacking the pane. The window was frosted with so much ice she could hardly see outside. Sleet kept chipping away at the glass. She turned on the radio, and then raised the volume to compete with the shrieking wind.

A heavy snowstorm forecasted, twelve inches for Westchester County. Then came the announcement of school closings. She was already on her way back to bed when she heard that both the Tarrytown Public Schools and the college were closed. Never doubted for a second that they wouldn't be. Before cuddling up in bed, she stopped in Michael's room to turn off his alarm clock.

At about ten-thirty the doorbell rang. She'd fallen into such a deep sleep that when the sound of the bell awakened her, she couldn't quite figure out where she was.

It was light out. Michael ran down the steps. "I'll get it. The alarm clock didn't go off, I'm going to be late for... Oh, look at that storm!"

Diane assumed that it was some of the boys in the area looking for work shoveling snow, but it was the mailman. He had a certified letter for her, return receipt requested.

She invited him into the house. "Well, I've always heard that neither snow nor rain nor sleet could stop the mail delivery. Now I believe it."

"Yeah, pretty nasty out there, a nor'easter, pretty common for December. They've changed the weather report. The storm's slowed down so now they're predicting at least twenty inches, a blizzard. So after I get your signature, I'm heading back to the post office."

“Would you care for a cup of coffee, and some cream of wheat that sticks to your ribs? Help keep you warm.”

“No thanks. The snow’s falling a few inches an hour and the more I delay, the harder it’ll be for me to get back.”

He hurried out of the house, leaving slush from his boots.

Her eyes followed his outline through the frost on the living room window. With her index and middle fingers she cleared a section of condensation on the inside of the window, hoping to see him a little clearer. He was surrounded by snow, snow blooming on the trees, snow he kept tracking through, almost reaching his knees, snow coming down so hard now that no sooner did he push through it than the new flakes concealed his trail.

The tip of her nose was numb from being so close to the window. She went back into the kitchen where it was warmer, and looked at the return address on the letter. From a law office in Queens. Rothberg and Weinstein. Whom did she know there?

She opened the letter.



December 3, 1966

Dear Mrs. Pisani,

Please be advised that you have been named as a beneficiary in the Last Will and Testament of Cyril Siano, deceased as of November 2nd of this year. Accordingly, I enclose herewith a notice of Probate as required by the Surrogate Court of the State of New York, County of Queens, together with a copy of the Last Will and Testament of Cyril Siano, dated October 4, 1965, as per the requirements of the court.

You are not required to formally appear in court or to formally or in any way participate in the Probate proceedings. However, it is suggested that you retain an attorney to oversee and protect your interest in this Estate.

I also have in my possession a letter for you from the deceased with the instructions that I release it to you personally after his death.

If you have any questions concerning the enclosures, please feel free to call me.

Sincerely,

Bruce Rothberg

BR/fs
Enclosure

Diane couldn't have been more frozen if she was standing outdoors. Her blood had turned to gel, stopping short of her head. The only words that registered were, "Cyril Siano, deceased."

Was he sick? How long? How could it be that Cyril had died and nobody had informed her? And dead for over a month!

She didn't bother reading the Last Will and Testament, but picked up the phone to call her sister-in-law. Then, she reconsidered. Suppose Carla didn't know, either. Before doing anything she had to get more information. She made a pot of coffee, sat at the kitchen table, placed her elbows on the table so that her hands could support her chin. She could see Cyril, always in a three-piece suit, expensive ties. Perfect teeth through a delightful smile. How he stepped out from the crowd in the living room the first day she met the Pisanis. And how uncomfortable she felt with her lips under his with Michael's child tumbling within her.

Later in the morning she dialed the number on the letterhead. A female voice answered. "Rothberg and Weinstein."

"Mr. Rothberg, please."

"He just left on account of the blizzard, and I'm about to leave, too. Is there a message?"

"I just received a certified letter from him. I'd appreciate it if he'd return my call."

She left her name and both her office and home numbers with the secretary and secured her assurance that Mr. Rothberg would call

back when he returned to the office, probably as soon as the following day.

Diane didn't get dressed but remained in her bathrobe. She spent most of the day looking out the window, the snow spiraling and swirling with each rush of wind.

Cyril. He'd always been a ladies' man, yet he was always alone. Even though with the exception of her in-laws' funeral she'd had no contact with him since his offer of marriage, in the back of her mind she was secure in the fact that he was always there—the sturdy, reliable Cyril to whom everyone including herself turned when there was a problem. He was no longer there, and she felt an inexplicable sense of loss, her breath taken away as if she was standing by herself in the middle of the storm facing each wind gust head-on.

A second man who loved her was now dead. Her father in his superstitious way always said that everything comes in threes.

Would there be a third?



Before supper Diane read Cyril's Last Will and Testament. It was rather technical but the bottom line was that he had left his company, worth three million dollars, to his employees. They could continue to run it as owners, or sell it and share the proceeds.

Cyril left the cash in his non-business accounts to her. It was estimated to be in excess of two hundred fifty thousand dollars. She was flabbergasted. Couldn't imagine that much money and had no idea what she would do with it. But she was also curious about the letter that he had left for her.

The next day everyone was digging out. A warming trend brought the temperature way over freezing and the sun reappeared apologetically to help melt the snow.

Diane got to her office at ten. At eleven-thirty the call she expected finally came through. "Thank you for returning my call," she said, "I was so rattled by your letter. How did it happen?"

"A heart attack."

"My God, in someone so young? Where?"

"In his apartment."

"Was anyone with him?"

"No, he was alone. Dead for two days before they found his body."

"How's that possible? They would've missed him at the plant."

"It happened on a weekend. When he didn't show up for a whole day and didn't call, they got suspicious. The police broke down his door and found him on the kitchen floor."

Poor Cyril. He was always alone, even died alone. "Why didn't someone tell me?"

"He made out his will a little over a year ago specifying that he be buried quietly with no one in attendance and purchased a single plot at St. Raymond's for himself. It was almost as though he knew he was going to die or wanted to die."

"Give me the plot number. I must visit his grave and pray for him."

A long silence. "Tell me something, Mrs. Pisani. How come you're the first person I ever spoke to in the twenty years I've been practicing law who was more interested in the deceased than in how quickly she'd get her inheritance?"

Interesting question. She said the first thing to come to her. "Because nothing could replace knowing that Cyril would always be there for me."

She was saddened by the isolationism with which Cyril, still in his forties, had decided to envelop himself. She had ambivalent feelings about not having contacted him except when she needed help in arranging her in-laws' funeral. Should've sent him a birth announcement, Christmas cards, called him when she received her doctorate, invited him for dinner. She had wrapped herself in a shell. Maybe there was something about him she didn't trust, something about herself she didn't trust. Or maybe he was right. She could've learned to love him. Was she afraid of risking loving anyone again?

Mr. Rothberg suggested she visit his office to discuss the probate procedure and pick up the letter which he had promised Cyril would be delivered to her personally.

She finally went to Mr. Rothberg's office, and took Joe O'Brien with her for support. They waited in the reception room for a few minutes. The room was disheveled with magazines spread about in no particular order and diplomas along with other testimonies of qualifications hanging crooked in their frames. It looked as though it was a daily occurrence for an earthquake to shake up the building. Even the secretary's desk was a mess, as was her hair.

Diane was disappointed that Cyril would've been associated in any way with a lawyer who presented such a shoddy image. Her hope was that his competence compensated for his sloppiness.

When Mr. Rothberg summoned them into his office, he remained seated, checking over the file labeled on the flap in large print Siano, C. before greeting them. He was wearing a shirt so tight for him that its buttons seemed on the verge of popping. His loosened tie appeared to have freed his windpipe for the air his diaphragm couldn't provide. His fat bald head housed two floppy ears that held up horn-rimmed glasses.

As soon as he shifted his eyes from the file to her he said, "Well, now I know why you were so precious to Cyril." He advised her that it would take three to six months to go through probate. After that time, he, as also the estate executor, would send her a check for the full amount of all moneys in Cyril's bank accounts plus any interest accrued up through that time. It all seemed simple, the information gained hardly worth taking the ride to Queens.

Then Mr. Rothberg handed her the letter. She looked at him to see whether or not she should open it.

He nodded.

It was handwritten and surprisingly brief. She read it silently, then handed it to Joe.



My dearest Diane,

Your life has been an inspiration. I wanted so much to share that life with you. But I knew that you would never accept anything from me unless you could give something in return. You will never know how much you have given me.

It would give me peace to share something with you in death. This gift I am leaving you is for the house you always wanted. Enjoy it. Be happy. Pray for me. And think of me once in a while.

My eternal love,

Cyril

Diane held on to Joe's arm, embarrassed because Mr. Rothberg kept staring at her and she imagined that he was thinking that she was one of Cyril's many willing conquests, probably a special one to have inherited all this money.

As soon as Mr. Rothberg had completed his responsibilities, he advised her to think carefully about what she would do with her inheritance. She was uncomfortable in his presence and in a hurry to leave.

She and Joe thanked him for his counsel, returned to the car, and didn't speak until they were in the middle of the Throggs Neck Bridge.

They waited on a slow moving line to pay the toll.

"So just who was this Cyril Siano?" Joe said in a sneering tone.

"Don't be cute, Joe. I already told you on the way to the lawyer's. He was my mother-in-law's nephew, my husband's cousin."

"Well, I noticed that he didn't leave anything to your sister-in-law who was his blood relative. What makes you so special? All that eternal love and stuff."

She could take teasing, and give it, but for some reason she was ruffled. "Are you going to stop with these questions?"

"Of course not, you know my Irish penchant for gossip." Joe banged the steering wheel repeatedly. "I'll not cease until you tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Miss or is it Mrs. Inspiration."

For a while she remained silent. Then she said, "Cyril asked me to marry him three months after my husband was killed. It was a little before Michael was born and he thought that the child could use a father."

"So why didn't you? You could've had a comfortable life."

"Joe! How many years have you known me? Do you think I could've married someone for comfort, someone I didn't love? And I didn't love Cyril."

Joe seemed to be enjoying the prodding. "Did you ever? You know." He nudged her arm with his elbow. "Did you ever do something, something extra for him to warrant all that money?"

"You devil! How dare you ask me such a question." How could she get back at him? Ah, yes. "And since when do the Irish ever think about sex?"

"A-ha, what makes you think I was referring to sex? See, it's your guilt that just made you admit it."

"Don't be ridiculous. Cyril told me he was in love with me."

"Well, so is half of Tarrytown. The male half. You know Diane, I just love riling you up. I get a real kick out of it."

"Now you remember, Dr. Joseph Francis Xavier O'Brien, I'm a rich, or maybe I should say richer woman now. So you'd better watch what you say and do to me. I'll buy the college and have you fired."

His impish eyes turned serious. "That's another problem. What should you do with the money?"

"After paying inheritance taxes, I don't know how much I'll have left. Guess I'll have to read up on investments. But to tell you the truth, with some of the money I'd really love to have a house of my own."

“Remember, houses need a lot of maintenance, may be too much to worry about and take care of on your own. You’ll have to consider your options. The lawyer said it’d take about six months to receive any money anyway, that should give you enough time to plan.”

They had passed the toll now and continued on their way back to the Westchester suburbs.



That evening when Michael went to bed, Diane felt her loneliness more than ever. She was restless, couldn’t sleep. She went downstairs and tried to read but couldn’t get into anything. She kept searching. Her hand followed the outline of books in the dining room turned library. A thick book. The Bible. Maybe if she read it, it would make her drowsy.

When she went to remove the book from the shelf, it slipped out of her hand onto the floor, opening to a page that looked worn. Her eyes fell on the text. She had read it often, a passage from Matthew’s gospel, one she thought about the night of her husband’s funeral.

“O ye of little faith. Do not worry what you are to eat, what you are to drink, or wear. Your heavenly Father knows all that you need. Seek first the kingdom of heaven and all these other things will be given to you besides.”

She thought of Cyril’s gift. Maybe he was trying to send her a message that evening.

She closed her eyes, the Bible, and crushed it against her chest.



It was fourteen years late. But in the spring, Diane and Michael, with the O’Briens’ help went house hunting. And on August 17th, a little over a week before the beginning of the fall semester, Diane and Michael moved into their new home.

CHAPTER 15



Eugenia “Gina” Esposito instantly became the apple of her father’s eye. A happy, bubbly child, she showed potential at an early age for being a real beauty, inheriting the best features of her parents.

Gina received all kinds of attention, from Sal because she’d be his only child, and from Carmela because any attention she tried to give her husband was rejected.

Carmela sensed Sal’s coldness, attributing it to the fact that she could never give him a son. But there were times when she also considered whether he had married her to get ahead. She talked herself out of that idea time and time again, recalling the many conversations she had overheard about his having excellent potential in the organization. He’d been given more responsibilities even before they were married, and he could’ve backed out of the wedding then.

Sal even seemed to have enjoyed their honeymoon. And the beginning of their married life was pleasant. She recalled the time he stood behind her, and guided her hands as he made hers slice garlic, place it into hot extra virgin olive oil and remove it just as it turned golden brown, before it became bitter. How he roared when she couldn’t quite get the meatballs right. No matter how long she kept rolling them, they always came out egg-shaped. Roly-poly meatballs, he used to call them. And how they roared hysterically when the wooden slats supporting their mattress spring shrank after the first

few days the heat was on and they both landed on the floor in the middle of the night.

But now Carmela began to blame herself for the failure of their marriage, even for her infertility. Maybe she didn't take care of herself enough during her pregnancy. Her doctor did tell her to stop smoking and she had actually cut down considerably during those nine months. She knew how Sal hated her habit. If she quit now, she might be able to regain his interest.

On a Monday evening she took her last cigarette, but placed half a pack of Salems in a kitchen drawer just in case she couldn't make it.

For a week she didn't touch a cigarette. The week was agonizing. She even lost patience with her beloved Gina.

Carmela kept looking at the drawer with the cigarettes, but every time she looked she imagined Sal telling her how much he loved her and making love to her, so she stayed with it. The pleased expression on his face gave her the strength to resist.

She was very proud of herself. After the first week of not smoking, it was time to tell Sal of her achievement. They had finished the main part of their dinner, and she was preparing dessert and coffee. "Sal, I have a surprise for you."

He was reading the newspaper, and answered without removing his eyes from the print. "Good, it's been a bad day, I could use a surprise. I hope it's a pleasant one."

"It's something you've wanted for a long time. You're going to be very happy, my love."

He let out a heavy sigh. "So why are you keeping me waiting? What is it?"

"I've quit smoking." She stood up anticipating that in his excitement he would do so, too.

He didn't budge, kept his eyes on the paper. "Oh, is that all? Only that you've stopped smoking? No big deal, it would've really been a good surprise if you told me that you were pregnant."

“Pregnant!” She was already edgy from being in withdrawal, but for the first time in their marriage she shouted at him. “You know Sal, you’re a real son-of-a-bitch. You think I’m happy about the fact that I can’t have any more children? And if I could, how the hell would I get pregnant anyway, certainly not from you. You haven’t made love to me, not even touched me in months. But then I’m sure you get enough satisfaction from that slut of yours. Your Thursday night business meetings.”

Sal kept his head in the paper. Much to her aggravation he didn’t give her the attention she thought she might get from her outburst.

Instead, he sounded calm. “My dear wife, I would get more satisfaction from a chimpanzee.”

Her anger became more exacerbated not so much by his response but by her inability to rattle him.

The coffee pot was now hissing. She walked over to the stove, picked up the pot, and poured the boiling coffee all over his newspaper. Her trembling made some of the liquid fall on his hand.

She knew the coffee scalded him but he refused to move, letting it sink into his flesh. She ran frantically for a towel.

She touched his hand with the towel. The instant she made contact he thrust her aside, rose from the table letting the coffee-saturated newspaper drop to the floor, then went upstairs.

“Sometimes I think you married me just to get in with my father,” she shouted after him. She was so upset by the encounter that she placed the guilt on herself, for her reaction to his sarcastic, nasty remarks instead of on the remarks themselves.

As though in a hypnotic state, she headed for the drawer, which contained the half-pack of cigarettes. She took one out, lit it, inhaled deeply, then chain-smoked the rest of the pack before cleaning the dishes.



Her screaming statement left Sal somewhat disturbed. He was always cautious, and as he tended to his painfully burnt skin, he regretted his behavior. She didn't deserve what he had just said. He was too hard on her. She was a wonderful mother, took loving care of his daughter. Put up with a lot from him. Wouldn't like it if he was in her place. He remembered how tenderly she held the screaming Gina for over three hours when the child cooked her hand on the hot oven door, a blister so large it covered her entire palm. And how Carmela sat in the rocking chair right next to his bed, watching him, nursing him all night when he had a high fever.

The thought of Carmela telling her father about their argument worried him. Carmine could be very protective of her. Sal would feel the same way about Gina. He knew how Italians reacted to anyone who harmed their women.

Now he could smell and taste the power that was almost in his reach. He was so close to achieving his goal that he couldn't take no chances that Carmine might get back at him by arranging to place someone else in charge.

He waited for Carmela to come up to the bedroom, something she always did when through in the kitchen. This evening the wait was unusually long.

He was just about to go downstairs to check on her when Carmela, teary-eyed, red-faced, and stinking of cigarettes entered the bedroom. He got into bed, keeping his bandaged hand on top of the covers.

"Carmela baby, come here."

She ignored him.

He'd tell her what she wanted to hear. "Carmela honey, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I'm under such pressure lately I don't know what I'm saying."

He put his head into his unscaled hand keeping the other one high and visible. "Sure I have a slut. But," he promptly said, "so does your father. That's just the way it is, you know that. It don't mean nothing. You know how your father loves your mother."

He deliberately touched his burnt hand so he could wince. "But how could I be so unkind to the woman I love, the mother of my child. Sometimes when you're hurting yourself you do and say unkind things to the people you love the most. Now come here to Sal."

She looked at his injured hand, then ran to him.

Though he found her tobacco-ridden mouth repulsive, he covered her face and mouth with kisses. With the hand free of bandages, and with quick assistance from Carmela, he disrobed her and made love to her.

He got through it pretending she was someone else, anyone else. Like Mrs. DelVecchio, whose deep-set dark eyes stared back at him a little too long when he looked at her. Or Mrs. Cinque, whose gold medal of the Virgin breathed up and down over her cleavage. He always got through it that way in the remaining times he wanted her to believe that his stated feeling for her was real.

For as long as Carmine Caputo was alive, Sal had to make sure that he kept Carmela happy.



While he rested in bed after making love to his wife, Sal wondered what life would be like with a woman he really loved. He liked Theresa, but didn't love her. She was just a convenience.

His thoughts returned to the redhead. What had happened to her?

Maybe by not being with someone he loved, he was missing something. He forced the idea out of his mind, but the thought always found its way back.

He had to keep reminding himself that there was no time for love, only time for accumulating his fortune and gaining control.

Sometimes he thought of staying with Theresa, living together. Always relaxed when he was in her apartment, not the way he was with Carmela.

But then there was his daughter.

And he couldn't forget what his father-in-law said to him the first time they met, that even though he had his own woman on the side, "...I always make sure I come home to my family."



Joseph arrived at the hospital to find his mother the same color as the sheets. Only the two gorgeous blue eyes stood out to immediately identify her.

How thin she had become, a living skeleton. He had always seen her fully clothed, but now he was tormented by her appearance in the revealing hospital gown, and tormented by that call from the factory, telling him of the pool of blood under her sewing machine chair.

He had always worried about her. She was still living in the apartment they had moved into when they first came to this country. He knew she'd never live with Sal. She would always tell him what a humiliation his lifestyle was, and how with one son wed to Christ and the other to the Mafia, she had no other choice than depend on the factory for a social life. There, too, she complained about being embarrassed by many of her co-workers who knew about Sal. Some of them needled her often, asking why she had to work if her son was so rich and powerful. Others consoled her, helping her make up for him by referring to the saintliness of her son, the priest.

Joseph placed his rosary in her pale hand, clasped it, and held it. When his hand touched hers, his mother's blue eyes shifted from space toward him. She smiled, appeared to be at peace.

She spoke in a combination of Sicilian dialect and English. "Giuseppe, I'm ready to die."

Why did she suddenly start calling him by his Italian name? Hadn't done that in years. "You shouldn't say things like that, you just need rest."

Joseph believed what he had just said. The doctors advised him that his mother had uterine cancer, which would in all probability be cured by a hysterectomy. And a six-week recuperation period would bring her back to normal. He had discovered that she hadn't seen a doctor in all the years that she was in this country, not even before or after delivering Sal.

He was determined that his mother no longer work. He didn't want her to live by herself anymore. Living in an adult home run by the nuns is what he would arrange for her. She would fight it, but he would somehow convince her that this is what God wanted. Then she'd do it.

But just now his mother dozed off. After the operation would be a more appropriate time to broach the subject.

He left her sleeping, still with his rosary in her hand.



When he heard of his mother's illness, Sal immediately called her doctor to have her placed in a private room. The doctor stated it wasn't necessary, but Sal had a way of insisting that always made him win.

Over the years he had constantly tried to get his mother to live with him. Her answer was always the same. "I rather die than live with you and your kind." She would add some version of, "You stupid wife, she no know what you do? Everybody know. Why she no make you stop?"

Sal canceled all business appointments. Everybody would understand it was a family matter that had to be attended to.

Bruno dropped him off at Sak's Fifth Avenue before going to St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital. Sal wanted to personally select something elegant, something exquisite for his mother to wear after surgery.

Theresa was always talking about her collection of peignoir sets that she had bought especially to please him. He thought of asking Theresa to buy a peignoir set for his mother, but reconsidered. Theresa's taste might be too gaudy. Besides, Theresa had never met his mother and he wanted to get something that would blend with her eyes.

The salesgirl showed him several nightgowns and matching robes. He selected a cornflower blue satin nightgown with wide straps, a lace top and a lace-trimmed matching robe. The color would make his mother's eyes deeper. She had told him that it was her favorite color because she knew she looked good in it. The outfit might at least break the monotony in private of her still wearing black in public. He had the peignoir set gift-wrapped in silver paper with white and silver ribbons and bow.



Domenica couldn't stop thinking about Sal. He was always smart. Why couldn't Carmela get him to do other things with his life? Then she considered her own life. She couldn't get her husband to stop gambling. It was a sickness. Sal's business was a sickness, too. All she could do was pray for him as St. Monica prayed for her son, St. Augustine, that some day he would change and be saved. And Monica's prayers had paid off.

Her fear was now for her granddaughter. What chance did that child have with that father of hers? How would she turn out? A major problem. She prayed and prayed for some miracle that would save her only grandchild from what appeared to be an inevitable fate—doomed to wed a *mafioso*.

Sal appeared in the doorway. She was happy to see him. He had disappointed her, actually broken her heart, but she still loved him.

As soon as he came into the room, he kissed her cheeks and hands, and sat next to her.

She forced herself to smile. Couldn't get her words to be heard in the beginning so she made a real effort to speak more stronger. "How's Gina?"

"Mama, you always ask for Gina, don't you ever ask how I am?"

"I know how you are, I really know. How's my grandchild?"

"She's fine, she'll be going to school soon. And from what I see, she's going to be a smart girl."

"I hope she's smarter than you."

"She already is."

"I mean real smart, so that she no approve what you do."

He answered her by placing the silver box on her lap. "Mama, I bought this for you, to wear after the surgery. It'll cheer you up and make you get better right away."

"Let's see." She pretended interest and slowly and carefully removed the bow, untied the ribbons, and eased her hand under the paper where it was joined so that it wouldn't rip—a habit from the old days where everything was to be saved and reused.

She lifted the cover, pushed aside the tissue paper, and removed the contents. The satin was so slippery that the nightgown and robe slid onto the floor. Sal quickly picked them up and returned them to her.

She examined the lace, the material, the workmanship. "Very well made. Quality work." Domenica moved the label a far distance and read it. "Made in France. Beautiful. For a queen."

"You're my queen, Mama. You wear this after the operation and maybe some rich doctor'll fall in love with you."

"Devil. I had enough of men, they only get you in trouble."

He narrowed his eyes and smiled. "Well after this kind of operation, you won't have to worry about that kind of trouble no more."

She shook her head. "You impossible, always were. What's the use! But thank you...Beautiful. Wear it after I no can have no more children. But right now I'm tired, want to sleep." She tried to move the

back of her hand forward with a thrust, but all she could manage was a shake. "Go home to you family."

He rewrapped the peignoir set, placed the box on the night table next to her bed. "I'll leave the light on in case it's dark when you wake up."

He nestled her against his chest, kissed both cheeks several times. "I love you, Mama."

She dropped her head on the pillow. What did he really love?



Hector Rodriguez entered the room. The light reflecting from the silver box shined so bright it caught his eye. He wondered what could be in that box while he kept sweeping and emptying the garbage and waste he collected from the smaller pails and wastepaper baskets into his cylinder. He left it next to the patient's bed and went to the other side of the room to pick up her untouched supper.

He returned with the tray, and was just about to dump its contents into the cylinder when he noticed that the silver box was in the container and two blue gowns had partially slid out. But he was less surprised by their presence than by the eyes staring at him.

"Miss," he picked up the gowns and box and handed them to the woman. "These fell into the garbage."

"They no fall. I put them there."

"But Miss, there's a lot of waste material in this pail. Your fancy clothes may get blood on them."

Her eyes hooked his. "Believe me, sonny boy. There's more blood on those clothes than there is in this whole hospital."

Another crazy old lady.

He carefully removed the unsoiled garments, folded them into the box before he returned it to the night table.

The woman pushed herself up and grabbed his arm. "Sonny boy, you have a wife or girlfriend, somebody special?"

"Si, Miss, I have a wife."

“Then you give her this.” She pointed to the box.

“Miss, this is a very expensive gift someone brought you. You should keep it.”

“I no like it. It no look good on me, it no fit. It never can fit.” She squirmed in her bed. “It make me itch if I wear it.” Her voice became more firm. “You, you a good man, I watch you. Work hard for you money. You give the gown to you wife. Tell her it’s from me.”

“But Miss...”

“No tell me no. You give it to you wife or I keep throwing it in the garbage. You understand?”

He hesitated before picking up the silver box.

The blue eyes were giving their approval.

He thanked the woman and left the room with the box under one arm, the other pushing the cylinder.

That night his wife couldn’t stop talking about her present. She stroked the material, held the nightgown, then the robe up against her. She took a shower, sprayed herself with perfume, put on both the nightgown and robe. After wiggling her body under them, she slid next to him under the sheets.



The doctors who operated on Domenica closed her up as quickly as they could. The cancer had metastasized to the ovaries and to several other organs. Nothing could be done for her. Any treatment would be worse than the disease. Her physicians believed that death was imminent, perhaps days, so they didn’t move her to another care facility.

Joseph and Sal began a vigil they alternated so that their mother would not be alone when she died. Even though Joseph knew her situation was hopeless, he insisted she be fed intravenously to prolong life. But when he saw the pain she was suffering, he agreed to have the tubes removed, and the pain-killing drugs increased. That his mother was in this state was his fault. He shouldn’t have entered the

priesthood, should've taken better care of her. What good had he done anyway, stuck in the parish to keep an eye on his brother's family? If he had been a missionary, a real preacher, he would've been able to do more good. A parish priest's life was soft. He wasn't worthy of his calling.

He watched his mother slip in and out of consciousness.

One evening, when it was his turn to stay with her, she called. "Giuseppe."

The Italian name again. He quickly approached her bed. "I'm here, Mama, I'm here. Is there something I can get you?"

"Hold my hand, Giuseppe." He immediately extended his hand to take his mother's but she instead grasped his with such strength that he couldn't speak. Could it be his prayers were being answered and she would be cured?

"Giuseppe, you always my *bastone*, the cane I depend on. Maybe it's no fair, but you always there for me. I try no bother you too much, but there's something you got to do for me."

"Anything, Mama, just ask me."

"You got to promise me two things."

"Sure, what are they?"

"That you take care of Gina. You got to promise me you make sure she grow up right. No like Sal. That she no grow up like me, with no education. She's got to get a good education so she no end up marrying those bums, those trash, that she throw up when she's near them."

"Trust me, Mama, I promise you that she'll get the best education. What's the second promise?"

"You got to promise you pray for you brother. Every day. You got to pray hard for him that he be saved. You know, Giuseppe, I named him Salvatore, the Savior. Baptized him myself. You got to pray that he be saved."

Baptized him herself! Must be the morphine they were giving her. He felt exasperated, hoped his mother wouldn't see the doubt on his face, but she must have.

"You should know better, Giuseppe. The priests, they always say that prayer can move mountains."

He bet those priests had never met the mountain named Sal. And while Joseph did believe in the power of prayer, it would take a miracle for his brother to be saved. And for that miracle he didn't have much hope. "To be saved, Mama, he's going to have to suffer. Carry his cross."

"Then I pray that he suffer. A big suffer. A big cross. The biggest. Now you promise, Giuseppe, you pray he have a big cross."

"Don't worry, Mama. You rest. Joseph'll take care of both promises."

With a remarkable spurt of energy, she lifted herself up and squeezed his hand. "No forget you promise to you Mama on her death bed. Or I no die in peace. I depend on you. No forget you promise...you promise...the mountain...move mountain...he suffer...big cross." She was still squeezing his hand. Then she fell back on the pillow. Her fingers relaxed.

Dear Jesus, his mother was gone.

He couldn't move.

The sensation of her fingers pervaded into his entire being the two promises he had just made.

CHAPTER 16



One of the most difficult things Diane ever had to do was deliver the eulogy at Joe O'Brien's funeral. The sixty-seven-year-old, three years from his second retirement, was stricken on the way to campus by a heart attack while driving on the Taconic. His car went out of control and crashed into a tree. A miracle no one else was killed.

During her prayers for Joe's soul, she chastised him for abandoning her. "I never knew you to be a quitter. How could you leave me alone just now?"

For in 1969 it seemed as though the nation had gone mad. The country was still whirling from the prior year's assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. The Vietnam War was tearing the United States apart. The world was literally and figuratively going to pot. And as the country became covered with graffiti, Diane didn't know who was worse, those performing the act or those justifying and excusing it.

In the turbulent sixties, education was not immune from the storm but was frequently at its center, the solution to all problems. But as the society moved toward openness, some professors had become too open—accepting anything that was handed in, inflating grades, using expletives in the classroom, and smoking pot with students. Diane was convinced that lowering expectations and loosening standards would be detrimental over the long term, leading

students to mediocrity instead of allowing them to reach their full potential. She was a voice alone fighting the trend. "Bring students up to the standards; don't lower the standards. The former requires commitment, the latter giving up."

She never gave up but there were times she felt she was the only one fighting. Having high standards was frustrating. They took a lot of effort to maintain, but when one always lived with them, one couldn't stand anything less.

Joe's passing represented a new era in her life. Did she want to apply for his position and assume a leadership role within the department, or did she want to remain a professor in the department? She opted for the challenge and, after competing with one of her colleagues and three outsiders, was named Chairman of the Teacher Education Department.

Under her guidance teaching excellence became a reinforced priority. Research was important but teaching was first. Her faculty were to be role models for their students who were to learn in varieties of modes and be actively involved in the learning process.

And even though a required core of courses was dropped for all students, those in her department were required to take a broad array of liberal arts credits. She firmly believed that exposure to many different subjects was critical for future teachers so that they would be better prepared to enrich the curriculum for their pupils.

And finally she wanted to complete the exposure by adding diversity to her faculty, people of different religions and backgrounds, those who could bring varieties of perspectives.

To this end she began an extensive recruitment campaign and conducted numerous interviews.

Amazing.

Some of the most magnificent resumes could produce some of the most incompetent people. The interviewing process was exhausting but worth it if she was going to hire the best.

One person Diane was most impressed with was Ruth Finkelstein, who had recently completed her doctorate at New York University. She was invited to campus for a luncheon interview so that Diane and other department members would be able to meet with the candidate in a relaxed environment. Diane took the time to introduce Ruth to faculty members from other departments as well.

The next day Dr. Gus Eisendorf, a political science professor, joined Diane for lunch. Gus had been a Rhodes scholar with enough publications to his credit to fill two library shelves, a recognized expert on the post-World War II era.

"How are the interviews going, Diane?"

"It's a tedious job but if I don't spend time doing this right, I'll pay the price later on."

"How did the woman you interviewed yesterday fare?"

"Very well, in fact we're giving her serious consideration."

He kept pulling his beard so that it came to a point. "What was her name again?"

"Ruth Finkelstein."

He remained silent for a few moments. "Is that a Jewish name?"

"It might be. What difference would it make?"

"You said you don't want to pay the price later on. So if I were you, I wouldn't even consider hiring her."

"Why not? What's with you?"

"Come on, you know how they are."

She leaned closer to him, perked her ear up. "Do tell me, Gus, how are *they*?"

"For openers, if you ever applied for a job in a yeshiva, you wouldn't even get as far as the door. Then give them some time to get comfortable and they'll be telling everybody how to do everything. They're inveterate know-it-alls."

Gus shook his finger at her. "I'm warning you her name may be Ruth, but try to get rid of her if she doesn't work out, and the day will come when you'll find out that her name is really Sue."

Could she really get sued for trying to get rid of an incompetent person? Never considered that. She shouldn't take the risk. Oh, for God's sake, how could she be such a lily-liver? If anyone she hired wasn't up to par, she'd take that person to the Supreme Court if she had to.

"Well, as long as you've stated the negatives of the stereotype, let me give you the positives. *They* are hard workers. *They* are most interested in learning, and education is *their* highest priority. And if it ever came to what you suggest, I'd take her head-on."

"I believe in stereotypes. They wouldn't exist unless there was some truth to them. Did you ever ask yourself why the stereotypes of different groups are different?"

"No, but I'm sure you have an explanation."

"The stereotype of the Poles wouldn't be different from the stereotype of the Greeks unless they behaved differently. It's currently in vogue to use stereotypes only when you say something good about a group. When you state the negatives, everybody gets upset.

"What is this today, logic according to Eisendorf?"

"No, math according to Eisendorf. You see, I go with the probabilities. And the odds tell me you hire a Jew and the chances are you'll get a persistent, pushy, bragging, arrogant pain in the ass."

She'd had enough. She picked up her tray and left the cafeteria asking herself how someone as smart as Gus Eisendorf could be so stupid.

The next week she hired Ruth Finkelstein.



At the college Helen Ferguson became Diane's closest friend. Helen was a member of the Psychology Department, the newest and youngest female on the faculty, and one nurtured in the free-thinking of the Sixties. The spectacled, under-weight, under-endowed vegetarian seemed to enjoy analyzing everyone on campus, most often Diane.

"You know, Diane, you should stop burying yourself with work. You're escaping. You should go out and have some fun, why don't you begin dating again?"

"You're such a nag. Joe used to nag me about dating, too."

"Do you know why you don't date? You're afraid you'll get hurt again."

A slap in the face. One of those forest-for-the-tree moments, but Helen had put her finger on it. It seemed as though every man who made her feel secure, Michael, Cyril, Joe, died on her.

But whom could she date? She only knew the men she worked with. Donald Swenson. He was attractive, but married. Pass on that one. And David Piller. Nice eyes. But he was so in love with his experiments, calculations, and formulas, he'd probably measure a woman's pulse rate after sex instead of smoking that cigarette. Jack Pigott, a good sense of humor, but so laid back, low-keyed, he'd probably sleep through an orgasm. And when a member of her staff tried to set her up with someone named Ben Czyzyczon, an architect, she gave it a whirl. He kept calling her after their first date, but she always came up with excuses. She had the sense from the beginning what kind of companion, conversationalist he would be with such a high ratio of consonants to vowels in his name.

Yet over the years Diane missed waking up next to a warm body. She missed the intimacy, the kisses, the...She pushed the notions out of her head.

She did think about dating but wanted to see Michael settled first. "Maybe when Michael goes to college."

"Everybody'll be taken by then, even the widowers." Helen wagged her finger. "You're using your son as an excuse. He'd probably like the idea."

Despite all her nagging, Helen was a good companion. She was empathetic and became a sounding board, something Diane needed badly since Joe O'Brien died.

Helen was the quintessential matchmaker, plotting and planning all kinds of schemes to bring people together. Diane figured that every time Helen, who was not married, succeeded, she gained a vicarious husband.

One day they were trying to decide where to sit at lunch. Diane noticed that Helen was heading for a table where Dr. Richard Worthington was pontificating. Diane forced the edge of her tray into Helen's ribs. She stopped in her tracks.

"Helen, don't sit with Worthington. He's such a pedant, loves to hear the sound of his own voice. And he's always kissing all the women and talking about his wife, bores me to death."

"I've had my eye on him. He only kisses everybody if you're in the group. He doesn't do it if you're not there. And do you know why he's always bragging about his wife in front of you, and may I add, you only?"

"Ever the psychologist. Why?"

"He wants, wants you," she covered her mouth as she chuckled, "to compete with her."

"Where do you pick up these ideas?"

"It's true, he really does. Now let's sit with him. When he starts on his wife, you agree vigorously with everything he says about her. You brag about her, too, it'll blow his mind. Let's go."

She and Helen continued to entertain each other playing their little games.



Diane had set two rules for herself—not to get romantically involved with anyone she worked with, and not to become emotionally involved in her students' lives. She had often advised her own students to avoid getting emotionally involved with their pupils when they became teachers.

Since Michael's death, she hadn't met anyone who captured her interest. Only Paul Conner, an unattached colleague of Phil McGrew, was a possible candidate.

Diane couldn't figure Paul out. She got the sense that he had some feeling for her, but he never pursued any relationship with her. More than once she caught him staring at her. When she turned toward him, he would jerk his head away.

Even Helen had mentioned, "I think Paul really likes you."

"If that's true, you'd never know it."

"Why don't you ask him to go out?"

"Helen! I was raised at a time when it was fashionable to pretend you didn't get an off-color joke! I could never ask him for a date."

"This is the age of the liberated woman, you should ask him."

"I have a better idea."

Helen shook her. "Well, hurry up and tell me before I burst."

"At lunchtime let's go to the cafeteria. You sit at Paul's table, I'll sit somewhere else. Chat with him for a while, about anything. When you sense the timing is right, and you're good at that, work into the conversation that I'm getting engaged. Then read his reaction, verbal and non-verbal. That's what you love to do. I'll also keep my eye on the action."

Helen's eyes were rounder and larger than ever through her thick glasses. "Diane, that's brilliant. I can't wait until lunch."

A little after twelve they proceeded with the master plan. Diane positioned herself at a table near, yet distant enough to monitor the activity unobserved. Helen maneuvered herself into a conversation with Paul.

Before long, Paul stopped eating. He also stopped talking.

Shortly afterwards he left the cafeteria in a huff.

Diane, her curiosity satisfied, resented his behavior. If he had any feeling for her, he should've told her to her face, the way Michael did the first time they met. Michael would've taken the initiative. He

loved her enough to risk rejection. He was tenacious and wouldn't have relented until he had won her.

Paul Conner was no Michael Pisani.



"Is this your son?" the police officer said when Diane opened the door.

She didn't answer but stared at Michael whose head looked as though it was hanging from a meat hook.

"I'm Officer Bernardo. He was spraying paint on the signs at the train station with some other kids. They got away. Here's the can he was using." He held it in front of her. Rustoleum. "When he told me his name, I asked if he was related to you. My daughter's one of your students so I didn't take him into the police station."

She took the Rustoleum from Officer Bernardo, looked at it, then shook it. At least the kid used quality paint. "Thank you, Officer, but I don't need any special privileges."

"All the other kids did it, too," Michael said.

"I'll deal with you later, young man, right now go up to your room." Michael started to argue but her eyes silenced him.

He went up the steps giving each riser a loud kick along the way.

"Don't be too hard on him," Officer Bernardo said. "It's part of being a teenage boy."

"Destroying someone else's property is not part of being a teenager in this house. But I really do appreciate your bringing him home. Let me assure you that it won't happen again."

"I didn't think it would."

"Thanks, Officer."

She closed the door. Her first reaction was to run up the steps and beat the hell out of Michael, throttle him. She was supposed to be a scientist, an educator, but she still wanted to pummel some sense into him.

Graffiti. Such a pre-meditated act.

Her son.

What a disgrace, and so embarrassing. But why? Why was he behaving this way?

First she had to cry. Then she'd decide what to do.

After slowly consuming a tall glass of ice water, she called Michael down to the kitchen.

"What are you going to do, Mom?"

Cunning little bastard, putting on that innocent, little-boy face.

She had taught reality therapy that day, why not use it on him? What were the three steps again?

"You have this all wrong," she said. "It's not what I'm going to do, it's what *you* are going to do."

"Huh?"

"You heard me. Now here's a pad and pencil." She swished them across the table. "I want to you write down what you did and how that behavior helps you."

"I did it because..."

"You're not listening. I want you to write *what* you did, not why. Now what do I want you to write?"

"What I did."

"And how what you did helps you. Then write what you're going to do about it. Let me repeat. You're going to write three things—what you did, how what you did helps you, and what you're going to do about it. Any questions?"

"No."

"Now go to your room. Get started and bring me the pad when you're finished."

Michael started to run up the steps, then came back to the kitchen. "You don't understand why I..."

A pot on the head would do it. "Not why, Michael, what." She had made too many mistakes, flunked the test as a mother.

He returned to his room.

It was an interminable fifteen minutes while she worried if he'd do what she'd asked.

He's testing me. Suppose he leaves the house. What if he gets into trouble again?

He's much taller than I am, and stronger. I can't make him do anything anymore. He's fourteen now. What am I going to do when he's seventeen, when everyone tells me it really gets tough, when kids think they're the smartest creatures in the world, and their parents, the dumbest. Suppose...

Michael came into the kitchen, the pad in his hand. He gave it to her.

She glanced at it, returned it to him. "Read this out loud."

He read, giving her intermittent looks for punctuation. "I went to the...Tarrytown station...and...sprayed paint on the billboards." Her eyes were cemented to his. "It helped me because I felt frustrated and got my frustration..."

"Michael! Cut the nonsense. How does that kind of behavior help you?"

"It got my frustr..."

"Michael!"

"Okay, it doesn't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Now what else did you write?"

"I'm going to go back tomorrow and clean the paint off the signs."

"That's fine. Anything else?"

"No."

"Well, you're off to a good start." She had to make sure she didn't seem insensitive. "Now I want to know why you're frustrated."

He hardly let her finish when he said, "Barry Gutman's going away with his father this weekend. Fishing."

"So?"

"I wanted to go fishing, too, but Barry didn't invite me, and I don't have a father who could take me."

Was this really it, or a cover-up for something else? She'd get to the bottom of it, but not just now.

"Not having a father is tough. I understand, but there's nothing you can do about it. And when there's nothing you can do, then there's nothing you can do. But there is something you can do. You can write a letter of apology to the officer who was kind enough not to book you. If he did, you'd have a police record that would follow you the rest of your life. And make sure you use your own money to buy whatever you need to remove the paint. Do you know why people spread graffiti?"

"No."

"It's because they want to make their mark on society. The reason they need to do that is that they haven't really accomplished anything. I don't understand why you had to resort to that. You're a top student, everybody likes you, you're good in sports. Everything's in your favor."

"Everybody, all the guys in the crowd were doing it."

"My grandmother always told me that when you're in with the crowd, you don't stand out. Is that what you want? To be in with the crowd? You're old enough to know when you're behaving stupidly, like the time you and your friends killed a bottle of vodka and ended up throwing rocks at streetlights. What you did was just plain dumb, and you know it. You don't need excuses, like the crowd wanted to do it, or you were frustrated."

The kid didn't know what that word meant. She was the one who should be frustrated. She didn't have a husband, and when she was just squeaking by to pay tuition for grad school and buy Christmas presents at the same time, she had to take that part-time sales job at Macy's for the holiday season. She could still feel how she twinged when students saw her there and either made believe they didn't see her, or tried to be extra nice when they did.

“We all get frustrated at one time or another. There were times I was lonely, money was tight, but I never, never, compromised my values. I didn’t rob a bank, feel sorry for myself, or marry a rich man I didn’t love.”

“Uncle Cyril?”

She nodded. “We all get frustrated, it’s part of life. The way we react to frustration tells us what we’re really made of. There are constructive ways to deal with it. You could talk to an intelligent person about it, or you can write what you’re frustrated about. Writing helps clear your head. It’s much more effective than drinking vodka or destroying someone else’s property. Those things never solve problems only create more.

“How would you like it if someone sprayed paint on our house?” She didn’t give him a chance to answer. “Now this is the second time you could’ve gotten into real trouble. Make sure there isn’t a third, or you may be unfortunate enough to end up with a police record that could stand in your way in the future. You’re mature enough to understand that, and I know I can count on you. Even Maureen counts on you, looks up to you. Is that the kind of example you want to set for her, destroying property?”

Michael went upstairs without speaking. Worse than if he’d yelled and argued. At least she would’ve known what he was thinking. She was so upset that all she could think of doing was rearrange the dishes and pots hoping that the noise in shuffling them around would drown out her worries.

A while later he came downstairs. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

She put her arms around him. “We’re a family, not a big one, but nevertheless, a family. Whatever either of us does reflects on the other. I hope I’ve never done anything that wouldn’t make you proud of me. Besides, I’ve already accomplished much of what I want to do with my life. But you have a long way to go. We all make mistakes, the important thing is that we learn from them so that we don’t repeat them. I hope you’ll learn from this one.”

"Do you forgive me?"

"Of course I do. Did you write the letter?"

"Not yet."

She gave him a kiss. "Well, go do it."

He kissed her back. "Okay."



Diane had learned only one thing about being a parent. Say no only to the things that are really important. That made it possible for Michael to distinguish what was from what wasn't. Even though she wanted to rip off his clothes when she saw him dressed for school in dungarees that had too many holes in them, she remained silent. The ponytail was no joy either, but that, too, would pass. She never made a case out of his messy room, which she interpreted as an outer manifestation of his inner confusion. But on the drugs, alcohol, and sex without responsibility and consequences, she was adamant.

She was financially comfortable now, but didn't lavish her son with just anything he desired. From the time he was fourteen, Michael always had a job, after school and in the summers. Sometimes the job demanded that he wear a suit, other times, jeans. Some days he came home with blistered hands, other days dripping with perspiration. She wanted him to understand what it meant to have to earn something, believing that whatever was earned through work learned to be appreciated, and put material possessions in perspective.

The only summer that he didn't work was the summer they went to Europe. That had been a dream of hers ever since her World History class in high school. She had wanted to visit all the places she'd studied about, making the Parthenon, the Hall of Mirrors, and the Colosseum more concrete than the pictures in her textbook. She wanted to take Michael to Europe while they had the chance. The College of Hard Knocks had taught her to capture the moment, because the future, even when promising, could be unpredictable.

Besides, that summer he was sixteen. And since they were together all the time, she didn't have to worry about him.

With all the worrying about whether or not he'd get into trouble again, the worst that happened was that he disappeared for a while, locked up in his room for about a year, alternately practicing the cello and listening to rock music, finally emerging to make an important announcement.

He was going to be a lawyer.

He would attend Yale as an undergraduate and then Harvard Law School.

It was not a matter up for discussion. That was the way it was going to be.

And she noticed that his room had suddenly become neat.

She was positive he wanted to be a lawyer because he had heard so much about his father. She wanted Michael to pursue, or at least consider, different possibilities so she spread books on all kinds of occupations on the coffee table. Michael did look at the literature, but his mind was made up. He was going to be a lawyer. And she knew that once he made up his mind about something, there was little anyone could do to change it.

An incident that had occurred when Michael was only six came to mind. He was playing with a toy gun Joe O'Brien bought him.

After Michael had the gun for a day, Joe came over to visit. "Let's play a game of war."

"Why did you ever get him such a stupid toy?" She could still hear the annoyance in her tone.

"He needs some manly experiences, won't get them from you. Besides a man should be able to handle a gun."

"If you're on a manly kick, you could've bought something mechanical that you can take apart and put together."

"If you want to play war," Michael said, "we have to load the gun."

"We can't," Joe said. "The gun doesn't open."

"Oh, yes it does."

Joe yanked the gun from his hand. "You see, Diane, the way this gun is constructed, it can't open. Look at it."

Michael's voice was gaining volume. "It does, it does."

"Jesus Christ, this kid is thick. Are you sure your husband and not some Irishman sired the child?"

Michael ripped the gun from Joe's hand and threw it on the floor. "It opens."

Diane sent him to bed early.

The next morning when she came down for breakfast, Michael was sitting at the kitchen table munching on his cereal. In front of his bowl was the gun Joe had given him.

And it was open.

They looked at each other.

"See, Mommy, I knew I was right. I had it open during the day yesterday. I wouldn't've said it if I didn't know I was right."

"Always make sure that before you insist on something you know what you're talking about. And if you really know you're right, don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

He ran into her open arms. She felt guilty punishing him for already having heeded her advice.



In the years Michael and Maureen were growing up they shared many different experiences. They had graduated from being called the precocious campus brats to their first initials, and the chocolate candy, M&M's, often together and so much alike that the only difference was the color of their coating.

Even after Michael and his mother moved to their own house, he and Maureen still played together. The house was a short walking distance from Marymount, on a plateau midway between the campus and the Tarrytown village. They'd often spend time together going for walks or looking out over the expansive view of the Hudson, clearly visible from the living and dining room windows of the

Pisani home, one of the most striking features that helped decide its purchase. And when he had started to drive, and had his own car, ten years old as it was, Michael frequently reminded Maureen how he appreciated having a two-car garage.

He was most protective of Maureen, always helping her with her homework and giving her advice as only an older brother could. There were things she could tell him that she couldn't discuss with her parents, mostly girl things. Even though he wasn't female, he listened carefully and seemed to understand.

Just before he was about to leave for New Haven, Maureen came to visit. "I'm going to miss you. Can't wait for your first break."

"Won't be till Thanksgiving. But when I come home, I'm going to check your report card."

"I promise to study hard so you'll be proud of me. But I really don't want you to go."

"Now correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't you the one who was more excited than I was when I got into Yale?"

"Yes, but that was five months ago. And you weren't leaving then."

Though they had been together for so many years, it wasn't until the evening of Maureen's high school prom that he noticed that she was no longer the little female companion that he'd grown up with but a most attractive young woman. That night, when he delivered her to the same house from which she ran to welcome him when she was only two years old, he kissed her for the first time.

"I love you, Michael." She snuggled her head into his neck. "I don't want to go to college in Michigan, I'll be too far away from you."

"You'll probably meet so many men there you'll forget me."

"Never. Nobody could ever mean more to me. I can't handle thinking that it'll be four more years before you graduate from law school, and with your grades, probably get into Harvard, even farther away than New Haven."

“Don’t worry. It seems like a long time now but four years’ll go fast. And you’d better concentrate on your studies right now so you can have a better chance of doing what you want when you graduate.”

“You mean make you proud of me?”

“Exactly. Make me proud of you.”

“You win. I’ll be an A student.”

“You’d better be, if not you’ll have to answer to me personally.”



When Michael began college in 1972 Diane felt an enormous sense of freedom. Not that she didn’t miss him; she actually realized how alone she was. Her freedom came from the satisfaction of knowing that after all the years of trying to do her best to raise him alone, and with a few bumps along the way, she finally believed she had been successful. He was provided with a sound upbringing, a strong sense of values, and now he was on his own.

But time was passing. Maybe she should attempt a career change. Everybody kept telling her to begin thinking of herself. What direction should her life take next?

An area that had always interested her from college days was communications. One of her former students had worked her way up to a visible position with ABC News. She contacted Diane to see if she’d consider working on news related to education.

Diane was stimulated by the prospect. Interviews by several ABC executives followed. They offered her a position as head of a team that researched and prepared documentaries related to education. She fancied herself after some experience being called on to narrate the programs or appear on television herself to host the show.

The opportunity of a lifetime. The salary, prestige, and potential for exposure were enormous. She was about to have a new career. She would sign the contract with ABC and advise the president of

the college about the new position in ample time to complete a search for her replacement.

Diane immediately began to prepare a list of possible education topics important enough to present to TV audiences. One of the problems with education was that it was a common experience. Everyone had attended school, therefore, everyone considered himself an expert on the topic. But there were so many misconceptions that had to be cleared up, so many innovations and critical issues that had to be analyzed that she'd have a real challenge communicating these to the general public.

The prospects were exciting. She might meet an interesting man in her new workplace, and if she did a really super job, she might end up having her own talk show on education.

After her next class, Cassandra Johnson, a black student who complained about a grade she had received on an assignment, followed Diane to her office.

Cassandra threw her paper on the desk. "What do you mean giving me a C on this lesson plan!"

"Well, let's take a look at it." She sat at her desk and spread out Cassandra's work.

The student didn't wait for an explanation. "This is good work, it's better than anyone else's, I had someone read it. Nobody else on this campus gives me a C. You don't like me, you're prejudiced."

The race card again. Good try, little wise-ass. She had another guess coming. But Diane was extra careful not to let her irritation show. Remain calm. Don't give in to this ploy, for it was becoming commonplace in the society to assign labels to people to intimidate them. Then those making the charge would have the perfect excuse to avoid doing what they were supposed to.

"Maybe you've been getting away with that line on a lot of people, but it's not going to work with me."

"What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean. If being prejudiced means that I will absolutely not accept from you work that is below what you can do, then call me prejudiced. Give me any name you want, you pick it.

"Cassandra, stop deluding yourself. You're a very bright student, I don't have to tell you that. And I really do believe that you can do work better than anyone else in the class. But you're so used to making excuses, just handing in careless assignments and getting rewarded for it that you're not producing the quality you're capable of."

"How come you took off points for grammar? This isn't a English class."

"An English class, and you tell me why I did it."

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. And I'll sit here and not speak another word until you tell me."

Cassandra fidgeted. She looked at the floor, the walls, then at Diane who kept direct eye contact.

Cassandra finally moved her eyes away. The prolonged silence broke her defenses. "Well, if I'm going to be a teacher, I should write correct."

"You mean, correctly."

More silence.

"And I guess you can't write science, or social studies, or any subject and misspell words and use the wrong grammar."

"Now that we have that settled, let's discuss the way you've prepared this plan. Let's look at the learning principles you used, and more importantly, the learning principles you could have used but didn't." Diane analyzed the work in detail and presented several examples to clarify the points she was trying to make. She converted the mediocre plan into a dynamic one.

Cassandra kept scratching her face, rubbing her forehead.

“Remember, Cassandra, when you hand in any assignment, it’s a statement about you. It says, ‘This is who I am. This is what I think of myself. This is how I care about myself.’ Now I’m going to give you...No, you choose your own topic from this list.” Diane handed it to her. “Prepare a detailed plan for me that says, ‘This is Cassandra Johnson. This is what I want you to know about me, think about me.’”

Cassandra’s face was sullen. She yanked the list from Diane’s hand, and left without a word.

Three days later Cassandra didn’t hand her lesson plan to Diane directly but placed it on her desk. She didn’t read it until later in the evening. The plan had a special decorative cover, one she was not used to getting from anyone, especially Cassandra. But more important, the work inside was a masterpiece, creative, and versatile enough to be published in a professional journal.

She sent for Cassandra. “The mystery is gone. I finally know who Cassandra Johnson is.” She handed her the plan submitted previously which had received a C, and the one which received an A. “I want you to pretend that you’re the instructor, and I’m the student. Explain to me the difference in your work.”

With an air about her that was professorial, Cassandra compared and contrasted the two assignments. When she got near the end of the explanation, she slowed down and choked down the tears. She held up the second plan. “This is really good, I’m proud of it. Thanks for making me do it, you really care.”

She put her hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Cassandra, remember. When you become a teacher, you’ll be in a position to influence a lot of kids. Don’t shortchange them. If you don’t expect quality from them, you won’t get it. Think about how you feel now, you feel good, don’t you?”

“You bet.”

“There’s nothing like real achievement to make you feel good about yourself.”

They walked out of the office together. Cassandra squeezed her hand and sneaked a kiss on her cheek. Diane felt fulfilled as she too filled up with tears.

At that moment she knew she'd return the contract to ABC unsigned.

CHAPTER 17



Vinny, Carmine Caputo's bodyguard, phoned Sal. "The boss is more than an hour late. You know your father-in-law, a stickler for promptness, runs his life according to the slots in an appointment book. Unless he's getting something extra special up there today."

"You hear any shots, see anything?"

"No, it's been quiet, too quiet, making me nervous."

"Wait for me, we'll check it out together."

Sal rushed over to Nellie's. He ran upstairs with Vinny and rang the bell. After several rings, still no answer.

Vinny rattled the doorknob. The door was unlocked.

They found Nellie, crouched in the corner of the bedroom, sobbing into while squeezing and twisting a pillow. Still naked herself, she was gawking at Carmine, nude except for his socks. He had left a hurried trail on the floor. A jacket, pants, cat's eye cuff links, a tan shirt with CC on the cuff, silk underwear.

Him and Vinny tried to calm Nellie down.

Sal covered her with a blanket. "What happened?"

Nellie was so hysterical she couldn't speak. After almost five minutes of guarantees that she wouldn't be held responsible she said, "He croaked, right, right on top of me. Had to roll him, over, over on his back, to get out from under him. Couldn't call the police or nobody."

“Good thinking, Nellie,” Sal said. “It’s good you didn’t call nobody. We’ll take care of it from here.” He gave her a piercing look. “You make sure you still don’t tell nobody. It didn’t happen here. You never seen him today.” He dug his fingers into her arm. “Get it?”

“Sure. He was never here. Didn’t see him today.”

“Good. Now, Vinny, help me dress him. Let’s bring him to the club. We’ll tell Luisa that he got sick during a business meeting where he gave in to the many anxieties of his business pressures.”

Sal wanted everybody to be satisfied. Nellie would be off the hook, and Luisa would have a justifiable reason to be the mourning widow. For saving face for his boss, Vinny would be assured continued responsibility in the organization. Carmela could genuinely assume the role of the grieving daughter. The coroner’d be certain that there was no foul play. Even Carmine himself was now free from constantly having to look over his shoulder.

A few details were left for Sal to take care of. First, he stopped the rumors circulating around the neighborhood.

No, Carmine didn’t die from a hit.

No, the feds didn’t get him, and yes, the neighborhood would still be safe.

Next he checked with the mortician. “How does he look?”

“Since he went quick, didn’t suffer, not bad.”

“Make sure he looks good. Dye his hair, put on the most expensive suit, and by all means, do whatever you have to do to get that stupid smile off his face.”



It had always been a given that Sal would take over on his father-in-law’s death. But why should he take a chance? Had to cement his grip on the families.

He called a meeting. And this time it would be different from the 1957 Appalachia disaster.

Who could be so stupid as to have bosses from all over the country land in New York City at approximately the same time? He arranged that family heads would fly into different cities close to New York. When they landed in Newark, Philly, Baltimore, or Boston, they'd be met by Sal's crew and driven to a place law enforcement would never think of—the Jewish Catskills.

Among the bosses who arrived at the Shalom Hotel suite where Sal was waiting were Vittorio Santangelo, Giovanni Battista, Italo Rosario, Serafino Di Benedetto, Luigi De Pasquale, and Natale Annunziata. From the names on the list it could've been a congregation of the heavenly host instead of a convention of powerful criminals.

Sal knew there wasn't a family head who didn't think that he himself should be the boss, so he prepared for this meeting well in advance and headed the meeting as though he was already in charge.

And why shouldn't he be? For several years now he'd developed an outstanding reputation for getting things done with intelligence and thoroughness. Impressive handling of the Sicilian Mafia back in 1957. When they wanted to deal in heroin, he had proposed the plan to connect them with other ethnic gangs. The American Mafia, like Pontius Pilate, would wash their hands of the whole affair. They'd facilitate the operation but not be involved in it themselves. For this accommodation they'd get a cut of the profits with no risk, leaving them free to pursue other moneymaking ventures.

At that time the American bosses had made clear to their subordinates the order that there was to be no dealing in drugs, less from a concern for doing what was right than for avoiding the pressure that operation was likely to bring. It had become routine for defendants facing drug charges to reveal family secrets or squeal to the authorities in order to plead to lesser charges.

Defiant family members who broke the no-drug-dealing rule and were caught by the organization were dealt with swiftly and firmly, much more so than they would've been by the government. Many

disobeyed this family regulation because profits that drug dealing brought were so great that it proved to be too tempting to resist.

For the purpose of getting rid of those who broke the rules, Sal had found a way of making murders more efficient, one that had brought the respect and admiration of all the bosses. Bumping people off with drafts in the head, shattering kneecaps, dismembering bodies, or throwing them off roofs were attention-getting warnings to would-be sinners but never very sophisticated. Neither was removing the testicles of those who sang to the police.

Sal had searched for some method that would add a little class to his operation. While attending a wake, he came up with an idea. In the lobby of the funeral parlor was a flyer that described a cremation option. Sal read it with interest.

Within a few weeks he set up one of his crew in the funeral parlor business. It just happened to have a crematorium. Clients to be dismissed were strangled and then baked in the oven to have their ashes nurture crops or dumped in a convenient place. No mess. Clean and neat, the way he always liked his murders. Guns rarely used. No corpses to be found. People just mysteriously disappeared leaving those remaining with a creepy sense of wonder.

But the group at the convention showed how amazed they were with Sal's organizational skills. They combined the old world trust, silence, and respect with progressive management by objectives.

He outlined on charts the job responsibilities of each family and coordinated the activities of each. When he was sure they were understood, he rehearsed them with each family before destroying the charts.

He especially wanted to tighten control of the harbors to ensure control of the cities. He saw to it that everyone got a good share of profits, especially now that the mob was well into white-collar crime and legitimate businesses. And he already had his eye on Wall Street.

Sal set up a pension fund for widows of family members and set aside cash for the families of gang members in prison. He made sure

that those who worked for the families managed to get some legitimate reported income in addition to the cash they received so they could collect Social Security. Everybody was taken care of, and because of this, Sal earned loyalty.

He delivered a warning against being showy, especially directed it to the California crowd, as younger members tended toward Americanization, drawing attention to themselves unnecessarily by becoming involved in behavior that was careless, undisciplined, and dangerous. They'd be punished. Their egos had to be held in check.

His ability to anticipate the future jolted the group into attention. He impressed them with detailed knowledge of demographics and technology, and cautioned that the families had to be on top of both subjects.

His strong organizational skills, and the security in an insecure profession in knowing that there was thoughtful, powerful leadership gave him the support of the group. Only when the mob was disorganized, out of control, did murder sprees take place, followed by governmental scrutiny.

And with governmental scrutiny in mind, Sal issued advice to the other bosses. "Make sure you overpay your taxes. Just a little."

Luigi De Pasquale pulled his mouth to the right. "What the fuck are you nuts?"

"Listen, it's like insurance," Sal said. "The IRS'll be so busy giving you a refund that they won't check your taxes no further."

One by one they looked at each other, nodded their approval, and smiled.

"Never thought of that," Natale Annunziata said. "Leave it up to Sal to come up with an idea like that."

"Clever bastard." Giovanni Battista stood up. "With Sal Esposito at the head of the organization, we can be sure of peace and prosperity." He took a quarter out of his pocket, spun it on the table. The coin settled heads up. Giovanni screwed the quarter, head facing out,

into his raised palm and floated his palm in a semi-circle around the room. He pointed to the coin. "In Sal Esposito we trust."

Each family head rose, lined up, pledged allegiance to Sal, and then kissed him. His mother's dream she'd constantly talked about had finally come true, but with a twist. He had become President of the United States. Missing, however, was the phrase his mother could never have anticipated. For he was now President of organized crime in the United States. Not only was he more powerful than President Nixon, but also more powerful than the Secretaries of State, Labor, Commerce, or Transportation. He had more control over interest rates than the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, and the charisma, charm, and negotiating skills to be an ambassador to anywhere.

He had finally reached his goal—becoming the bird, and the highest bird on the evolutionary scale. He was the most powerful man in the country, possibly in the world, and the richest. As he told his brother many years ago, no one, nobody would ever control him.

In his first official act as boss of bosses, he did something he had wanted to do all his life, something only Toni La Marca and Bruno would've understood to be so important.

He purchased a subscription to the Metropolitan Opera. For the best seats in the house.



Sister Albertus Magnus blew the whistle. Why were they going back into the building so soon? As the sixth-graders lined up, Gina checked the time. Too early to end recess. The weather was a bit nippy, but it wasn't raining. Not even a cloud in the sky.

The students settled in their seats.

Sister Albertus Magnus stood in front of her desk. She wrinkled her forehead. "We have a problem here." The children tilted their heads forward. "Charlie Brusco's wallet's missing. We have to help him find it, let's start in the cloak room."

The children marched to the cloakroom and stood in front of their coat hooks. At Sister's directions they turned their coat and jacket pockets and sleeves inside out, searched the shelves, and felt around the floors.

No wallet turned up.

"All right, boys and girls," Sister said, "Now put your purses and books on top of your desks."

They obeyed her instructions. Several books fell down and there was the rattling of pencils, and pens knocking against metal rulers.

One by one, Sister carefully examined all the desks, flipping through texts, catechisms, pencil boxes.

A dictionary landed on the floor.

Plunk.

Out of its pages came a wallet.

"It came from Gina's desk," a boy said.

"Gina!" the students said in chorus. Then, "Not Gina."

She stood in the middle of the classroom, humiliated. Everyone was staring at her. She had never taken anything from anyone. How could the wallet have come from her dictionary? The only thing she could think of doing was wiping the tears from her eyes so that when she lifted the cover of the dictionary she could clearly see if it was her name that was inside.

It was!

Sister said, "Gina, what is this wallet doing in your dictionary?"

"I don't know, I wouldn't take something that didn't belong to me."

"Well, how do you think it got there?"

"I have no idea. There's no reason for me to take money."

Gina put her hands over her face, then slowly moved them down. All her classmates looked surprised except one whose face was gloating. Gina felt like lurching at her, punching her in the face, pulling her hair.

Sister must've focused her attention in the direction Gina was looking, too. Sister said, "Lisa, come up here."

Lisa's gloating face changed to snotty. "Yes, Sister."

"Do you know anything about this?"

"How should I know?"

"Now I remember," a classmate said. "I saw you with that wallet but I thought it was yours. You must've planted it in Gina's dictionary."

"Yeah, you just love picking on Gina," another classmate said. "Like the time you told us that you heard her curse, and it was you who was cursing. And when you said she was cheating on a spelling test and she wasn't. And the time..."

"Enough," Sister said, "I'll deal with this later. Lisa, you come to see me immediately after school. Right now, all of you get ready for your geography lesson. And Charlie, come and get your wallet. Make sure there's nothing missing."

The boy came up to reclaim his property.

One student began to chant, "Lisa is a liar, Lisa is a liar." Soon everyone joined in. The slamming of Sister's yardstick on her desk put an end to the chant.

Gina, still shaken by what might've been a situation she couldn't have explained, slowly opened her geography book.



That afternoon Gina ran home in tears. When her mother opened the door, she jumped on her with such vigor that she almost knocked her over. She couldn't stop crying.

"What happened?"

Gina pressed a tissue against her eyes, then blew her nose. "It's Lisa Valenti again. She's always trying to get me in trouble. The more I ignore her, the worse it gets." She blew her nose again. "Today she put Charlie Brusco's wallet in my dictionary. When they finally found it, they thought I took it. I wanted to crawl into a hole."

Her mother cuddled her head against her chest. "Gina, you're only eleven years old. And already you've been exposed to some of the nasty side of human nature."

"But why is Lisa so nasty? What've I ever done to her? Even when nobody picks her to work with, I try to be nice to her."

"It's very complicated, Gina. You'll probably understand it when you're older."

"Tell me now, Mom. I'll try."

Her mother kept stroking Gina's hair. "There are some people in this world who are jealous of you, of our family."

"Our family? Why?"

She led Gina by the hand and faced her toward the hall mirror. "Look, Gina. I don't know what you see when you look in the mirror, but I know what everybody else sees. You have those gorgeous eyes like your grandmother's." She turned her slightly sideways. "Your lashes are so long they get tangled with each other. Your skin, if I do say so myself, is like mine, your cleft like Daddy's. I don't know where you got those dimples under the edge of your eyes when you smile. And people pay lots of money to plastic surgeons just to get your slightly upturned nose."

Gina examined herself as though it was the first time she had really seen herself.

"Now make believe that Lisa's standing next to you. What would she look like? You know. She looks exactly like Josephine. Her mother has beady eyes, a small forehead with a widow's peak, and a potato nose. Now do you blame her for being jealous?"

"But what does this have to do with our family?"

"Josephine could never find a boyfriend. So she sent for her first cousin from Calabria, paid for his trip, and married him. He works as a clerk in a drug store but she tells everyone he's a pharmacist. She told that lie so many times now even she believes it.

"And she told everybody in the neighborhood that she always wanted to marry a man like Daddy or one of his business associates.

Daddy's a very clever investor. He buys businesses that aren't doing well and builds them up, then either keeps them or sells them at a big profit. That's where he makes all his money, and Josephine's husband makes only a clerk's salary."

"Is that who those men who come in and out of the house all the time are, people who sell Daddy their businesses and those who buy them when he fixes them?"

Her mother looked up, then down. "That's one way to put it."

"Oh, I always wondered who they were."

"So Josephine's trying to copy what we do and Lisa's trying to copy what you do. Only she can't compete with you because there's no contest, so she tries to get back at you whenever she can."

"I can't wait to graduate so that I won't have to put up with her lies and attacks anymore. I already heard her tell Sister that she's going to the public high school."

"You know Uncle Joey won't let that happen to you. You're going to an expensive Catholic high school, and you can be sure that Lisa won't be there."

"That'll be a relief. But even though I can't stand her, in a way I feel sorry for her."

"Pray for her, Gina, that's all you can do. And while you're praying for her, pray for all of us."



His mother's dead fingers against his hand created a sensation which served as a constant reminder to Joseph of his promise to pray for Sal daily and oversee Gina's upbringing.

He and Gina spent every Saturday together until it was time for him to get back to the church to hear confessions. But one Saturday the parish was having a mission, so the priests who were conducting the mission were hearing the parishioners' confessions instead.

Joseph was pleased that he and his niece would have an extended visit. He missed not having his own children, and she was a welcome

surrogate. It wasn't hard fulfilling his obligation to her. The priesthood could often try his patience. But any vocation, just like any relationship, wasn't perfect.

When Gina got into his car he said, "I hear congratulations are in order."

"What for?"

"Don't be so modest, let me hear you brag for once in your life. I'm talking about the fact that you won medals for science, history, and Italian."

"Probably gave me the Italian medal because I tutor the teachers in that school where they have all those Italian immigrants. You know there's high unemployment in Italy."

"Frankly, Gina, it's a wonder you can speak Italian at all. You're always visiting your grandmother, and Luisa never bothered to learn English, or Italian for that matter, always speaking the Sicilian dialect."

"Even with the dialect, the conversations I had with her gave me enough of a foundation to become fluent in the language now. Besides, my grandmother'll never learn English."

"It's too late now."

"She never wanted to, probably because my grandfather married her straight from Sicily after his American wife died. It might've been her way of reminding him that he was married to someone different."

"Whatever, but to get back to the subject of your awards, don't think that the nuns don't report to me how well you're doing in school. They expect a lot from someone with your ability. And so do I."

He turned the corner and headed for their usual luncheon spot.

"Uncle Joey, can we go to a quiet little restaurant today? I really want to talk to you."

"Sure, any place in particular?"

"How about that trattoria on Coney Island Avenue we went to two weeks ago."

"And you say you want to talk, you just love their calzone."

"Calzone I can have anywhere. But tables with lots of privacy where they sell calzone? That we can get only in my favorite trattoria."

"Fine, let's go."

At the next corner he made a U-turn.

During lunch Gina twiddled her thumbs, took a slice of bread, made bread balls out of the soft dough underneath the crust, and dropped them into her plate. She finally began to eat, but didn't speak about what was on her mind until she was already on her second calzone.

"You have some appetite. Don't you ever worry about your figure?"

"I'll worry about that later. Right now I have other things troubling me."

Finally, she was going to talk about it. "Like what?"

"I don't know, I'm all confused. Maybe that's normal for fifteen-year-olds."

"And for adults, too. There's a lot of confusion in life because there are a lot of choices out there." He was still wrestling with whether he'd be a better adviser to married couples if he wasn't celibate, give better counsel to families if he had his own.

"I feel I really have to decide right now what I want to be when I grow up."

"Gina, there are fifty-year-olds who still can't figure out what they want to do with their lives."

"And I overheard one of Daddy's business associates trying to arrange a marriage for me in the future with one of his sons."

"What!" He dropped his fork on the table. "And what did you overhear your father say?"

"He really didn't say much, only 'We'll see, we'll see.'"

“Well, let me promise you something. Nobody’ll see but you. You have plenty of growing up to do before you ever have to be concerned about that. And when it’s time, only you will have a say in that decision. Not your father, his friends, no one, no one but you. Of course,” he bent his head toward her and lifted his eyebrows, “I’d like to be consulted.”

She grinned while he squeezed her hand and smiled, trying to assuage her and himself, for he was livid. Over his dead body would Sal ever match Gina with a *mafioso*.

“Uncle Joey, I needed you to tell me that. I trust you, you make me feel safe. It’s probably my imagination but sometimes I think that Daddy likes to control too much.”

How right she was but not in the way she thought. “He really has your interest at heart. He knows that I know better about getting you a good education than he does. That’s why he always consults with me about school matters, after which I consult with you. And for something that’s so important as marriage, I know he’ll want my input, too. Sal’s crazy about you and wants you to be happy.”

“I’m glad we didn’t plan on going to any museums or concerts today, Uncle Joey. I wanted to bring this up with you more than anything else.”

“Don’t worry, Gina, put it out of your mind. This is one matter you’ll never have to worry about. You just keep getting honors in school, that’s your responsibility right now. And keep up your volunteer work. I hear you started working with geriatric patients at the St. Agnes nursing home.”

“Oh, Uncle Joey, it’s so sad. I cry every time I leave that place. I try to cheer them up with some of the stories I wrote for my English class and I try to listen to them. They’re so lonely. Most of them have been abandoned by their children.” She looked over his head. “I can’t understand how parents who’ve done so much for their children could be abandoned by them. I’ll always take care of my parents, never abandon them.”

"It's good for you to be concerned with the needs of others, it helps you develop productive values. And as far as the marriage plans, or lack thereof are concerned, leave them to me."

"I love you, Uncle Joey."

"I love you, too, Gina." He looked aside for a while then back at her. "I must tell you that when I took my vow of celibacy, I knew I would miss not having a family of my own. Did I ever tell you that I arranged with the bishop and my provincial to be assigned to a parish near my family?" He couldn't tell her why, of course, and how much explaining he had to give the bishop.

"You never mentioned it before, but nobody's happier than I am that you did."

"Family's so important in our culture. But God has rewarded me, He gave me you. I know He'll bless you."



Joseph couldn't believe how fast time had passed. His niece was in her junior year and it was time to find a college for her. He played a major role in working with her to find the right college. She told him that her experiences in high school made her quite sure she wanted to work with people, and almost sure that she wanted to become a teacher.

Joseph set up appointments for them to visit many different colleges and universities. While he never verbalized it, he preferred that Gina attend a Catholic college, or one with a Christian tradition. He also thought that a women's college and a small college would provide the best atmosphere for her development. And he wanted the campus to be located in a safe area.

He and Gina researched many different institutions, their faculties, the progressiveness of the curriculum, the facilities, and the success of the graduates. Sal and Carmela told him to make the decision with Gina. And in September of 1975, with a full academic scholar-

ship, Gina began the freshman honors program at Marymount College in Tarrytown.



Gina's first weeks of college were most challenging. There were the usual adjustments—being away from home for the first time, finding one's way around campus, learning to manage time and organize work, and especially as an only child, having to share a room in the dorm with a stranger. These she readily handled.

But what made it unusually uncomfortable for her was the fact that there was another freshman on campus.

Lisa Valenti.

CHAPTER 18



In the spring of sophomore year Gina finally registered for a course with Dr. Pisani. The very first day, Gina had just about sat down when she found herself faced with two columns on the blackboard. One was a “yes” column containing examples of an idea Dr. Pisani wanted the students to guess, the other was a “no” column containing non-examples of the idea. The students had to find the attributes of the examples by comparing them with each other, then contrasting them with the non-examples. Comparing, contrasting. Dynamite. That was the way we learned concepts. Gina was hooked. The time just flew. Every class presented an exciting hands-on, discovery learning experience the students were expected to interpret, practice, then audiotape in their public school classes for evaluation by their professor. The students were also expected to prepare a research paper related to one of the strategies covered in class.

At the end of March, Gina made an appointment to see Dr. Pisani to go over preliminary plans for the research paper. Before the meeting, Gina fixed her hair and dressed in a skirt and blouse instead of jeans. She practiced what she was going to say because she wanted so much for Dr. Pisani to approve her work. She handed her the paper and watched her reaction as she read it.

After five endless minutes Dr. Pisani said, “I never saw such thorough research from a student. Actually, for a person your age you

have excellent research skills. You should plan on using them in the future.”

The future? Right now she just wanted to do well this semester. “I hadn’t thought about research. When I first came here I thought I might want to teach. Now I’m sure of it.”

“What made you finally decide?”

“All the field experience we get in the public schools as part of our program. Also, I did a lot of volunteer work when I was in high school and now I’m involved working with disadvantaged students in an after-school tutorial program.”

“That’s good experience.” Dr. Pisani probed her eyes. “How has that experience changed you?”

That wasn’t a question anyone, including Uncle Joey, had ever asked her before. She could answer what she learned from the experiences but had to think carefully about how they had changed her. “It made me less selfish. I guess being an only child makes you think about what you want more than what others need. I’m more appreciative of the things I have. I don’t take them for granted anymore. I’ve developed more patience, and. And silly things don’t irk me the way they used to.”

“You’re quite young to have changed that much already. I don’t know you well enough to tell whether or not you have a sense of humor, I don’t know how one gets through life without it. But if there’s one job where you need it, it’s teaching. And you also can’t take yourself too seriously, you have to be able to laugh at yourself.”

Gina moved her eyes to the right, then to the left. “I think I pass both tests.”

“You don’t have to be a polished product at this point. You still have a full two years to go. And if you don’t want to burn out, you’ll have to keep growing. All of us have to keep growing. Have you decided what grade level or subject you want to teach?”

“Elementary school, I love kids.”

“My field was secondary education, chemistry.”

"That's surprising. I hope this doesn't sound like apple-polishing or anything, and I really can't explain it, but I think I'm a lot like you. It may sound ridiculous but from the first time I met you, I felt. What word am I looking for? Linked."

Dr. Pisani didn't react at first, then she smiled. "Linked."

"Maybe we were born under the same sign. When's your birthday?" Gina said.

"I'm a scientist, I don't believe in astrology. But it's December 20th."

"Mine's April 16th, so I guess that's not it."

"Well, maybe we'll find out what it is before you graduate."

"We will. I know it."



Gina didn't look forward to returning home for the summer though she welcomed the time to relax and be free from studying. Now that she had gotten used to being in the suburbs, the city was too confining. She longed for her nature walks, the quiet, the trees, the smell of flowers instead of bus fumes.

A summer job was available at a remedial program in a public school in Brooklyn. Tough assignment. But a perfect place to experiment with the techniques Dr. Pisani taught her to get the students successfully involved in learning. Dr. Pisani had always warned them that too many remedial programs used the same techniques that were unsuccessful for pupils in the first place. Poor remediation was more of the same.

All summer long Gina missed Marymount and tried not to think about how she would miss being there after she graduated. Dr. Pisani had assured her that when the time came, she'd be ready to cut the cord between the embryonic life of academia and the outside world. Two more years would make a big difference.



The first evening that Gina was home for the summer, Carmela, concerned that campus food wasn't healthy or tasty enough, cooked a traditional Italian meal.

Sal was going to be a little late that evening, he had told her. After work he was going to buy a welcome-home gift for Gina.

Without Gina around the house, Carmela's life was intolerable. With Sal spending more time with his slut, Carmela spent more time consuming her cigarettes. Couldn't give them up as long as they helped serve as a substitute for her husband.

As soon as Sal came home, he embraced Gina, and presented her with a pearl necklace. She looked at it, thanked him, kissed him, then put it back into the box. Carmela didn't know why Sal bought the necklace. Gina rarely wore jewelry.

She and Sal beamed as they looked at their beautiful offspring, the only thing that connected them.

"So tell us," Carmela was pleased that Sal included her by not saying, 'tell me', "what's happening at that college?"

"Oh, Daddy, I love it so much there, I'm learning so much."

"Good, I hope I'm getting my money's worth."

"Don't tease me, Daddy. You know I have a scholarship and I'm saving you thousands a year."

Gina could hardly catch her breath. "I just have to tell you. There's one professor in particular that I adore, everyone adores. Dr. Pisani."

"Well, that sounds like a good Italian name." He looked at Carmela for her agreement, which she gave by lowering then lifting her eyes. "I hope you don't like this Dr. Pisani more than you like me. Just what makes him so special?"

Gina kept shaking her head and laughing. "Daddy, you're unbelievable. Such a male chauvinist."

Sal squinted.

"Dr. Pisani is a *woman*, I suppose that possibility would never've occurred to you."

It even surprised Carmela.

Sal raised one brow. "And I suppose she's the one who filled your head with that male chauvinist stuff."

"Oh, no, that's one of the things I like about her. She's the most liberated woman I know but has never used the expression, 'male chauvinist'. She's just great and I'll miss her when I graduate. In fact," the facial expression and voice tone shifted from excitement to sadness, "I miss her already. It's like having a mother away from home."

In what seemed like sudden discovery Gina said, "I want to be just like her."

Carmela hardly reacted to Gina's last comment. She was still hearing, "a mother away from home." Her pulse rose, so much so that she faced her palm up and put her index and middle finger on her wrist.

Sal smacked his lips. "You want to be just like her. Hm, and when you're away, do you miss your parents?"

"Of course I do, you know that. But with her, there's something that's just different."

"Right now your mother could use your attention, so why don't you help her with the dishes?"

Gina immediately stood up and began cleaning the table.

Throughout the summer Gina constantly referred to Dr. Pisani, describing all the events she was involved in on campus and how she helped the students.

Carmela resented the praise Gina directed toward her professor. The resentment reached its peak one evening after Gina left the kitchen to go to her room. Carmela kept rhythmically punching the table while she said to Sal in a high-pitched voice, "Dr. Pisani, Dr. Pisani, Dr. Pisani. I'm sick to death of hearing that woman's name."

"So am I, Carmela. But don't worry. It'll pass."



During the summer of 1977, Diane spent considerable time writing a grant proposal. She had observed that no matter how thoroughly lessons were planned by teachers in the public schools, and how well the planning reflected the best of research on learning, there were still some pupils who didn't seem to be interested, or learn as well as they might.

She considered the unorthodox methodology used by Mother St. Paul in the World History class at St. Ursula's, where students moved through the diamond to dirt rows and back, according to the way they answered questions, some proud to be diamonds, others, defiant, but not on the surface at least, minding to be dirt. Why did students react differently to the same instruction? This question had always haunted her.

She became fascinated by some seminal research on learning styles, considered doing similar research herself. She contacted professors at other universities who were working on this topic. They were supportive of her exploratory ideas. Therefore, she designed a study to determine whether once learning styles were diagnosed, if pupils learned better being taught new material first according to their styles.

By mid-August her proposal was on its way to Washington two weeks before the deadline. She'd planned it this way so that she could be free to enjoy the last two weeks of August, the time she always took her vacation just before the beginning of the fall semester.

In December, a week before finals, she received a letter from the U.S. Office of Education. She was awarded the grant for \$50,000, just the amount she had budgeted for. The letter announcing the award praised the thoroughness of the research that supported the justification of the proposal, and suggested that though the study would be beneficial for all students, it might be even more applicable to minorities.

How exciting! Her first attempt at grant writing and her proposal was funded. It would give her something to do, take her mind off the fact that Michael would be away next summer.

She immediately began to consider the grant's implementation. Listed in the categories for funding was a request for a stipend of \$2,000 for the summer services of a student assistant. Gina instantly came to mind. She had been under consideration from the very inception of the proposal with Diane believing that Gina's analytic ability and work ethic would be of enormous assistance.

Anyone her age could use the money and being a part of this project would be a bonus when Gina applied to graduate school.

The day after receiving the news, Diane sent for Gina, then let her read the letter from Washington.

"I'm so happy for you, Dr. Pisani. You deserve this."

"Don't be happy for me, be happy for us."

Her blue eyes indicated she needed an explanation.

"You see, Gina, I want you to be part of the grant. I even wrote it with you in mind. I want you to be my student assistant."

"Dr. Pisani, I can't believe, I'm flattered, I don't deserve, I..."

"Look, Gina, I was surprised myself, never wrote a grant proposal before. But you are perfect for this research, that is, if you want to do it."

"If I want to do it! If you want me to, and believe that I can, nothing can stop me."

"Well, think about it."

"I already have."

"You'll have to spend the summer on campus. That means you can only be home on weekends."

"Oh, I hate spending the summer in Brooklyn anyway."

"And there'll be a \$2,000 stipend for your work. That's more than you'd be able to earn at most summer jobs. I know that people your age can use the money, and the experience will be good for graduate school."

She'd assumed that anyone with Gina's ability would continue her studies. "I believe that you should go directly into a doctoral program."

Gina looked aside. "A doctoral program. Never thought of that." She took her time before she said, "I'm definitely going to be your assistant. I promise I won't let you down. I'll do the best job possible, make you proud of me."

"I already am."

The tears in Gina's eyes made them appear gray. Gina embraced her. "I can't wait to tell my uncle."

She was surprised Gina didn't say parents. "Why your uncle, is he an educator?"

"I guess in a sort of way he is, he's a priest. My father's older brother, Uncle Joey, and we're very close. He's always played an active role in my education."

So Gina had the guidance of a member of the clergy. Probably one of the reasons she exhibited such a high sense of integrity. Definitely an attribute of a person with a good family background.



Carmela was still holding the phone when Sal came home. She didn't know whether she wanted to slam the receiver or pull the wire out of the wall.

"I just spoke to Gina. That Dr. Pisani got some kind of award and wants Gina to be her assistant doing whatever it is she got the award for. I don't understand what it's all about, Gina was speaking so fast."

"Really? What does she have to do?" He opened the freezer, and took out a container of Breyer's Vanilla Fudge Twirl.

"I don't know, all I know is that she won't be home this summer."

He took a spoon and began eating out of the container. Never did that before and always complained about people who did. Was he as alarmed as she was? Probably not, confident as usual that he could control the situation.

"There's no chance of that," he said calmly, "she'll just have to refuse to work with that woman. What did you tell her?"

"I told her we'd have to discuss it when she comes home for Christmas."

"Good, I'm glad you didn't commit yourself."

"You know, Sal, the more she stays up there the more removed she's getting from us. I don't like it one bit."

"I don't like it, either."

"Is this the price we have to pay for giving her an education?"

"We'll see." He licked the part of the ice cream that was beginning to melt down the spoon. "Right now, forget about it. When Gina comes home I'll get her to forget about it, too."

That he was taking it so lightly was irritating. "That's fine with me, Sal, I know you can make her do what you want."



When Diane entered the cafeteria, she received congratulatory comments from some of the faculty. Others would choose to ignore her achievement most likely resenting that they wouldn't receive the same reward for not being willing to put forth the same effort. An attitude that even affected their politics.

She finished lunch and was just lingering over a cup of coffee before going to her next class.

Gus Eisendorf joined her table. He settled his tray. "Congratulations, Diane, I just heard about the grant."

"Thanks, Gus, I'm really happy about it. The college should end up with \$10,000 worth of free advertising from it."

"That's great, God knows we could use spreading the word about this marvelous institution. But tell me, what's this nonsense about learning styles?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "You people in the liberal arts, you really get me. Did it ever occur to you that you should think about teaching once in a while? It's what you do, you know."

"Sure I teach. My lectures are terrific."

"That's your problem, Gus, all you do is lecture. And some people aren't auditory learners."

"At my age I'm too old to change."

Wasn't it interesting how her father-in-law lost his income when he refused to change but Gus could get away with it? Only in academia. "You mean you don't want to."

"How's the fifty thousand going to be spent?"

Didn't he change the subject fast! And knowing him, she was a little suspicious of the question but did explain in a general way what would be done.

"Have you given any consideration regarding who your student assistant might be?"

"Oh sure, it's going to be Gina Esposito."

He spoke through tightened lips. "Surprise, surprise. Gina Esposito, I might've guessed. Boy, how you people stick together."

She was becoming increasingly annoyed. Still couldn't forget Gus's remarks about Jews. "Are you saying that I selected her because she's Italian?"

"Come on, Diane, you know what I mean about sticking together. You know. That she's a, a *mafioso*."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Do you mean to tell me that you've had her for two semesters and you don't know who she is?"

She placed her cup in the saucer, then her hand on her hip. "No, Gus, but I'm sure you know. Who?"

"Salvatore Esposito's daughter, dim-wit. You know, *the* Sal Esposito, Mr. Mafia himself. You've heard of him, Diane, haven't you? I mean everyone has." Gus had the same smug expression on his face that he had when he tried to get her not hire Ruth Finkelstein.

The lack of response from the other members of the faculty sharing their table was unnerving. She looked at them for their denial but each one in turn just lowered a head.

"But, but I've had other students named Esposito, it's such a common name," she said almost in a murmur, "and Gina's the best student I've ever had."

Gus snickered. "She comes by it honestly...or should I say, dishonestly."

His comment brought smiles from the others seated at the table.

Diane got up without taking her tray. She said in a semi-audible tone, "I can't believe it. It's got to be a mistake. Salvatore Esposito. I, I would never've made the connection."

She was furious on two counts. She didn't tell Gus off about his reference to all Italian-Americans being associated with the Mafia. He was the only faculty member to ever think this way, sparing no one. But as her mother often would say, "There's always one in the crowd." Bad enough Gus was an anti-Semite, but he was anti-everyone. A real misanthrope.

The shock of hearing about Sal Esposito made her need to react to Gus's insinuation take a secondary place on her agenda. Besides, she couldn't change him. He always got a kick out of lumping everyone into nice neat categories.

She also seemed to be the only one on campus who hadn't heard about Gina. Probably because her office was removed from the main faculty building. Always the last one to hear any gossip. Thank God for that.

Then what difference would knowing about Gina's father have made? Her behavior mattered more than her heredity. A wonderful girl who couldn't be faulted for an accident of birth.

Yet, she felt betrayed. The feeling was irrational, but she was hurt and upset, so much so that for the first time in her eighteen years on campus, she canceled class and went home early.

The only levity she could find in the situation was how she worried about Gina's having the \$2,000 from the grant because she probably needed the money. Really worth a laugh because the last time she read about Salvatore Esposito, it was reported that he was to have ruled over a crime empire that was estimated to be worth over fifty billion dollars. True, it was inflationary times. But fifty billion was fifty billion. And wouldn't the \$2,000 be a significant contribution to that!

Her father had always said in his theory of relativity, "Fifty dollars, if you have it, it's nothing; if you don't have it, it's a lot of money." She had assumed that the money would be a lot for Gina who was, after all, a student. How funny, the laugh was on her. But she didn't know whether she was laughing or crying as she thought about something even more humorous.

Gina's uncle.

Uncle Joey, the priest.

CHAPTER 19



When Gina went back to Brooklyn for the Christmas recess, her parents did not share her excitement about the grant. Her father was hanging silver balls on the tree, didn't even turn around to look at her, or say anything to her. Her mother was wrapping presents, cutting paper with large scissors, not missing a beat when she switched to designing bows. She didn't say anything, either. Why were they ignoring her instead of being proud, as other parents would be?

Gina looked forward to going back to school in late January to complete her junior year. Wanted the semester to go fast so that the summer would be here and she could work closely with Dr. Pisani. Yet the sooner the semester was over, the sooner graduation would come, and the sooner she'd be leaving the college. Being away permanently from a place and person she'd grown to love would be difficult, but she'd have to handle it. It was part, she was told, of growing up, moving on, and developing new experiences and relationships.

Finally, what seemed to be an interminable January was almost over. Time to return to college.

A message in their mailboxes welcomed the students back with additional news. The dormitories were scheduled for renovation during the summer. Students planning on attending the summer session would have to find alternative housing.

If there was no housing, how could she be able to work on the grant? Couldn't commute back and forth to Brooklyn every day.

She went to see Dr. Pisani who was signing students' programs in preparation for final registration.

Dr. Pisani acknowledged her from a distance with a military salute.

When it was her turn to meet with Dr. Pisani, Gina handed her the notice about the dorms.

Dr. Pisani looked perplexed. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Because how am I going to work with you this summer? I can't stay in the dorm and I can't commute from Brooklyn. It would be at least two hours each way." She put her index finger into her cheek and looked up. "Maybe I'll have to rent an apartment."

"It's too early to worry about...Wait a minute, I have a solution."

Gina removed her finger from her cheek.

Dr. Pisani's eyes were jumping across the room. "You can stay with me. This is the first summer I'll be alone, could use some company. Michael, that's my son, will be spending the summer in Washington. I have plenty of room, now isn't that a mutually beneficial arrangement?"

"I could never ask you to..."

"It's settled."

The telephone rang. From the way Dr. Pisani spoke it must've been a student with questions about registration. While Dr. Pisani was chatting, Gina opened the second envelope that was in her mailbox. So distressed by the first message, she had forgotten to read the other note.

Dr. Pisani hung up. "From that smile on your face that looks like good news."

"It is. Dr. Marino selected me to be head tutor to engage in conversational Italian with intermediate and advanced students. That means he must think I'm fluent enough to assist in college level courses. And I'm going to get one credit for my work."

“Wonderful. Now that I’m older I regret not hearing Italian spoken at home. I can’t even say a coherent sentence in the language. I had four years of Latin, four of French, and three years of German, that one for my chemistry major. But Italian was never offered in any school I ever went to.”

“My Uncle Joey was always upset when I visited my grandmother, my mother’s mother. She still speaks the Sicilian dialect, and he was afraid I’d never learn the real Italian.”

“Some day I’d like to learn the real Italian. Maybe on my next sabbatical, on an extended stay in Italy.”

“If you ever want to study Italian before you have a sabbatical or make that trip, I’d be hurt if you didn’t ask my help. Not that I think you couldn’t do it on your own, but it’s always good to converse with someone who knows the language really well.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”



What was sociology all about? Gina tried to make associations between prefixes and words she already knew related to what might be covered in that class. Socio-let’s see. Society, social, social climber. She hadn’t bought the text yet, though she knew which one it was. It would be good to get an overview. “The science of society, social institutions, and relationships,” the dictionary had said, “specifically the systematic study of the development, structure, interaction, and collective behavior of organized groups of human beings.” Gibberish. Which human beings? Interesting or not, she’d soon find out.

She was just making herself comfortable when Lisa Valenti walked into the class, and took a seat on the opposite side from her. The farther away the better. She and Lisa had passed each other on campus occasionally, and politely acknowledged each other, but this was the first time that they were in the same course.

Dr. Perry Winstead was the instructor. He introduced himself as an adjunct, who came from another university for their Tuesday and Thursday four o'clock class.

Because the class was relatively late in the day, there were only twelve students enrolled.

Dr. Winstead stated how pleased he was with the intimacy the small number would provide.

He distributed his syllabus, which included a list of research topics. Each student would be responsible for selecting one of the topics, or could suggest her own with his approval, and would be assigned a date when the topic would be presented to the class and discussed. Enough photocopies of their papers were to be made so that everyone would have one for analysis and future reference.

Dr. Winstead emphasized how important it was that the first report be outstanding, because whether they realized it or not, the rest of the students would use it as a model. Gina wanted to be first, just to get it over with, but Lisa Valenti beat her to the punch.

The last class in March the scheduled presentations began. Lisa sauntered up to the lectern and introduced her topic, "Organized Crime." She explained her interest in the subject. Ever since she could remember, people were always associating all Italians with organized crime, and she wanted to lay the subject to rest once and for all.

Lisa had requested in advance from Dr. Winstead an overhead projector which he had ready for her. The pointer, always in the classroom resting on the ledge with the chalk, she quickly picked up. She distributed copies of her paper to everyone in the class. Gina thumbed through Lisa's paper. It was unusually thick, including photocopies of newspaper clippings, magazine articles, pictures, graphs, and numerous other references. She was impressed. The girl had really done her research.

Lisa presented documentation regarding the number of Italians involved in the Mafia. The FBI had determined that the number was

approximately 6,000 in the nation, and the population of Italian-Americans, according to the 1970 census, was about 30,000,000. After translating that data into more manageable information with a simple calculation on the blackboard, .02%, 2 in 10,000, or 1 in 5,000, she described the workings of the crime families and their involvement with labor unions, drugs, gambling, prostitution, and finally their infiltration into legitimate businesses.

The students expressed outrage that such practices were allowed to exist. Lisa completed her presentation by putting on the overhead the last chart, a family tree identifying the crime families and their hierarchy. "Federal Bureau of Investigation" in small print was in the lower right corner, legitimatizing the chart.

Lisa tapped the pointer on the floor while she waited for the students and Dr. Winstead to examine the chart.

Then she slipped the pointer up through the litany of Italian names. When she got next to the top, she stroked the tip of the pointer over the name, Carmine Caputo. "He came from Sicily and solidified the organized crime families in America. He had a son, Marco, who died in his early teens. His daughter, Carmela, is married to," she slid the pointer to the top and continued to stroke, then circle the name there. "Salvatore Esposito, the reputed head of all the families, the boss of all bosses. He has no sons, only one daughter, Eugenia, known as Gina."

With a smirk on her face, Lisa stared at her. One by one everyone else in the class, including the instructor, stared at her.

A strange silence filled the room, the only sound coming from the hum of the overhead projector, which was relentlessly casting onto the white wall the image of the crime family hierarchy.



For a few moments Gina absorbed the silence, the stares. Carmine Caputo. Carmela. Salvatore Esposito. Names that hit home. And her real name was Eugenia, named after her father's father, Eugenio.

No, it was someone else Lisa was talking about, other people with the same names. Just a coincidence.

But Marco, his name was on the family tree, the uncle she often heard about but never knew, the one who died way before she was born. It all crystallized.

Should she go home, call her parents? No. They would just lie to her. She wouldn't have anything more to do with them.

Her father.

Her mother.

How could she even look at either of them again?

She slowly stood up and left the room, leaving her classmates rigid in their seats. As she got farther from the classroom, her stride became longer, her gait faster until she found herself running and running. She didn't know where she was running until she landed at Dr. Pisani's office door.

Gina rubbed her eyes and screamed, "It's not true. It can't be true."

The office door was closed. Diane's secretary, Laurie, had just picked up her purse and some papers as though she was getting ready to leave for the day. Gina scratched at the door, still screaming.

"There's someone in Dr. Pisani's office," Laurie said. "I don't know if I can..."

The door flung open. Dr. Pisani came out with a student. They looked at each other. "We'll continue this discussion at another time." With a wave of her hand, Dr. Pisani sent the student away.

Gina ran to her. Dr. Pisani led her into the office, closed the door, then hugged her tightly.

A full five minutes passed before Gina could speak.

When she finally did she said, "Dr. Pisani, tell me it isn't true. Tell me, tell me." She tugged at her arm.

"Tell you what isn't true?"

She gulped, then blurted, "Tell me my father's not the head of organized crime. I need you of all people to tell me that."

“Gina, what are you talking about?”

She took several deep breaths. “Lisa Valenti just. Gave a report in. Sociology class. She, she showed. A chart. Which pointed to my father, my father. As head of. Head of. Crime. And the rotten bitch kept staring at me when she emphasized the name, Esposito. Now tell me it’s not true. There must be. Must be a. Lot. Thousands. Many people named Salvatore Esposito. I’m so humiliated. I can never go back to that class again. I can’t ever go back to any class again. I can’t face anyone as long as I live.”

Dr. Pisani put her arm around her shoulder and led her to a chair. “Gina, you can’t let the likes of Lisa Valenti get to you. Some people have to feel important by trying to associate with people they perceive are important, others have to knock people down to boost themselves up. Lisa’s in the second category. We all at one time or another have to face the Lisas of this world, and there are plenty of them to go around. They’re the losers, and if we give in to them we become losers, too.

“Now I don’t know anything about your family, who they are, nor do I care. I only know who you are. And do you know what I see when I look at you? I see a bright, sensitive, caring person with the potential to be anything she wants. What people say about your father is irrelevant. What matters is what *you* are. And if you have a strong sense of what you are and what you stand for, it doesn’t matter what or who he is.

“In the final analysis, Gina, you can only be responsible for your own behavior. If your father’s a saint or a criminal, you can’t be responsible for him, only for yourself. You know right from wrong. Don’t you ever tell me that you can’t face anyone. I dare anyone to face you, because no student on this campus can compare with you. You remember that.”

She placed her hand firmly under Gina’s chin that had developed a tic and forced her head up. “Now you hold your head up high and

remember what I told you. Whenever you forget, think of how my hand feels under your chin and you'll get the strength."

After several more minutes of tears Gina said, "I think I can go back to my room now. I don't feel like eating, I just want to sleep."

"This whole matter will feel different to you in the morning. Come on, Gina, I'll walk down to the dorm with you."



Gina didn't feel much better the next morning. Her nine o'clock class. Should she cut it? She gave that some consideration for a moment but then decided she'd have to work out the entire matter, and the sooner the better. Couldn't spend her life hiding. Even if it were true about her father, she'd have to live her own way.

Sociology. Collective behavior of organized groups of human beings. Head of organized crime. Were those people, was her father human?

She kept going over the contacts she had with her father—the lullabies he sang to her.

Crash.

That big roll of thunder that rattled her room. She ran into his, screaming, holding her ears. He snuggled her in his arms, stroked her hair, kissed her forehead. It made her feel secure to be held by strong arms, a firm chest.

Was this Salvatore Esposito, the Mafia head, the same man who was always so generous to people who needed help, the same man who cried uncontrollably at his mother's funeral? Couldn't possibly be the same person. Still in her pajamas, she ran into the hall for the telephone book.

There. At least a dozen Salvatore Espositos listed, and that was only in Westchester. Any of them could be...

She could still feel her chin being supported by Dr. Pisani's hand. She ran back into her room, showered, went to breakfast, then to her first class.

For several days she didn't call home. Calls from home weren't returned. How would she manage this situation? Until she figured it out, she'd avoid it.

The more she thought about it, the more of a simpleton she appeared to herself. Twenty years old, almost twenty-one, and oblivious to anything that was happening, accepting all that was told to her.

How could she have been so blind? How could she not have realized who those men constantly coming into and out of her house were? How could her father, someone so good to her, so loving, someone she loved, possibly do what he was reputed to have done? How could Uncle Joey and her father, brothers, be so different?

What a fool. Now she understood why Uncle Joey played such an important part in her education. She recalled a statement from the Bible he frequently quoted. "Do not judge lest ye be judged." He probably said that because he knew that the moment of truth would one day come and she'd need those words for support, to fight against her defective genes, genes she had to have, coming from both sides. Would she some day become a criminal, do something rash, evil?

And what part did her mother play in all this? She had told her that her father was a speculator. He'd buy businesses that were in trouble, build them up with his managerial skills and either run the businesses himself or sell them at a large profit.

Her mother seemed to have had a lot of practice at covering things up. Carmela Caputo Esposito. Some heritage! Her mother had lied to her. What else had she lied about besides telling her about the stork? Could she ever believe anything her mother said again?



Carmela was pacing and puffing. Such a long time not hearing from Gina. She put out her cigarette. Never visited the Marymount campus, leaving educational matters to Joseph. This was the first

time in her life she was sorry she didn't learn to drive. After manipulating the dial on the safe in their bedroom closet, and removing three hundred dollars, she called a taxi to take her to Tarrytown. And she didn't tell Sal.

She waited outside Gina's room for over two hours. First she spent some of the time reading the bulletin boards, then listening to one-sided phone calls from the hall phone. She read the bulletin boards again and again until she had memorized them and could advise anyone when the next mixer, lecture, or trip to the city would occur. And she could identify every crack on the wall, every flake on the ceiling.



When Gina finally came into the dorm, she was startled by her mother's presence. Not like her to venture far from the neighborhood, especially alone.

Gina knew her behavior caused concern at home, but she didn't care. She had to finish the semester and then work on the research project with Dr. Pisani.

One step at a time.

Would she lose control and make a scene?

Gina was silent. She opened the door to her room and flicked her eyes down both sides of the hall before signaling her mother to enter.



Carmela couldn't understand why even when both of them were behind the closed door, her daughter didn't greet her with a kiss. She appeared cold and aloof, not at all like herself.

Gina remained without expression, not responding to her presence, not even looking at her.

"Gina, what's wrong, are you all right? You haven't been home lately. We call you several times a day and you never call us back. Don't you get the messages?"

She didn't answer but looked at her with loathing. "Is Daddy the head of organized crime?"

Carmela was totally thrown, didn't know what to say. Some day she'd have to face this situation, never practiced how she might handle it, hoping it would never surface.

She didn't think her daughter was capable of the look she was now giving her. Carmela couldn't remain silent any longer. All she could say was, "Your father loves you."

Gina's blue eyes filled all the space they could in their sockets. "Loves me? Why he's made a fool of me, I've got to be the biggest joke on this campus."

Carmela tried to stifle Gina, cover her mouth.

Gina shoved her aside. "I was humiliated in sociology class when the evidence about Daddy was presented right before my eyes. Pictures, charts, everything. And you," her pointed finger was worse than a knife, "how could you allow this to happen?"

Carmela looked at the floor. Gina didn't understand. No one ever told her stories about the old country like the ones her mother had told her. Gina had never had anything taken from her, any family members killed.

"Don't bend your head, Mother, look at me, God damn it, look at me."

When Carmela finally lifted her head, Gina continued. "I know now that I don't want to be like you. How could you be married to him? The whole thing disgusts me. You disgust me. He disgusts me. I spoke to Dr. Pisani about it and besides I'm going to stay with her this summer to help her with the research. I don't want to come home or see either of you ever again." She turned her back toward her and burst into tears.

How could she dare speak about this to Dr. Pisani? What her daughter just said to her, not wanting to associate with her family, was less horrifying than the fact that she had discussed this matter with an outsider. “You mean to tell me that you discussed our family with a stranger?”

Gina turned around and looked her straight in the eye. “She’s not the stranger, you and Daddy are.” She aimed her arm toward the door. “Go home, Mother. Go home to your husband and your sordid life. I hate you both and can never forgive you. Get out. I have to study.”

She had never seen Gina like this, never heard her speak to anyone with such venom. In the mood Gina was in, there was no point in discussing the matter any further.

Carmela felt as if all her bones had disintegrated, and she was reduced to a puddle of skin. It took her a long time to drag herself, almost crawl back to the taxi.



Carmela was sitting in the kitchen, staring into space when Sal came home. She hadn’t prepared any food.

“I see you’re puffing away in front of me. Something must be wrong.”

She took out another cigarette, lit it, and smoked it along with the other one she already had in her mouth. “I went to see Gina today.”

Sal grabbed her arm. “And?”

The fact that he had touched her momentarily broke her train of thought. It had been years since there was any physical contact between them, not since her father’s death.

Sal’s hand felt good on her skin and for a while she didn’t move or speak, just transmitted the nerve endings stimulated by his hand to her brain and back to her arm. She remained still, soaking in the sensations for some seconds. Then she continued to inhale more smoke to get the crutch she needed to keep on track.

"She knows about you. Somebody up at that college told her. I'll bet it's that woman, that Dr. Pisani. She's trying to take my baby away from me. She's a bad influence on Gina. And Gina discussed our family with that woman, a perfect stranger, can you believe it?"

Carmela alternately beat her chest and screamed, occasionally doing both at the same time. "She discussed our family with that woman. How could she do that? Gina thinks she going to spend the summer with that woman living in her house doing that dumb project."

She felt an assertiveness in her that she hadn't felt since the night she mentioned his slut. "I want you to go up there and bring Gina home. Now. This instant. I don't care if she never graduates. Too much education goes to your head. She's not going to spend the summer with that woman, that witch. No, Sal, you go up and get Gina now, and I mean now. I'm her mother and know what's best for her."



It didn't matter to Sal whether or not Carmela had her facts straight. She had said enough.

He wasn't inclined to react quickly. Always examined situations, careful that when he finally acted, he'd do so with the least possible chance of making a mistake.

However, when his daughter was concerned, he tended to be more emotional. And he was so shaken that he followed his first instinct. He went into his study and called his brother.

"Joey, you got to do something for me."

"Well, so much for a warm greeting. I know you like to cut to the quick but don't I at least get a 'how are you?'"

"Listen, Joey, it's about Gina."

A hesitation.

Then, an intense voice. "What about Gina?"

"There's a woman up at that college, a Dr. Pisani, who's talking to Gina about our family, filling her head with poison. Did you hear that, Joey?"

"Yes, I did."

"I want you to call up one of your contacts, some important bishop or somebody, maybe the cardinal, or even the pope if you have to, and I want you to have that woman fired. Do you understand? I want that woman and her career destroyed."

"Now calm down, Sal. What's this all about?"

"I don't have time to explain. Do what I tell you. Call the president of the college and have that woman fired. I'll make a substantial contribution to the college when they do that, the largest contribution they ever seen. You tell'em that."

"You may find this hard to believe, Sal, but there are a lot of people out there who don't play according to your rules. The college doesn't care about your contribution. They have a thing called academic freedom which to put it simply means that a professor, and therefore, that woman you refer to is free to speak her mind without being fired for it."

"That's some stupid system. Then call her up, Joey, and talk to her. This second. Convince her to lay off Gina and stop filling her head with nonsense. And tell her that my daughter's not staying with her this summer or ever. Or I'll go up there and pull Gina out of that college myself."

"Good idea, Sal. Go up there. You have the reputation for convincing anyone to do anything. A top negotiator, they call you. If you can negotiate with the devil, you can certainly talk to that woman. I know you can make her tow the line, or better yet, you can rub her out."

He didn't like the idea of meeting that woman. Would've preferred to handle her with the usual threats. But Joseph was right, usually was when it came to these matters. Sal could be charming. He could get the most stubborn groups to agree. He'd tell Dr. What-

ever-Her-Name-Was to stay away from Gina. He'd shut the troublesome professor up once and for all, or she'd regret it. He had a way of making things clear. Perfectly clear.

He'd never met any of Gina's teachers. Hadn't been to any of her schools except for graduation. Visiting teachers was something women and priests took care of, not a situation he felt comfortable with. But this matter he had to fix himself. Couldn't delegate it to anyone else.

The next morning he called the college and made an appointment for him and Carmela to see Dr. Pisani. Four o'clock was a mutually agreeable time.

The secretary said, "May I ask what this is in reference to?"

He was quick with an answer, "Personal," and quick to bang the phone down.

He advised Carmela to be ready at 2:30 when he'd be back to pick her up.



Carmela had already decided that she wouldn't go with Sal but wouldn't tell him until he returned. She didn't want to meet that horrible woman, felt threatened by her.

She propped herself in front of the vanity, took out three cotton balls, a jar of cold cream, and removed her lipstick, foundation, and rouge. With a powder puff she patted white bath powder over her face, then pressed it in with a tissue. She rubbed her eyes so that some of the mascara would settle under them giving them dark rings, then loosened her hair, shaking it until it look wild. The coughs she practiced first in duets, next in triplets echoed around the room. With her opened hand pressed against her chest, she practiced the coughs again.

When Sal returned to pick her up, she was wearing a bathrobe, and greeted him with a mixture of coughed duets and triplets.

She wasn't quite sure whether his eyes attacked her with disgust or with fury.

"For crying out loud, Carmela, can't you ever face nothing? Why don't you act like the wife of the boss instead of hiding in the corner all the time?"

He yelled for Bruno and stomped out of the house.

CHAPTER 20



The car was already out of the garage, parked in front of the house. Just as Bruno began to open the door of the Mercedes, Sal yanked the handle out of his hand, pulled the door so hard the hinges vibrated, got into the back seat, and slammed the door shut.

Bruno rushed into the driver's seat.

"Let's go," Sal snarled.

Bruno swiftly started the engine and streaked into the driving lane.

"I'll pull my daughter out of that goddam college. They're always trying to pump all those wacky ideas into her head. She's young, impressionable, and believes all that crap.

"Just you wait till I get my hands on that Dr. Pisani, I'll show her who she's dealing with. And Jesus Christ, Bruno, just look at the damn traffic. Just today I have to go up there, the first springy day, and every hard-on has to get out and drive."

By the time they got from the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel onto the West Side Highway, it was already 3:10. For a while Sal watched the boats sailing up and down the Hudson River. A strong current ran opposite the direction they were driving in. Even though the traffic lights were synchronized, the road construction kept the Mercedes crawling, stopping and going in uneven patterns. Ever since he could remember, the West Side Highway was being repaired. By the time

they reached the Cross Bronx Expressway, the traffic disappeared, most of it lining up for the expressway, the rest for the George Washington Bridge, leaving them the road going north all to themselves.

After they got off at the Tarrytown exit, Bruno wandered around some of the side streets until he found the college gates. A security guard looked suspiciously at Bruno and at the car windows.

Bruno told him they had an appointment with Dr. Pisani. The guard identified the appropriate building, and showed them where to park. They followed his instructions and found a parking space right in front of the Gill Hall entrance. A squirrel didn't bother running away but remained to watch them enter the building.

Sal noted it was two minutes to four. With all the delay, he couldn't believe they had made it on time.

He introduced himself to the secretary.

She led him into an office. "Please have a seat, make yourself comfortable, Mr. Esposito, Dr. Pisani will be with you shortly. May I make you a cup of coffee while you wait?"

"No, thank you."

She closed the door halfway. He heard her make Bruno the same coffee offer. He also refused.

Sal watched them through the partially opened door. The secretary showed Bruno a seat and gave him some magazines. He thumbed through several. "Don't you got any with pictures in them?"

"I don't think so."

Bruno tossed the magazines one by one onto a nearby table. He stared at the secretary as she typed. She got up, came to the office door. "I'd better close this all the way, Mr. Esposito. I have a lot of typing to do and the noise may disturb you."

"Thanks."

Sal looked out of one of the windows. It faced west and presented a magnificent view of the Hudson River and the Tappan Zee Bridge. The weather was perfect, only a few puffy white clouds in the sky.

The sun continued its trip to the west and the reddish part of its light began to hit the office.

He entertained himself looking at the books that were neatly organized in the many bookcases placed against the walls--Bruner, Freud, Crisis in the Classroom, Piaget, Harris--authors and titles he never heard of. In his social club were porno magazines, detective stories, an occasional paperback mystery novel.

Plants were systematically placed on the bookshelves and along the window ledges making a symmetrical design around the room. On the desk was a pile of papers, neatly stacked, a large green blotter with a brown leather edge, and a hinged picture frame, which shared a picture of a man and a boy about four years old. Magnificent eyes on the kid. For a split-second, he thought he had saw those eyes before.

Sal paused over the pictures. The two did resemble each other. Were they her brothers, cousins, or perhaps the same person at different ages? He had never considered until now whether the professor was married, assuming that anyone in her position wasn't. How could any female combine marriage and a job like this? Impossible.

On the opposite side of the other window was a small sofa. He walked over to it. No, it was more of a loveseat. He pushed his palms into the orange and yellow flowered cushions. They felt soft so he sat down, trying to unwind. Too much tension from the traffic and his wife.

From the loveseat he read a plaque on the wall. "Know thyself...Socrates."

The sun continued to make the room colors warmer—the brown wood of the bookcases and loveseat frame, and the carved frames of paintings now turning bronze.

As he sat sunken in the cushion, he felt at peace in his warm surroundings, more aware of the fact that in all his life he rarely ever left Brooklyn or Manhattan.



Right after Diane's nine o'clock class that morning, Laurie had informed her that the Espositos would be coming at four.

Immediate panic.

What was she going to discuss with the head of the mob and his wife? She wasn't sure why the Espositos were coming, but wasn't taking any chances being caught off-guard.

Know thy enemy.

A quick phone call to the periodicals librarian ordered a computer search of Salvatore Esposito, one that had to be ready by noon.

At 12:15 she went to the library where she began to peruse the reams of abstracts the search had produced. So much material that she skipped lunch, spending that time forewarning and forearming herself studying the enemy.

Hm-m. Carmine Caputo's son-in-law. Carmine Caputo. Where did she hear that name before? It had slipped her mind, but if she didn't think about it, it would come back.

God! Was there a thing Sal Esposito wasn't alleged to be involved in? A leech, vulture, piranha. Slick. Cagey. Charges that couldn't be proven, people in the community who supported him, witnesses who were willing to say only the best about him, never imprisoned. An unbelievable lifestyle, enough to keep her reading until three o'clock when she had to attend a meeting.

Diane tapped her pencil, chewed her pencil, broke her pencil during the biweekly Academic Policy Committee meeting. She was trying hard to pay attention to the interminable discussions so she would not be thinking about her upcoming appointment with the person she spent most of the afternoon reading about.

At 4:05 she abruptly picked up her papers, several textbooks, then left.

Delightful. One of the first spring-like days on campus with a warm breeze and a smell of early grass, not quite ready for its first mowing.

Carmine Caputo.

Now she remembered. He was the gangster her husband was accused of wanting to go into law to defend.

She walked briskly up the hill to her office. Already a few minutes late and didn't know whether or not her appointment had arrived.

Then, she saw it.

A Mercedes.

Parked in a space near the front door.

Her adrenaline started flowing, her insides imploding. Her stomach was empty from missing lunch. She felt a surge of nausea. Too late to cancel the appointment, say she was sick. The cold waters of the Hudson seemed a better alternative to confronting the Espositos.

Stop being silly, Diane. Besides, how bad could it be with the wife there?

She had carefully avoided thinking about what she would say to that family and now that their meeting was near, she regretted not having planned it very carefully. Should she be honey, or vinegar? Too late now. She had already reached the top of the hill, would have to trust her instincts to say the right thing.

She tried to ignore the Mercedes, its charcoal-gray windows. Was there anyone inside watching her? She'd keep her head straight, pass by it casually, and not look in.

She entered Gill Hall, walked down the passageway to the clicking rhythm of Laurie's typewriter. When would the college ever get a more modern machine with silent keys? She'd request it, no demand it in her next budget.

She reached the reception area. A man's back was toward her. Was it Mr. Esposito? Then Laurie, typing like a robot, said nonchalantly, "Mr. Esposito is waiting in your office."



Sal glanced at his watch. Only 4:10 but it seemed later. He stood up, moved over to the window, this time the window directly opposite the door.

From this location high up on the hill he could see toy trucks and cars on the bridge. The bridge scene had to be noisy but from where he stood, the traffic was silent. The campus was quiet. He understood why his daughter loved it here.

Spring was unfolding. The crocuses had already claimed their turf. And as the sun slowly slid west towards Rockland County, he heard the door opening.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Esposito.”

That voice. It struck a chord.

Sorry. Sorry...See you next week, Charlie.

Saliva stuck in his throat. He swung around. Dr. Pisani was standing in the doorway opposite the window. Her eyes caught the red rays of the sun, and her pupils were so contracted that all he could see were the auburn irises, made more bronze by the reflection of her hair. Her face was flush, and her pink blouse made her cheeks appear petal-like.

She stood slightly slouched from the weight of the books in her arms. She spilled the texts onto her desk, then immediately extended her hand. He felt awkward and tried to cover his reaction to her by quickly taking her hand.

“I’m Diane Pisani.” She shook his hand firmly, and he didn’t want to let go, but took his cue when she relaxed hers. He lowered his hand, pressed it hard against his right thigh to control a slight tremor.

Diane Pisani.

Diane.

What had happened to the floor? Was that a fault line he’d been standing on?

"I was trapped in one of those meetings where people talk in circles for hours," she said.

He babbled something like, "I've been trapped in some of those myself."

She moved first toward the chair behind her desk, hesitated, then walked to the loveseat. "Isn't Mrs. Esposito with you?"

"No, she wanted to come but she's not feeling good." He already forgave Carmela for not joining him.

"Sorry to hear that, but please sit down, Mr. Esposito. I assume you wanted to discuss your daughter?"

He promptly joined her on the loveseat. She placed her arm on the back and faced him, but didn't speak. Her silence gave him a signal to begin the discussion. She maintained eye contact with him, pupil to pupil.

He really didn't want to talk, just wanted to look at her. The hair, the eyes. For a moment he even forgot why he was there.

Anyway, he began. "Me and my wife, we're very worried about Gina. She's not been home since the beginning of the term. She don't call, neither. We call her and she don't return our calls."

Dr. Pisani leaned closer. "Go on."

"We had a long talk over the Christmas vacation. Gina said that she wasn't coming home for the summer and that you wanted her to help you on a special project. Now my wife tells me that some of the girls in her classes were making cracks about our family, saying of all things that we were criminals and that she was a criminal, too. She told us she hated us and wished she had other parents. Somebody up here is spreading rumors about our family and that's got to stop."

He couldn't believe how mild his tone was when he spoke about all the things that were bothering him, but they seemed less important in Dr. Pisani's presence.

She waited a while. "Gina hasn't been home and she doesn't call. You're concerned that people are making accusations about your

family. This is making Gina aloof and you're worried that she doesn't want to return home this summer."

The way she repeated what he had just said struck him, his grammar and vocabulary less than perfect. He tried to speak with more precision. "I want her to come home. Now. Pull her out of here. This place's a bad influence on her, she gets a lot of strange ideas. She'll listen to you if you tell her to come home."

Then the real reason for his visit surfaced, the reason he wasn't aware of until he heard himself say, "I'm afraid I'm going to lose my daughter."

Dr. Pisani stood up. He attempted to stand, too, but she stopped him by raising her hand. He remained on the loveseat.

He watched her glow as more of the sun's red rays hit the room. His insides glowed with the very sight of her.

She stared down at him with a slight frown as though she was thinking about what she was going to say.

"Mr. Esposito."

The way she said his name, the fact that she had just spoken it, made him melt. He was so busy absorbing her that he barely listened to what she said.

"I like to think of myself as a scholar. A scholar doesn't operate on rumors, only on facts. I don't know or possess any facts about your family, and frankly, whether or not there are criminals involved is not my business. Only Gina's my business.

"All I can tell you is that those people, whoever they are, make me incensed. I'm sick and tired of having innuendoes hurled at me. I've spent all of my life working hard, trying to improve myself to shake the negative image those people give to all of us Italian-Americans."

He was pleased that she included him among the innocent.

She hardly paused before saying, "Those people are the albatross we have to live with. Think they're so clever. But if they were really clever, they'd use their supposed intelligence helping society instead of destroying it. That's the real challenge.

"I'll never understand them. All they could possibly have to look forward to is death or prison. Death or prison," she emphasized with an expression that showed she found the choice incredible.

"They don't understand their heritage. It was only the Italians who twice made a major contribution to civilization. The Roman Empire and the Renaissance. But those people act as if those periods of history never took place. Instead of building on their heritage, they demean and destroy it. They should be nurturing the arts, beauty, what positive qualities there are in man that could make him all he's capable of being. But no, they appeal to and nourish what's worst, his basest instincts with drugs, I mean, don't they have children of their own? Gambling, prosti..."

Her hand reached for her throat.

Sal would have had people beaten up for speaking to him this way, but Dr. Pisani, Diane Pisani could've said anything to him, and he, looking at those expressive auburn eyes, was thrilled by the passion they communicated.

He had the urge to kiss those lips of hers when she started moving them again.

"But Mr. Esposito, we're not here to discuss those people. We're here to discuss Gina."

Dr. Pisani sat next to him once more. "Gina's a brilliant girl and a wonderful person. She has so much potential that she could do just about anything she wants. She's sensitive, caring, involved, gentle, kind. No, Mr. Esposito, no one who knows Gina could ever believe those rumors. For to know her is to believe that she could only have been brought up in the best of families.

"I've studied about and worked with children who've had no hope but made it anyway. There was only one reason they did. One person believed in them, encouraged them. Now Gina's starting out with so much more than these children, and I'm not going to give up on her."

The tone of her voice became less businesslike, more sympathetic. “You say you don’t want to lose your daughter. The only way not to lose her is to free her to become what she has to be, not some pre-conceived idea of what you want her to be.”

Sal recalled Gina’s comment about Dr. Pisani. “I want to be just like her.” He gave his daughter a lot of credit for that.

“My mother used to say that there are only two things you can give your children, roots and wings. You, Mr. Esposito have already given her the roots. She’s had a fine education so far and a solid upbringing. Now she needs the wings to pursue her dreams. You’ve got to let go.

“You have to ask yourself what the consequences are of not having her do this. She has a few more weeks of this semester, only another year of college to graduate, and the talent to work with me in research. Can you take her out of school now? For what rational reason? What kind of life do you want her to have?”

Carmela entered his head. Always knew he didn’t want Gina to be like her mother, but with Dr. Pisani, Diane, sitting next to him, the choice was clear.

He didn’t speak.

She rose and looked at him with those eyes that made him lose the thoughts he started out with. “Mr. Esposito. We, you and I,” she pointed her hand to him, then to herself, “cannot let this happen to Gina. You’re very fortunate. I wish I could’ve had a daughter like her.”

She looked shocked by what she had just said.

So was he.

The thought of them sharing a child, even one impregnated by the pupils of his eyes, intrigued him.

“You see, Mr. Esposito, those people made me a widow.”

This was the first time he was able to speak after listening to her lecture. “What are you talking about?”

She put her lips together, swallowed hard, and waited a while before she said, "Some mobster, some low-life loser decided to blow up my husband's closest friend, his law school classmate and a brilliant district attorney. The police were almost positive that someone associated with organized crime committed the murder, but they could never prove it. They don't know till this day who did it. What the criminal never considered was that my husband also happened to be in the car with this thug's prey. I was four months pregnant at the time. My son. Never...never saw his father."

She looked toward her desk at the picture of the man and the boy. Sal did the same. "How did you manage after that?"

"I did what I had to do to raise my son. Taught during the day, studied at night. Then I got a job here, sometimes took extra jobs to make ends meet, and eventually became chair of the department.

"And your son?"

"He's at Harvard Law School, finishing his second year."

"You must be proud of him."

"Yes, as I know you'll be of Gina."

He was crushed that she had returned the conversation to the reason for his visit.

"Well, Mr. Esposito, do you trust me enough to lend me your daughter this summer?"

He would've trusted her with anything. "Now that I've met you, I think...I know she'll be in good hands."

"Great." The smile that came to her face made her even more irresistible. "She can stay with me, it'll be easier that way. The dorms'll be closed this summer for renovation. I live near the campus so it'll be easy for us to use the college library and mainframe. And when you bring her to my house, you and your wife must come for lunch. I know how Italian people are, wanting to know how their children will be cared for, always having to feel secure that their children are safe. I'm the same way."

"But that would be imposing."

“The only thing that would be imposing, and a tragedy for Gina, would be not having her work with me this summer.”

“How could I ever thank you? At least let me pay ex...”

“The grant I received more than adequately covers expenses. If I need anything, I’ll call you.”

“Is that a promise?”

“It’s a promise. And so it’s settled, when the semester’s over I’ll have more details for you.”

Dr. Pisani looked at her watch.

She was telling him to leave, but he didn’t want to go.

He hesitated. “Be sure and let me know if I can do anything for you. By the way, I got no right to ask you for anything else, you’ve already did so much for Gina. But I’d appreciate it if you would be the one to tell her I think it would be a good idea for her to work with you this summer. Would you do that for me?”

“I’d be very happy to do that for you. Let me walk out with you.”

She opened the door. As he moved toward it, he passed the picture of her husband and son. He glanced at the picture feeling jealous of her dead husband for ever having touched her.

Bruno stood up. Sal avoided introducing Bruno to Dr. Pisani. For the first time in his life Sal was embarrassed by Bruno’s presence.

The three of them walked out of the reception area, along the hallway, and out of the building.

Owning the Mercedes made Sal’s stomach coil. He didn’t want Dr. Pisani to see the car.

She shook his hand, then Bruno’s. “Hope you don’t hit much traffic.”

“We’ll be okay.” He was just about to get into the car when he turned toward her. “Before I leave, I have to ask you something.”

“Sure.”

He waited, then said, “What was your name before you got married?”

She tilted her head. "My maiden name? That's a strange question. But if you must know, it was Pinto."

"Diane Pinto?"

"Diane Mary Pinto to be exact." She waved goodbye, and re-entered the building.



Diane started to return to her office. She was halfway down the hall when...her right hand was prickling, tingling, her skin peeling, starting to get the creeping crud, crawling itch.

He had shaken her hand, touched her.

Salvatore Esposito had touched her!

She wheeled around on her heel, bolted for the lavatory, twisted open the faucet the most it would go. She pumped and pumped the yellow liquid soap from the dispenser until she had extracted every ounce from it, the excess liquid her hands couldn't hold flowing into the sink, bubbling up to the top under the running water. She kept wringing, rubbing her hands together with the antiseptic-smelling soap before rinsing eternally with hot water.

She headed for her office, shaking her hands that were still dripping.

"Well, what happened?" Laurie said.

Instead of answering her, Diane closed the door, didn't bother turning on the lights but sat at her desk, stunned. What had just happened had occurred so quickly that she didn't have a chance to think.

A chameleon he was, coming in with one agenda, going out with another.

And what in heaven's name ever possessed her to invite the Espositos for lunch? Must've been that feeding people was so much a part of her culture. How she regretted extending that invitation. With a little luck Mr. Esposito might forget it.

Her couch was turning burnt-orange, absorbing the sun.

She even told white lies, those about not knowing anything about him and about Gina's being brought up in the best of families. Punishable by a short bout in purgatory, the nuns had said.

Shadows were appearing on her wall from the trees outside.

In almost twenty years at the college, she had never discussed the full details of Michael's death with anyone, not even Phil or Joe. Why in the name of God had she just discussed it with of all people, Salvatore Esposito, someone she'd just met, someone whose very existence revolted her?

Crazy, even crazier for her to admit it, and to him no less, that she did want a daughter like Gina.

And after what she'd read about Salvatore Esposito that afternoon, there'd be a blizzard at the equator before she'd ever accept anything from the likes of him.

The tree shadows were looming in on her.

She realized how frightened she'd been of this meeting. She recalled all the things she'd said to Mr. Esposito and was suddenly overcome with chills. Had to find the sweater she kept in one of the drawers for the times when in the winter the heat didn't reach her office.

She turned on the lights, had to lose those creepy shadows.

Where did she get the gall, or was it plain stupidity, to talk to Salvatore Esposito that way?

Never asked him but told him what to do. Couldn't remember what he looked like. So nervous that she looked through him even though she was looking at him.

But she won.

She had saved Gina for a little while longer.

Then, still with her head in her hands, and weak from not having any lunch, she gave in and cried.



The ride home to Brooklyn was very different from the ride to the campus. Sal didn't pay attention to the traffic, the river, the time. He was numbed by the events of the afternoon, especially with his lack of education staring him in the face.

He closed his eyes, remembering how she looked in her New Moon costume. What would be the odds of him running into her, finding her after all these years, and in this way? A zillion to one? With odds like this, someone in his casinos could break the bank.

He remained silent all the way home.

Bruno seemed fidgety, disturbed by the prolonged silence. "Boss, do you want me to send someone up there, rough her up, just a little?"

For a second he went brain-dead. All those years, she was alive. Now he'd make sure no harm would ever come to her. "Shut the fuck up, Bruno, and if you ever, ever say anything so fuckin' stupid like that again I'll have *you* roughed up, and not just a little."

"Hey, what the hell's eating you? I can count on one hand the number of times in my whole life I heard you curse. Are you hungry?"

He didn't answer. The only thing that came to him was what Imogene Coca used to say. "Isn't it a small world?"

What had happened to Diane Pinto's singing career?

It had to be destiny that they'd meet. She was his destiny.

Bruno interrupted his train of thought. "Do you want me to stop at Theresa's?"

Theresa.

Bruno's question rumbled around in his head. His visits to Theresa would never be the same. He might be satisfied by her, but never fulfilled. "No, not now, but slow down and try to find a bookstore."

"A bookstore?"

“What the fuck are you deaf? You heard me the first time. Besides what’s so surprising about that?”

“Nothing. Hey, what’s making you so touchy today? I’m not surprised about the bookstore. I just thought you’d prefer Theresa’s.”

“Well, do what the hell I tell you. There must be a bookstore somewhere on this goddam street.”

“I’ll find one, I’ll find one.” Bruno slowed the car while moving his head in both directions.

Several blocks later Bruno said, “There’s one, it’s on the other side of the street. ‘Book It Here’ is the name.”

“Sounds like one of my operations.”

“It is.”

The car was still moving when Sal opened the door.

Bruno jammed on the brakes. “Boss, wait for me. It’s not safe for you to go in there alone.”

He grinned as he waited for a space in the traffic. “Don’t worry, nobody would ever think of looking for me there.”

He was right. No one would try to find him in a bookstore. It was fairly empty at dinnertime, with those who were there deeply absorbed in their interests.

Sal surveyed the book headings, stopped at, “English Literature”. Eight book stacks under the category. Several audiocassette shelves.

After reading the descriptions on the covers, he chose a set of tapes described as a “...comprehensive review of English grammar, sentence structure, and pronunciation. Guaranteed results within two weeks or your money back.”

On the way to the checkout he also picked up a copy of Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary that must of weighed ten pounds. He completed his purchase, returned to the car already planning when and where he would play the tapes. The FBI would really be confused listening to them.

Bruno started rolling again. Sal asked him to stop. He got out of the car. Two young boys were playing cards in the street. "Hey kids, what're your names?"

"I'm Guido and this is my buddy, Fioravanti."

"I might of guessed," Sal said. "How would you guys like to make fifty bucks?"

"Fifty bucks?" Guido said. He looked at his pal, then at him. "What would we have to do?"

"Promise me something".

"What?" Fioravanti said.

Sal threw a fifty-dollar bill at the kid. It fell to the floor. "Promise me you'll get off the streets and get an education."

The two boys closed their drooping jaws before they immediately picked up the money.

Sal got back into the car, told Bruno to head for home. He should of listened to his brother, became a professional. How long would it take to learn his grammar, increase his vocabulary? Had to start somewhere.

He opened the dictionary to letter A.



At 7:00 o'clock, Carmela, looking surprisingly healthy and miraculously cured, greeted them at the door. "Did you tell her off, Sal?"

"Shut up, Carmela, if you were so interested, why didn't you go up there with me? Is there anything to eat in this goddamn house? I'm starving." The table was already set with the usual blue and white china and the cup with a crack down the side. "I told you to get rid of these cracked cups. What's the matter, can't we afford new ones?" He grabbed the cup, smashed it on the floor.

She swept up hurriedly the shattered pieces and dumped them in the garbage.

He knew she'd prepare an elaborate meal to compensate for his annoyance with her.

They ate in silence, typical of the time they spent together, with only an occasional grunt when he wanted something. He could hear himself chewing, her fork moving around the dish. She placed her napkin on her lap, then back on the table, and back on her lap. She must of had the same piece of veal in her mouth for five minutes before taking another piece.

When it was time to serve espresso, she said, "When's my baby coming home?"

He looked at her for a long time, seeing in her something he didn't want his daughter to turn out to be. "She's not. I've decided that she will do the research project this summer with that Dr. Pagano. Oh yes, uh, Pisano, Pisani, or whatever the hell her name is." He hoped pretending not to remember her name might divert Carmela's attention from noticing what an effect Diane Pisani had had on him.

He was aware that Carmela was enraged by his answer but wouldn't challenge him. She didn't respond even though he was sure she disapproved of his decision.

He hated her for her silence. Dr. Pisani wouldn't of let him off the hook that easy and he didn't want Gina to be pushed around the way Carmela had always been. Doing what everyone else wanted her to do. Jumping at the sound of his voice.

"Well, if you think it's all right, then I agree."

How could he not despise her for not fighting for what she wanted, the gutless creature? How could anyone so passionless arouse any feeling in him? He was even more pleased with his decision to let Gina spend the summer with Dr. Pisani.

After supper Carmela cleaned the kitchen while he made believe he was reading the newspaper. He watched her every move. Did Dr. Pisani ever cook or clean up or wear the same kind of apron Carmela had on, the kind the shoemaker wore? Before Dr. Pisani's husband died, what did they talk about when they ate? He would love to talk for hours with her, especially over dinner.

Would a woman like her put up with Theresa? If he were married to Dr. Pisani, he wouldn't need a Theresa.

How did Dr. Pisani spend her time off campus? He was determined to find out more about her before the summer was over.

When Carmela finished scrubbing the sink with Comet, the last ritual of the dinner, they went upstairs to the bedroom to watch television.

He looked past the television set thinking about his meeting with Dr. Pisani—Diane. He kept thinking her name over and over again. He remembered one thing he learned from Sister Mary Catherine, while reading mythology in the eighth grade, something that had never come into his mind since. Diana was the goddess of the moon. And the name, Diana or Diane, meant “of the gods”. How appropriate.

At eleven-thirty, just after the last news program, Carmela showered and got into bed. Her hair hung over her shoulders, her nightgown was pale green, silky, with lace on the straps. He knew she was pretending to sleep so she could avoid any conversation he might bring up related to his afternoon at the college. She rested on her stomach with only the sheet over her.

How would Diane Pisani look in that nightgown? Green looked good on redheads. Maybe she wore pajamas. Silky like the ones Carmela had, or flannel? Diane was hardly the flannel-pajama type. When she was on her back, did her hair stream all over the pillow? Would it flow all over his face if he was laying next to her?



That night Diane was very restless. She was still in a state of shock over what she had said to Mr. Esposito, suddenly fearing reprisals.

Why did he want to know her maiden name? And why did she tell him? She could've made something up. Behind that lurking, phony patina of pleasantries was he planning to investigate her, have her followed?

He seemed agreeable enough. But down deep he was like a cougar, keeping its claws retracted to keep its nails sharp so at the right moment, they'd be ready for the kill.

The kill!

She drew the blinds, pulled the cord so tightly she stopped only when she realized the tension might break it. Kept checking the locks on the windows and doors.

Why was she alone?

Why wasn't Michael home with her instead of in Massachusetts?

She sat in the middle of her bed, first Indian-style. Then she unwound her legs, raised her knees and wrapped her arms around them. But she was still too much of a target that way. She removed her right arm from her knees and slowly lifted the sheets to check for the head of a dead horse. Maybe she should try sleeping under the bed. Ridiculous. She'd seen too many Francis Ford Coppola movies.

Still not secure, however, she sprawled on the bed, wrapped the covers around her head, burrowed it under the pillow, and hummed.

She stopped, listened for noises which she had deliberately blocked by the blankets. After repeating this ritual several times, she eventually fell asleep.



In bed Sal tossed so much he kept knocking his pillow on the floor. Bouncing around to get comfortable might rock Carmela to sleep. He wanted her to sleep.

He kept trying to get rid of his thoughts about Diane Pisani. She could take him off course. But the more he tried to shake away her image, the more it was etched in his brain.

His thoughts were not active. She wasn't doing nothing. Her face, in particular her eyes, he couldn't stop seeing.

He turned on the lights for a moment trying to destroy her, but every detail about her was still there. He didn't want to wake Car-

mela up, so he turned off the lights hoping that in the dark Diane would now disappear. But there she was, deeper than ever.

How furious he should be with her the way she told him off. He had intended to do that to her, was annoyed with himself for giving in to her so quick.

He was used to having his way. Didn't even have to snap his fingers, only had to look as though he wanted something and whoever was around would grant it to him.

But that woman turned it all around. How could he have said no to those eyes?

Her eyes wasn't the only thing. It was also her incredible ability to make him feel comfortable.

And what she said was right for Gina. He wanted Gina to be like Dr. Pisani...Diane Pinto. What was there about Diane Mary Pinto Pisani that made him, from a Sicilian culture that mistrusted red-heads, willing to trust this redhead with his daughter's, and even his own life?

Whether lying on his back, his stomach, or his side, with his eyes, bedroom lights open or closed, he couldn't rid himself of Diane's face. And only many hours later, after staring at her all night, it hit him.

He had never even noticed her breasts.

CHAPTER 21



Gina heard the telephone ring in the dorm at 8:20 in the morning.

The house director knocked on her door. "Telephone, Gina."

"Who is it?"

"Dr. Pisani."

Gina ran out of her room and was just about to pick up the phone when she stopped dead. Could it really be her parents pretending to be Dr. Pisani? She approached the phone cautiously, didn't touch it, then said to the house director, "Get a number where I can reach her, and I'll call her right back."

A few moments later she dialed the number. "Dr. Pisani, I'm sorry, I have to be careful. Thought it might be my parents making believe it was you."

"Gina, I want you to come to my office early, before classes begin."

Dr. Pisani's voice sounded stern.

"Sure, is anything wrong?"

"No, just come right over."

She put on some lipstick, picked up her books, and ran up the hill to Gill Hall.

Dr. Pisani didn't greet her, didn't smile, just remained poker-faced. "Your father came to see me yesterday afternoon." Her voice was flat.

Though Gina was worried, she tried to remain nonchalant. “Yeah, what did he want?”

“He’s concerned that he hasn’t heard from you.”

“And he’s not going to. I can never forgive him.”

Dr. Pisani spoke in a tone Gina had never heard from her before. “Who are you, young lady, not to forgive him? Who are you to sit in judgment of him? Whatever your father may be, he’s your father and he loves you.

“Look, Gina, we don’t get to pick our parents. Most of them do the best they can to bring us up, and they deserve our love. And whatever they do, you and I both learned in Catholic school, you’ve got to turn the other cheek. You can’t be a real Christian unless you can forgive. Not condone, forgive. Anything.”

Gina closed her eyes, put her hands on her temples, and massaged them to alleviate the pain from a severe headache. “You don’t know how down I am.”

“I know you’re thinking of yourself, not your father. But you can’t dwell on whatever your father was, is, or does. That will take away the creative energy that you need to deal with the present and the future, to propel yourself forward.

“My father always said that every knock is a boost. If you know how to take the knock, you come out stronger. And remember what President Nixon said the day he resigned. The true measure of a man is not how he behaves when things are going well for him but how he behaves when things are tough. And frankly, Gina, I think you’ve abandoned your parents. It’s not what I would’ve expected from you, and it reveals a side of you that really disappoints me.”

Dr. Pisani had hit two nerves. Gina remembered the word “abandon”, how horrified she was when she saw the seniors at the nursing home abandoned by their children. She recalled the promise she had made to Uncle Joey, never to abandon her parents. How naïve she was. But worse was that she had disappointed the one person who believed in her the most.

Silence passed between them.

Gina continued massaging her temples. Finally she said, "Okay, you're right, I'll call them."

"Good. I want you to do it now, before classes. You can call them from here. Use my phone, I'll leave." Dr. Pisani let out a little giggle, put her arm around Gina's shoulder. "By the way, your father said he thinks it's a great idea you're going to do research with me this summer. He's so proud of you and wanted me to tell you that he supports your efforts."

Gina's mouth hung open. She looked at Dr. Pisani without speaking.

"I even invited your parents to lunch when they bring you to my house so that they'll get an idea of where you'll be and how you'll be taken care of. It'll make them feel more confident that they made the right decision."

She didn't know whether to be angry or pleased. "Why did you wait until now to tell me such good news?"

"Because I wanted you to first make up your mind to reconcile with your parents because it's the right thing to do, not because they agreed to let you stay with me this summer."

There was a gleam in Dr. Pisani's eye, one that communicated victory.

"You know, Dr. Pisani, you're really something else."

Dr. Pisani winked at her. "I have to leave for my nine o'clock class."

As soon as Gina put her hand on the phone, Dr. Pisani picked up some of the material on her desk, and walked out of the office.



The morning after his meeting with Diane Pisani, though he was exhausted from lack of sleep, Sal contacted one of his lawyers. "Mario, do you want to go for a ride?" He knew that Mario would recognize the importance of the signal.

"Sure, Sal, your place or mine?"

"I'll pick you up at your office in about," he checked his watch, "forty minutes, depending on traffic."

He got into the Mercedes and dozed off after telling Bruno to drive to the Manhattan office of Nigro and Schwartz.

Bruno was shaking him. Sal was groggy, looked outside through slitted eyes, and realized they had arrived at their destination.

Mario Nigro was leaning in front of his office building when Bruno pulled up. Mario was tall, 6'2", but looked dwarfed against the towering concrete. He entered the back seat.

"You look good, Mario. That's a real stylish suit."

"I wish I could say the same for you." He shook Sal's hand. "You look shot!"

Bruno began to circle the block.

"Didn't get much sleep last night," Sal said.

"Are you okay?"

"Actually, I'll be much better if you get some information for me."

"When it comes to information, I'm your man."

"I know I can count on you, you were always smart. I didn't put you through law school for nothin'. I could probably get this information from somebody else but I want you, personally, to research it for me."

Mario took out a pad and pen. "Shoot."

Sal put his hand on the pad. "Maybe you'd better not write nothing down. Memorize, Mario, memorize."

Mario put the pad and pen back into his pocket.

Sal scratched his head. "I figure this happened about twenty-four or twenty-five years ago."

"Twenty-four or twenty-five years ago." Mario kept staring at him with a look that showed deep concentration. "That would make it 1953 or '54."

"You got it, somewhere in that time frame. Maybe even '55. You know, some time around there. There was a district attorney blown

up in a car with another lawyer named Pisani. You got that name? P-I-S-A-N-I. I don't know the other guy's name."

"I won't forget. Pisani."

"There's a rumor that someone connected to us may've iced them. You know the rules, you don't mess with D.A.s."

Mario looked straight ahead and slowly moved his head up and down as Sal described the chore. "I want you to get as much information on this job as you can. It'll be hard because that's all I got, but I know you'll find it. You get me everything on this job, and I mean everything."

"I'll get it to you as soon as possible. But you don't look so good, Sal, your eyes are sunken in. Make sure you get some rest, take it easy."

"There'll be no rest until you get this information for me. Just get to work, Mario, and call me as soon as you can."

By now Bruno had completed only one revolution around the block. They were back in front of Mario's office. Sal had accomplished what he came for, so he told Bruno to stop the car, and let Mario off.

Mario opened the car door. "Take care, Sal, you'll be hearing from me."



Two days later Sal received a phone call.

"Do you want to go for a ride?"

He knew who it was. "I'm finishing up some work here. How about I pick you up in an hour?"

"Good, see you then."

When him and Bruno arrived in front of the office building, Mario was standing by the curb holding a large Manila envelope. He got into the back seat.

"Here's everything there is on the case, copies of newspaper articles, police report, pictures, the works. Jesus Christ, Sal, I should've been an investigative reporter instead of a lawyer."

"Sometimes the two go hand in hand. Thanks, kid, now get back to work." He paused. "No, don't get back to work, take it easy." He gave him a pat on the back. "See you around."



When Sal got home, he went into his study, locked the door, opened the envelope, and spread the papers out on his desk. He examined the material, all the gory details, committing as much information as he could to memory.

In one of the newspaper clippings was a half-page picture of a group of people at the Pisani funeral. Diane, standing behind the coffin, supported by an older man. Sal's chest collapsed when he saw the suffering on her face.

Yet the bottom line was that there was so much destruction that there were no clues, no suspects, only a guess that it might be someone associated with organized crime who had a grudge against the D.A. All the people undergoing trial and those up for trial under this new DA were investigated.

He was determined to get to the bottom of it. He had a much better staff of detectives, much better paid than those in the police department, and he gave some consideration regarding who he might select to investigate further.

He cut out Diane's picture and hid it between two business cards in his wallet. Then with his paper cutter, he shredded the rest of the materials, including the envelope.



Renato Tucci got into the shiny black Lincoln. A big tub but a damn good ride. The thing really floated.

Armand Pugliese, one of Sal's capos, slapped his shoulders. "Renny, you got the reputation as the guy who can get any information."

"That's what they say."

Armand described the task in detail. "There's a pile of dough in it for you if you can find out who was involved in this murder, even if you come up with that the guy responsible is dead. I need proof, anything you can find."

"How much dough is a pile?"

"More than you ever seen."

"It may take some time, but it's been a lot of years since this thing, maybe I can't get nothing."

"No, Renny, you got this all wrong. There ain't no such word as can't when it comes to who needs to know. You *will* get it. It's real important, so get going. Now."

Renny got the message. A tough assignment. He roamed the possible local hangouts for days pulling out piles of hundred dollar bills, looking for anyone over forty who might've had any knowledge of the event, anything at all, even if it seemed minor. Their blank faces made it nerve-racking.

Almost two weeks later he got word that someone wanted to talk to him. The person didn't want to be identified, but could be contacted through a phone number.

When Renny made the call, a muted voice said, "This may not be nothing but there was this guy once, drunk as a skunk in Carey's Bar, you know, the one on Coney Island Avenue. He was so soused that I didn't pay no attention to him. Bragging about himself all night. But then when I heard that you wanted information, I remembered that this drunk said he helped a friend of his blow up a D.A. about ten years before. That would make it about twenty-five years ago. Are you there?"

"I'm here. Keep talking."

"Now I don't know whether he was bullshitting me or not. And he was so drunk that first I let it go over my head. But it's hard to forget someone blowing up a D.A. You don't hear that every day."

"Who was he?"

"I think his name was Rosso. A little twerp. Pock marks and zits on his face. Somebody called him 'Dumb Red', you know, for Rosso. He was so drunk he passed out on the floor. I remember that some guy he was with picked him up, slapped his face and said, 'Louie, I gotta get you home'. So it looks to me like his name may be Louie Rosso. Now who can remember fifteen years ago? But that's all I know, and even that's a little fuzzy."

"Well, this's been helpful. If it turns out to be something, there's a big reward for you. Can I reach you at this number?"

"Yeah, if I ain't there, just leave a message and I'll get back to you."

Renny folded the piece of paper with the phone number and put it in his pocket.



Louie Rosso had just replaced the Eldorado's last spark plug, when two well-dressed men came to the service department of Martino Cadillac in Bensonhurst. Some of the top brass in the neighborhood had a proposition for him, wanted to take him out for dinner to a fancy restaurant. What proposition did they have? And why him? Then, why not?

Louie started drooling, spat through his teeth. Too good to be a mechanic. Always wanted to be associated with the mob. He got all spiffed up for the occasion—sharkskin suit, silk tie, shined shoes. Even cleaned the grease out of his fingernails.

Two men introduced themselves as Renny and Armand. They brought him to Baldini's Restaurant, where the maitre d' escorted them to a table. As soon as they were seated, he promptly removed the 'Reserved' sign, replacing it with a bottle of wine.

During dinner Louie spent a lot of time looking in the mirror on the opposite wall. He raised one eyebrow, attempted a tough look followed by a cruel smile.

“Our sources told us some great things about you,” Renny said, “so good that there may be the possibility of a high-paying job in the organization. And we mean high-paying.”

“No shit.”

“We wouldn’t shit a guy like you.” Armand squished his cigarette into an ashtray. “All we need is some kind of assurance.”

“Yeah, what kind?”

“Some guarantee that you got the guts to pass the test,” Renny said. “That you’re tough. You know what I mean, Louie. We need guys with balls.” Then Renny poured him a third glass of chianti.

“Do I got guts? Am I tough?”

“You got to prove it if you want the job,” Armand said.

“I got the cred, creden, credentials all right. Now listen you two. Pay attention.” Louie extended his short arms and pushed both men by the backs of their necks closer to him. “You remember that crazy fuck, Frankie La Rocca?”

“Rings a bell, that name,” Renny said.

“He was a real wild kid. And I helped him blow up a car with not one, but two guys in it.” He held up and wiggled two fingers.

Armand gave him a slug on the shoulder. “Wow, if that’s true, you got balls all right.”

“Sure it’s true,” Louie said. “And I got big ones.” He opened his hands and held them opposite each other a foot apart. He checked the reflection of his hands in the mirror and added another six inches. “Real big balls.”

“Yeah, now I remember Frankie, Frankie Nine they used to call him,” Renny said. “Went out with a bang, losing his head while getting some.” They all laughed. “How the fuck did you ever get involved with him?”

"He loaned me the money for my car, a '53 Corvette. You know the car? The first one they ever made." Louie smacked his forehead. "Jesus Christ, I get a hard-on just thinking about that car. The broads, how they went for it."

"You had a Corvette?" Armand said.

"You bet, and I didn't have to pay back no money if I followed this guy for him. And I'm smart, I found out his every move. And got a bonus for helping Frankie blow up the car."

"Smart, Louie. But who was this guy?" Renny said.

"His name was...some mick name...uh....Foley, Finn, no Flynn, Tom Flynn, some guy Frankie hated. I don't know why but he had it in for him."

Armand kept running his fingers across his cheek. "But Louie, you said not one but two guys. Who was the other one?"

"I don't know. All I know is that he wasn't supposed to be in the car with Flynn."

"You're something, Louie," Renny said. "Not one but two guys. Real tough. Yeah, real tough."

"I told you I got the cred, credentials. So what do you think, am I a hit with you guys or what?"

"Wait till I tell the boss," Armand said. "When I report to him your credentials for the job he has in mind for you, believe me, you'll be such a hit."



Sal watched with intense interest the conversation behind the two-way mirror he had installed at Baldini's specifically for these types of occasions. A microphone hidden under the reserved table where unsuspecting guests were ushered added the audio to the visual.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle," he said to himself.

Frankie La Rocca.

Frankie Nine. The explosives maniac from the social club.

All the pieces fit.

And all of this for a '53 Corvette!

He left his front row seat as soon as he heard the name, Tom Flynn. The one killed with Michael Pisani.

After considering the matter for some time, he decided what would be proper justice.

And it wouldn't be served the usual way.



Two weeks later, Mark Levy, owner of Mark's Classic Cars, received a phone call from the man who had given him a deposit a few days earlier for the '53 Corvette on display in the lot. The guy was coming in the following day to make his final payment, sign all the papers, and pick up the red beauty.

Mark was so excited he couldn't sit still. He didn't want anything to go wrong with this sale. He had studied its history. The Corvette was finally twenty-five years old, a classic, the first of its kind, and one of only three hundred made.

There was a \$25,000 price tag on this cream puff. Restored to its original condition, he stood to make a good profit from the sale.

He had moved the car to a protected location under a canopy in the rear of the lot after receiving the deposit. It would be a good idea to drive the car into the shop for servicing and a final checkup.

He picked up the keys and headed for the car. As he got closer, he noticed a man sitting behind the wheel. Some fuckin' nerve. God-dam salesmen. How could they leave the door unlocked for just anyone to enter this red gem without supervision? None of the help was reliable any more.

He approached the car door.

The lock had been jimmied.

He turned the handle. "What the hell are you doing in...?"

As the door opened only halfway, the man fell out of the car, his popped eyes gaping at him all the way to the ground, the partially

decomposed body emitting a putrid odor that rushed through the entire lot. The reeking corpse was dressed in a white greasy jumpsuit with 'Louie' monogrammed in orange on the pocket, a thin wire tied tightly around his throat.

Mark rushed aside just in time to prevent himself from retching all over the car and the corpse. He ran into his office to call the police, his hope of ever completing the sale diffused with the foul smell that permeated the entire area.

But before he made the call, he first had to dash into the bathroom to throw up again.

CHAPTER 22



The Sunday after Marymount's graduation, Gina kissed Carmela goodbye and handed Bruno her suitcase before entering the Mercedes. Sal kept thinking how pleased he was Carmela had decided not to accompany them. Not that he'd expected her to, but if she had wanted to go, he would've found a reason for her to stay home.

He joined Gina in the car. As soon as Bruno closed the rear door, they set out for the Westchester suburbs.

Sal's skin was prickly. Driving Gina to Diane's house. Six and a half weeks since he last saw her. And all the time he couldn't get her out of his head.

He saw her crossing a busy street, had Bruno stop the car. Sal chased after her, tapped her shoulder. She turned around, gave him a dirty look. He tipped his hat and apologized to the woman. Then Diane Pisani was looking into a clothing store window. He eased himself next to her, looked at her reflection. Again, a different face.

He was almost relieved to think that when he saw her again, his infatuation would be gone, that he could return to his pre-Diane normal life. Besides, she was occupying so much of his thoughts, he was afraid he'd get careless. With the Racketeer-Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, RICO, which made belonging to a criminal organization a separate crime punishable by a long prison term, some of the mob could be tried.

He had to remain vigilant, overcompensate for the distraction Diane Pisani was on his thoughts and energy by working harder, strengthening his hold on and expanding his legitimate businesses.



The Mercedes pulled into Diane's driveway a little early. She was walking toward her house, jingling keys in her right hand.

The car had hardly stopped when Gina opened the door, ran out and waved to her. Sal deliberately remained in the car. He hid behind the dark windows so he could confirm that his impressions from their meeting were not accurate, that he could find some imperfections in her that would convince him how silly and childish he was.

He had it right.

His impressions of her were not accurate.

She was better than he remembered.

"I hope we're not too early," Gina said to Diane.

"Your timing's perfect, it's exactly noon. I just came back from Mass."

Bruno got out of the car. Diane quickly switched the keys to her left hand, and shook his hand. He then opened the rear door. Diane greeted Sal with a handshake, too. "Good to see you again, Mr. Esposito."

"Call me Sal."

"I will. After Gina graduates next year."

Diane led them inside through the front door.

He couldn't get over the inside of her house. Not particularly large but had an open feeling. Both the living and dining rooms had picture windows and sliding glass doors that opened to a terrace overlooking the river. In the corner of the living room stood an ebony grand piano with the gold decal, Baldwin.

The dining room was surrounded by books, the table in the center already set for five. "I was expecting Mrs. Esposito," Diane said, removing the extra place setting.

“She wasn’t up to it today.”

Diane looked disappointed. “Well, maybe before the summer’s over I’ll get to meet her.”

“She’d really like that.” He laughed to himself thinking about how carefully his wife tried to avoid meeting any of Gina’s professors, especially Dr. Pisani.

He didn’t say much while they were eating even though Diane directed some comments and questions to him as well as to Bruno. He was mostly listening to the conversation between Gina and Diane, so he forced himself to keep facing his food instead of his love.

When dessert was about to be served, he finally fixed his eyes on her. “This meal was really delicious.”

“Yeah, it was,” Bruno said. “I didn’t have that appetizer in a long time.”

Diane closed her eyes halfway and slowly kept moving her head right and left. “The first time I had mozzarella and sliced tomatoes was in Sorrento. Only there the mozzarella is made with buffalo milk, delectably rich and creamy.”

Sal smacked his lips. “You served this lunch, enough for a supper, with such elegance. But you shouldn’t of...shouldn’t have made so much food. You have so many leftovers.”

Diane looked straight at him. “I can’t stand going to parties where a small tray of food is expected to serve sixty people, and I’ve been to a lot of those parties. Maybe I overdo it the other way. I’m sure you’re familiar with the thinking. If you don’t have a lot of food left over, you’ll never know if your guests’ve been satisfied.”

“The leftovers will prove how satisfied we are. But if I knew you were going to go through all this trouble, I would of took...have taken us all to a restaurant.”

“That would’ve been nice but here it’s much less formal, more cozy.”

He couldn't help noticing how immaculate Diane's house was. Did she have help? If she was his wife, she'd never have to do housework. She'd be preserved just for him to look at.

He couldn't figure out how to diplomatically find a way to go upstairs. He wanted to see her bedroom, how it was decorated, where she slept.

He already knew what the room was like. Had seen it once in a Joan Crawford, or Bette Davis movie. The bed was on a platform and had a white satin tufted headboard and a plush comforter. Expensive perfumes lined up on a dressing table.

Maybe he might ask as an excuse to see the bedroom where his daughter was going to sleep. Nah. That would be too ballsy. His curiosity had to go unsatisfied. He didn't want to leave, ever, but didn't want to overstay his welcome.

Back to her bedroom. She had now donned a white satin nightgown and high-heeled slippers with no backs. She kicked off the slippers, got into bed and propped herself on one of the pillows, smiling, her hair covering her shoulders, her extended arms beckoning his embrace. He ran toward her and...

"Do you want another piece of cheesecake, Sal?" Bruno held out a plate.

If there was ever a time he would've considered putting out a contract on Bruno, this was it.

"No. At my age I have to watch my waistline, but you go ahead and have some more. Have a piece for me."

Diane served Bruno another helping.

Sal noted how amused Diane and Gina seemed as they watched Bruno savor the flavor and texture of his second piece of cheesecake, his tongue circling the teeth under his closed mouth, making his lips stick out.

It was then time to go. Sal's stomach dropped. Leaving his daughter for the summer. Leaving Diane for the summer.

He got up from the table, kissed Gina, assured her he'd call. He held Diane's hand firmly without shaking it, thanked her once again for her hospitality before leaving with Bruno.



Diane and Gina sat in the family room that evening planning the week's activities according to the procedure described in the grant. The beginning of June was a perfect time to implement the study, since at this time of the year, children were reviewing, not learning much new, just waiting with their teachers for the summer vacation. Diane and Gina would introduce new material to their experimental groups, and had a full two weeks to do it before testing achievement.

Each day Diane and Gina went to the library to enter data into the computer so that their work wouldn't pile up. In the evening they either ate out or cooked a light meal at home over which they discussed the day's events, sometimes over coffee well into the night, leaving them both red-eyed the next morning when the alarm kicked off.

Diane was continually impressed with Gina's industry and intelligence. Her competence was more than she could ever have expected.

On the weekends they performed routine household chores and planned time for relaxation. Diane, knowing that Michael's job would prevent him from coming home weekends, and that Gina didn't want to go home weekends, prepared pleasurable activities for her guest and herself for the remainder of the summer.

Their first Saturday together they shopped at the flea market, and in the evening attended a summer stock production of *Carousel*.



The research was going so well that at the end of the third week Diane and Gina decided to celebrate on a Friday night by preparing an unusual Italian meal. Gina took the initiative cooking her favorite

Sicilian pasta, one that Diane had never heard of—*pasta con sarde*, prepared with a sardine sauce, and usually reserved for Christmas eve when before Vatican II, the eating of meat was forbidden. Gina explained how the sauce was made. It contained raisins, the fine, green leaves of the fennel plant and *pignoli*, pine nuts, the offspring of the umbrella pine trees indigenous to the Mediterranean.

Pine nuts wasn't a condiment Diane ordinarily kept in the house, and was the one ingredient Gina had forgotten when they went shopping.

Leaving her gourmet cook to indulge in her pleasure, Diane walked to the supermarket to pick up the *pignoli*. She also wanted to surprise Gina by stopping at the local Italian pastry shop to buy her favorite—sponge cake saturated with rum and cream for dessert. Why not? They were disciplined all week. Now they could splurge a little on calories.



About five minutes after Dr. Pisani left, Gina heard what sounded like the garage door opening. Then she heard footsteps.

Strange.

Dr. Pisani had made a case for walking instead of driving to the supermarket to get a head start on using up calories before dinner. Besides, she couldn't be back so soon unless she had forgotten something.

Gina was busy stirring the pasta sauce with a large wooden spoon. But when she heard fiddling on the knob of the kitchen door leading to the garage, she held the spoon high in the air.

The door slowly opened and she was ready for an attack. A man's head came from the door first, but he had to retreat behind the door when she threw the spoon at him.

He poked his head in once again. "Who are you?"

"Who am I?" she screamed. "Who are you? Get out."

She ran to the phone.

The man entered. He was wearing a suit and tie and carried an attaché case.

"I'm looking for the mistress of the house."

"If you want to sell her something, you should try the doorbell." She began dialing the number taped to the phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling the police."

"Now you go right ahead and do that. But first give the mistress of the house a message."

"And what's that?" The number was already ringing.

"Just tell her that her son came home for the weekend."

"Tarrytown police department," a man's voice said.

Gina dropped the phone, and tried to catch her breath. As her fear disappeared, her breathing slowed. She had a chance to look at him, noted how he still looked like his baby picture, the one in Dr. Pisani's office. Actually, more like Dr. Pisani's husband's picture, but his eyes were unmistakably his mother's, as though she had taken hers out and screwed them into his sockets.

She patted her chest rapidly. "Sorry, but you scared me half to death."

"I didn't mean to do that. But now that you know who I am, I must ask if you're our new cook."

Finally, a giggle. "Sure I'm the cook and tonight you're in luck because I'm preparing an exotic meal from the islands."

He walked over to the pot, closed his eyes, and breathed the aroma deeply while wafting his hand the way a French chef might. "It smells great in here, a little fishy, but good, though I don't recognize the scent. Which islands are you talking about?"

"That great island of Sicily."

"Sicily! Well, when it comes to food I'm game for anything. Now if you'd be kind enough to show me to my room, I might just have enough time to shower and get ready for dinner."

"Maybe you'd like me to show you where the shower is, too?"

"I see besides being a cook, you're also a comic, a sarcastic one. But I've been away so long you might have to show me to the shower. How long till dinner?"

"Oh, take your time, I'll set another place. There's plenty of food, God forbid Italians don't make enough to feed the neighbors. Besides, your mother went to the supermarket to get something I have to brown before I can add it to the sauce. It'll then have to simmer at least another ten minutes."

"Now try not to call the police while I'm upstairs."

Gina grabbed a metal ladle this time, holding it as though she was standing at the mound, waiting for the pitcher to throw the ball. He covered his face with his attaché case before walking backwards up the stairs.



Diane entered the kitchen with two packages, one large, the other tiny, and placed them on the island. She opened the larger bag. "Surprise." She showed Gina the box from the pastry shop.

"One surprise deserves another." Gina opened her hand toward the table.

Diane looked at the extra place setting and for a brief moment feared it was Gina's father who was coming to dinner. But then she doubted whether Gina would've considered his presence a pleasant surprise, or would at least have asked before inviting him.

She pulled out the pine-nut jar from the smaller bag. "Is it someone from the college?" She handed the *pignoli* to Gina, who promptly measured a handful and spread them into a dry heated frying pan. They sizzled and jumped. Gina turned the nuts, using a spastic shake of the pot handle away from her then back again. Unbelievable. None of the *pignoli* fell out of the pot. As soon as they were toasted, she transferred them to the sauce and gently stirred the mixture.

"Guess again," Gina finally answered.

Diane noted that Gina had already placed the perciatelli in boiling water. "Well, whoever it is had better be here soon because any pasta with such big holes should be ready in about five minutes, maybe less."

"Not with this pasta. After it's cooked it has to be baked in the oven for ten minutes. Besides, your guest is already here." Gina stopped stirring for a moment and aimed the spoon toward the steps.

By the time Diane turned around Michael had just reached the bottom step. When she saw him, she ran to him. He opened his arms.

"I thought that you couldn't get away until the end of August."

"Do you think that I could bear to be away from my favorite mother until then?"

"Usually when you come home it's to see Maureen, but she won't be back from Europe until the end of August."

They continued hugging and then Diane moved him at arm's length. "You've lost weight."

"Then I've come to the right place." He cocked a brow at Gina. "Did you ever know an Italian mother who didn't think her son was too thin?"

Gina shook her head and smiled.

"So, I see that you two've met."

"After trying to have me arrested, we've sort of met. But why don't you formally introduce us?"

"Just give me a few seconds," Gina said. "I have to get this into the oven."

She sprinkled a mixture of breadcrumbs and Romano cheese on the drained pasta after immersing it with the special sauce she had made. Next she placed the baking dish in the pre-heated oven and set the timer. Gina scrubbed her hands and dried them with a Bounty towel she'd pulled off the roll. Then she approached them.

"Gina, this is Michael. Honey, this is Gina Esposito."

"Hi," Gina said.

"Hi." Michael paused. "And now will someone please tell me just who Gina Esposito is?"

"You must remember I told you one of my students would be working with me this summer and would be staying here because the dorms are being renovated."

"Well, has she been a good worker?"

"The best and she can cook, too."

"We'll find out and soon I hope. I'm starving."

"So what else is new?" Diane said. "Did you ever know an Italian-American male," she stopped momentarily, "or female for that matter who can go longer than a few days without a plate of pasta? If someone wants to make a fortune, he should invent a pasta injection for Italian-Americans away from home."

"When the timer rings you can test my culinary art," Gina said. "In the meantime, have a cocktail and relax."

Diane and Michael went into the living room, sat on two chairs that faced the couch. Gina brought them martinis, napkins, and coasters on a tray. She placed it on the coffee table, then left the room.



After dinner that evening the three of them took a long walk along Main Street, then Broadway, studying menus on restaurant doors, especially that new Portuguese restaurant, checking antique shop displays and the Steinbach's sales to make up for the calories they had consumed.

Through side glances Gina noted the occasional quick kiss, hug, or squeeze Michael gave his mother. She and her father had shared the same kind of affection. But that was before. Would she ever be able to feel affectionate towards him again? Couldn't even begin to think about their relationship until after graduation.



The next weekend Michael came home again.

Diane was pleasantly surprised. "Two weekends in a row? To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"It'll be three. Next weekend's the Fourth of July and Washington gets very crowded. I'm coming home for some peace."

He kept walking around the house.

"What are you looking for?"

"After living in such a small apartment with two other guys, I'm enjoying the space." Michael scratched his nose.

"Well, you must really be soaking it up. You've checked it three times already."

Michael opened the refrigerator, took out an orange juice container. He poured some juice into a tall glass and sat at the kitchen table. "It's so nice and quiet here. It's good to be alone with you."

"Did you find having Gina here an invasion of your privacy?"

"Not really. By the way, did she finally go home?"

"No, she hates going back to Brooklyn."

"She lives in Brooklyn? I don't think I've ever been there, except maybe once to go to the museum, but people tell me it's a terrible place."

"It's like every other place, has its good, and not so good parts."

"I guess so. But tell me, Mom, don't you enjoy having me all to yourself? Unless you've met some exciting man since I've been away."

"Not quite. And don't get too used to not sharing me with anyone else. Gina went to the library to pick up a book we sent for from another university. She'll be back shortly."

"Oh."



Michael was just about to approach the window when Gina rushed into the house. "Here it is, Dr. Pisani, the book we've been waiting for. I had a chance to look...Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was with you."

She put the book on the table, glanced at him, and looked off to the side. "Hi."

"Hi."

"My brat of a son is too squeezed," she hugged herself, "in his apartment so he came home to have some space."

He felt flustered to the point that his face was hot. "Come on, Mom, you know I came to see how you're doing."

"I'm fine, a little tired, but fine. Besides, I have good company." She slid herself into a kitchen chair.

"Is this young lady such good company that you don't miss me anymore?"

Gina sighed. "Nobody can replace you, Michael."

"I know." He kissed his mother's cheek.

"I'm glad you came home. We have tickets to a concert at SUNY Purchase this evening, and I'm too tired to go. Maybe you can go with Gina, if you don't have plans of your own."

"I can't leave you alone," Gina said. "If you don't go, I don't go." She stood behind his mother's chair and put her hands over her shoulders.

"That would be a waste," his mother protested. "And the seats are front row center, first balcony."

He moved his knuckles across his forehead. "I was planning on calling Martin Lansing this evening, do you remember him, my friend from Yale? He wants to get together, but I haven't called him yet. So if you're stuck with the tickets, I can contact him some other time. I don't mind taking Gina, what kind of concert is it?"

“Vivaldi’s Four Seasons, Mendelssohn’s Italian Symphony and I forgot the third selection.”

“The Overture to *The Sicilian Vespers*,” Gina said.

“Last week Sicilian pasta, and this week Sicilian vespers. What Sicilian surprise will you have for me next week, the Mafia?”

Gina’s head jerked and his mother quickly said, “A R-Russian surprise. Next week we have tickets for Lyndhurst. They always do the 1812 for the Fourth of July.”

“By next week you may not be feeling so tired,” Gina said, “so we can go to the concert. But I won’t leave you home alone tonight.”

“I’ve been living alone for six years now, ever since Michael went to college, one more night won’t kill me. I don’t need a babysitter, yet. Now this discussion is ridiculous, you both go to the concert, and tomorrow you can give me a complete report.”



In the middle of the second movement of the Mendelssohn, Gina flipped through the program, even though it was dark and she couldn’t read it. Michael’s hands, she noted, from the corner of her eye. Graceful, yet masculine. Piano hands her mother used to say. His right hand was resting on his knee, his right shoulder not quite touching hers. She put the program on her lap, placed her left hand on her knee, a few inches from his hand, and her feet straight on the floor. She was hardly breathing, remained still until the allegro of the third movement pulled her out of her trance.

After the concert Gina said, “Your mother tells me you played the cello in high school.”

“And in college, too. You probably didn’t notice, but I kept watching the cello section the whole evening.”

“I wish I’d learned to play a musical instrument. Never had time, besides I went to Catholic schools and the only music they had was chorus.” She put her right thumb on her left index finger, her left thumb on her right index finger, and kept alternating. I can still

remember it.” She sang, “The eencey-weencey spider crawled up the water spout,” then giggled. “I don’t even remember if those are the right words.”

He looked at her strangely. “What did you do for extracurricular activities?”

“Volunteer work. Tutoring and taking care of elderly patients in a nursing home.”

“How did you get involved with that?”

“The nuns, and my uncle.”

“I get the nun part but your uncle?”

“He’s a priest.”

“Oh, so you come from one of those religious families?”

She didn’t answer for some seconds. “I really love my uncle, he’s been so wonderful to me. I didn’t realize until I got older what a positive influence he’s had on my life.”

“Who else?”

“You might not believe this, but your mother. She’s my idol.”

“I wonder if any kid ever thinks of his parent as being someone else’s idol.” He circled his index finger over his cheek. “Come to think of it, I guess I take my mother for granted. She is pretty remarkable, she’ll be a tough act to follow.”

“Why don’t we pick up a pizza for her, one with vegetables? She’s on this vegetarian kick and is probably hungry by now since we had such as early supper so we could make the concert.”

“That’s a great idea. I could use a slice or two, or three or four myself.”



The evening of the Lyndhurst performance scheduled for the next Saturday, Michael removed the tickets, including the extra one his mother had purchased for him, from his wallet, and handed them to the collector. He carried a blanket under one arm and the picnic basket Gina had packed in the other, depositing both on the lawn

reserved for concert-goers who ate their suppers outdoors before the performance. Then he, his mother, and Gina wandered around the grounds of the estate.

"I'm going to go as far as I can toward the river," he said. "The Hudson's much more beautiful than the Charles, especially at this point."

"I've used up too much energy, had enough walking. I'll go back and set up supper," his mother said. "Gina, you live in the city, so join Michael in enjoying the suburban views."

He and Gina headed toward the river. "You know, I'm really happy that you're here with Mom. I'm glad she's not alone this summer."

"I'm really enjoying it. I'm going to miss her when I graduate."

"Lots of students keep in touch with her, I'm sure you will, too. What are your plans after you graduate?"

"I hope I'll find a teaching job and get into graduate school."

"Where do you want to teach?"

"This may sound crazy but I like working with disadvantaged kids. Most of them come from such devastating family backgrounds that it makes me feel good when I can give them some sense of family."

"I know what you mean. I was so lucky to have Phil and Joe as surrogate fathers that I'd like to give some sense of family to a boy, like me, who grew up without a father. Be a Big Brother to some kid."

"Who are Phil and Joe?"

"Oh, Joe used to be Chairman of the Teacher Education Department when my mother first came to Marymount. The kind of guy who could always find a moral in something. He died way before you came. And you must know Phil McGrew, he's still there, in the History Department."

"You mean Dr. McGrew, I never had him. But I had his wife, she really turned me on to literature."

"She did the same to me when I was a kid. Used to read to me and Maureen all the time."

"Maureen?"

"I'm sorry, throwing all these names at you. Maureen McGrew, her daughter, my girlfriend."

Gina turned away. "Oh."

"What literature did Dr. McGrew turn you on to?"

Gina looked at him again. "Believe it or not, Ulysses. Most of my friends couldn't get into it but I loved it from the beginning. The stream of consciousness."

"No kidding. Joyce is my favorite author."

"I noticed you have a collection of his works."

"So that's what you do when I'm not home, go through my room?"

"I would never go into your room, it's a very personal thing to go through somebody's room. But I must admit that after I passed it so many times, I stood at the doorway one day last week and looked around. Didn't go in mind you, but you can't help noticing the Joyce books. You seem to have given them a place of honor, set them apart above your desk."

He looked at his watch. "We'd better get going, my mother's probably set up supper by now."

Halfway back he said, "It's really a coincidence that Joyce's your favorite author, too."

"Yeah, that is a coincidence."



Gina was worried that there were so many people with blankets spread about the lawn that they wouldn't be able to find Dr. Pisani. When they did locate her, she was asleep, none of the food set up.

Gina put her finger over her lips. "Let her rest, she's been kind of tired lately. I'll get everything ready."

"It's unusual for her to be so listless. She'd better get a checkup, I'll hound her until she does."

Fifteen minutes before the performance, Gina arranged the napkins, plates, and eating utensils, then distributed the food. She gently ran her hand up and down Dr. Pisani's arm until she opened her eyes.

"Dr. Pisani, the concert's going to begin soon. Why don't you have something to eat before it starts?"

She slowly sat up, rubbed her eyes. "I apologize for falling asleep, it's not the company."

"It's the sun setting on the Hudson, and we couldn't wait to eat any longer," Michael said. "Besides, nobody can sleep through the *1812*."

"You didn't have to wait for me. I just felt so weak all of a sudden that I needed rest more than food."

"Well, I need more food than rest," he said, "so let's eat."



During the performance Michael sat on the blanket behind his mother and Gina. He looked at that pile of curly hair on Gina's head, the few tendrils hanging on her neck, and thought of those violet eyes. He remembered how she looked the first time he saw her, with the apron ties wrapped twice around her waist.

During the *1812* the fireworks kept going off and the cannons were firing over and over and over again.

That night when they'd all retired to their respective rooms, Michael's eyes remained glued to the wall that separated his bedroom from Gina's.



Gina was humming the theme from the *1812* when she went to her room. She heard the shower running in the bathroom and hoped

Michael would hurry so that she could take her shower and go to bed.

When she heard him return to his room, she waited a few minutes before entering the bathroom. She locked the door, removed her clothes. She took a shower, washed her hair, dried and powdered herself before putting on her nightgown and robe.

She plugged in the blow dryer, and opened the medicine cabinet to get her hairbrush and comb.

Michael's toiletries.

Dr. Pisani had crammed them on the top shelf to give her room on the other three.

Gina examined his bottles, moved her hand across them, pulled one out.

Aramis. She put the neck of the bottle near her nose. The way he smelled that evening when the breeze blew across the lawn during supper.

She opened the Aramis, turned it upside down, and placed a few drops on her neck.

Maureen McGrew slinked into her head. She had seen her several times, walking on campus with her mother.

Gina examined her face in the mirror. Her eyes were larger and bluer than Maureen's, her nose better shaped than the pug of the pretty, petite blonde. Why was she feeling such a flood of hatred for a girl she hardly knew?

She turned on the water in the sink full-blast, and scrubbed the Aramis off her neck.

CHAPTER 23



Diane's forty-sixth birthday was a little more than two months away. Although she was always advising others about having regular health checkups, she hadn't had one herself in over eight years. Since Grandma Angelina was now ninety-six and still in good shape, and her great grandmother, Massimina, had died at one hundred two, there was no need to worry. Besides, there was never enough time to go for an examination.

But now she seemed to be losing her energy. Helen Ferguson kept urging her to go to the doctor. Helen had recommended her own internist, Lawrence Cohen, as a fantastic doctor. Diane had yet to meet anyone whose physician wasn't the greatest, or who wasn't the head of some department in some hospital.

Since her symptoms didn't seem severe enough to warrant going to a specialist, an internist was probably just what she needed. Helen's opinion was good enough. Besides, Dr. Cohen was conveniently located in Tarrytown.

She made an appointment as early in the morning as possible. Wanted to be the doctor's first patient of the day so she wouldn't have one of those irritating ten o'clock appointments that actually materialized at noon.

On Monday of Columbus Day weekend, she showed up at Dr. Cohen's office at 8:00. After filling out a medical insurance form and

a comprehensive questionnaire regarding her medical history and personal data, the nurse ushered her into the doctor's office.

Dr. Cohen was a pleasant-looking man with a round face, a slightly receding hairline, and blue eyes framed in silver metal glasses that made him look intellectual. He was about in his late forties or early fifties, she guessed, old enough to have had enough experience and young enough, maybe, not to be burned out. He was studying her history when she entered the room wearing only a white hospital gown.

He looked up at her, greeted her, then sped his eyes back to the questionnaire. "You're forty-five years old."

She didn't know whether that was a question or a statement, so she didn't respond.

His eyes moved up again. Instead of signaling her to be seated, he rose, moved close to her and began the examination, looking first near her ear, then at the outline of her hair.

"It's truly remarkable," he said. You checked 'no' on your history to having had any kind of surgery. I would've been willing to wager that you had a face-lift. Patients conveniently forget that plastic surgery is still surgery when asked the question."

A facelift! She flinched. Maybe for Hollywood stars whose livelihood might depend on it. But undergoing unnecessary surgery? Why not grow old gracefully?

"My grandmother's approaching one hundred and her mother was over a hundred when she died. It's just good genes." She paused for a moment. "And clean living, I guess."

"The best formula." With his stethoscope he proceeded to conduct a thorough, routine examination. A line-up of other diagnostic instruments—ophthalmoscope, sphygmomanometer, hammer, tongue depressor were set aside on a nearby table. "Do you have any complaints?"

"Just that I'm tired a lot."

He scrutinized her fingernails. He pulled down her lower eyelids, moved them to the left and to the right, then released them.

She liked a man whose hands were immaculately clean.

He looked into her eyes again, longer, this time without his ophthalmoscope. "Are you ever short of breath?"

"Sometimes."

"Palpitations?"

"No."

"Fever?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"You're blood pressure's low, but that's not the main reason you're tired. You're anemic, just how anemic I'll know soon enough. That's what I see so far. I suspect that the anemia isn't serious, sometimes an iron, B12, or folic acid deficiency. Are you still menstruating?"

"Yes."

"Are your periods regular?"

"So far."

"Normal bleeding?"

"Yes."

"Any other kind of bleeding?"

"No."

"Have you changed your diet lately?"

"I've become a vegetarian."

"What made you do that?"

"One of my colleagues, she's a vegetarian."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Spare me from these self-appointed nutritionists. And my prescription, I'm conservative until I get the blood test results, is eating red meats several times a week, and be sure to remove all visible fat. When I get your blood count and hemoglobin, I'll know if further intervention is necessary."

He examined her eyes again. "I would also like to remind you that eight years is too long between physicals, especially as you get closer to fifty. You should come in once a year. It was this very type of

neglect that prevented early diagnosis of my wife's cancer, the wife of a physician and she refused to go for tests."

Diane was hesitant before she said, "Are you saying you didn't catch it in time?"

"Unfortunately not. She died within four months of the discovery of the disease."

She didn't want to ask what type of cancer. "I'm so sorry to hear that. It's especially sad to lose someone so young. But you'll be well heeded, Dr. Cohen. Once a year it'll be."

"Good. Did you have breakfast?"

"No, your nurse told me not to when I made the appointment."

"Then she'll be in to draw some blood. As soon as I get the CBC, I'll give you a call if everything isn't a hundred percent. And in the meantime, don't forget. Red meats."

"I hear you. Red meats. Thank you, Doctor." She got dressed and proceeded to the reception room to pay her bill.

Should she go home to have breakfast? The college was closed for Columbus Day. Better to have breakfast out. It would still be early enough to do some morning shopping, and be home before the shoppers attacked the stores for the holiday sales.

In the diner Diane thought about how perfunctory the interchange between her and the doctor was. She'd spent more time completing the eight-page-long questionnaire than in the examination.

Then what did she expect from a routine visit?



The following week the telephone rang in Diane's office.

"It's a Dr. Cohen," Laurie said.

Diane pressed the blinking button. "Hi, am I going to make it, or should I rush to prepare my will?"

He laughed. "The results of your blood tests confirmed my diagnosis. You are anemic. I'd also like to mention that your cholesterol is 235. While that's not too high, I'd like to see it below 200 so that

you can surpass your grandmothers' longevity. So avoid fats for the next few weeks—no egg yolks, no fatty meats, trim the fat off the red ones because I want you to continue eating them, no butter or cheese, then we'll recheck your cholesterol and hemoglobin which is just a little low."

"Will do. Everything else okay?"

He didn't answer her question for a long time. "Well, there is one more thing."

She suddenly got a queasy feeling as if his statement were a precursor of bad news.

"I noticed that you listed the opera as one of your interests. I have two tickets to the Met for *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* this Saturday night and I'm wondering if you'd like to join me."

He spoke so rapidly that she wasn't sure she heard him correctly. She waited for his words to sink in.

"Saturday night. Let me check my calendar."

She put him on hold. She already knew there was nothing scheduled for her on Saturday, but she needed to think about his invitation.

So he must've also noticed from her history that she was a widow. Suppose she had a boyfriend.

Wasn't it presumptuous of him to think she'd be free?

He was a widower.

She hardly knew him.

Had Helen Ferguson been at the matchmaking again?

But she loved the opera, and could use an opera fix, so what the hell? She released the hold button. "Saturday night'll be fine."

A pause. "Why don't we have dinner first?"

"Does it have to be low cholesterol?"

"Absolutely, I'll select the menu. I don't want to be responsible for giving you hardening of the arteries. Shall I pick you up at five? I don't want to rush that diet food we'll be eating."

She giggled. "Five'll be fine. Let me give you directions to my house."

"Not necessary, your address is on your form, I'm familiar with Tarrytown and know exactly where you are."

"Okay, see you Saturday at five. Thank you, goodbye."

"Goodbye."



Saturday night was one of those prematurely chilly October evenings. Diane made sure she was subtly made up with just enough foundation, rouge, and eyeliner. Didn't want to give him the wrong impression. She took out a black velvet sheath with a boat neck and long sleeves. She wore a single row of pearls around her neck and a matching pearl clasp, which tied her hair in a bun on top of her head. The necklace had a pair of earrings that came with it, but they were for pierced ears. She could have put on clipped earrings but they always gave her a headache. From the closet she removed her mink jacket. Maria Pisani's name was still monogrammed in the lining.

At exactly 5:00 the doorbell rang. Glad he was on time.

She opened the door.

She and Dr. Cohen shook hands, then she led him into the living room.

He looked as though he didn't know what to do with his eyes. They were darting about, avoiding hers.

She offered him a drink.

"Not while I'm driving, but thanks anyway."

She had prepared some *hors d'oeuvres*. He examined the lot, before selecting a cracker with cheese, decorated with a spot of caviar.

"I dabble in cooking," she said. "It's great therapy but I don't have time to do much of it."

He picked up a toothpick pierced to a meatball, and crunched it away. "If these *hors d'oeuvres* are any indication of your talents, you get an A+."

"Why, thank you. Actually, the last time I had a chance to do any cooking was this past summer when I had one of my students living with me. She'd cook special dishes on the weekends. I hate to admit it but she was a much better cook than I."

"I promise not to tell. But I think that we should be going, I want to make sure we get into that Lincoln Center parking lot."

She excused herself, went into the kitchen where she wrapped the rest of the *hors d'oeuvres* in Handiwrap, and made a space for them on one of the refrigerator racks.

When she went back into the living room, she handed Dr. Cohen the mink jacket. Would he notice that the name in the lining wasn't hers? He placed the jacket over her shoulders.

She punched in the alarm code and locked the door.

"Do you live alone?"

"Only when my son's not home, which he hasn't been too often the past several years."

He opened the door of a dark blue BMW for her. "What does he do?"

"He's a student, now in law school."

"Great, where?" He placed the key in the ignition.

"Harvard."

"Now if you were Jewish, you would've managed to interject that information into our conversation the first few sentences after we met."

Diane wasn't sure whether Dr. Cohen said that because he felt uncomfortable about her not being Jewish or because he wanted to disassociate himself with the behavior in the statement.

She smiled. "Now Dr. Cohen, do you think that Jews've cornered the market on bragging?"

"No, but when it comes to Ivy League schools, they're uncontrollable. The first question they ask you is what you do, then where you went to school. And please call me Larry."

She was uneasy with the trend of the conversation so she decided to keep the theme but change its thrust. "So, Doc, Larry, are you going to tell this inbred Catholic school girl who never attended an Ivy League school where you went to school?"

"Columbia, both the college and the medical school, P and S. I see you didn't read the diplomas on my wall."

The mere mention of Columbia brought Michael to her mind. He was hazier now after twenty-five years. But as she sat in the car with Larry Cohen, she tried to imagine how Michael would've looked had he reached Larry's age.

"My husband went to Columbia." Her comment could've implied the medical school so she quickly added, "The law school."

"Then you qualify to stay in this car." They both snickered.



Dinner was fabulous. Larry took her to a small French restaurant in White Plains where everything was made to order.

The waiter did look at her seemingly piqued when she ordered a broiled steak, medium rare, and requested a lean one, well trimmed, with no sauce.

He said, "But tonight, Madame, we have a specialty, sautéed weakfish with mushrooms bordelaise." He pinched his cheek with a twist.

She slid her eyes to Larry, then back to the waiter. "Sorry, Doctor's orders."

Larry nodded his approval while swirling his Campari snifter.

The dessert was enticing but too rich, so she settled for a fruit salad made of fresh, unsweetened, in-season fruits and watched Larry delight in a chocolate syrup-drenched, cream-filled crepe. "Definitely decadent. I'm observing you intently because I'm having

a vicarious thrill. By the way, Doc, what's your cholesterol? You're setting a bad example for your patient."

"Do as I say, not as I do."



At seven o'clock they drove down the West Side Highway to Lincoln Center. They were able to park the car quickly and make their way to their orchestra seats located a little forward of the parterre boxes.

During *Cavalleria* the harp made Diane's blood rush for her extremities. The Regina Coeli and the Allelujas brought her back to St. Ursula's. The melody of the Easter music, while joyful and bright, communicated the critical role religion played in the lives of these peasants.

At intermission time she and Larry got up to stretch their legs by meandering around the lobby where drinks were being served. They opted not to drink but to discuss the opera.

"I've been thinking about this all during the performance," Diane said, "I'd like to hear your opinion. Do you think that artists raised in the culture where the opera takes place can better convey its nuances?"

"I have to think about it, but my gut tells me if you study hard, you can probably do just as well. For example, Richard Tucker performed such an incredible Rhadames that Toscanini picked him for the first NBC telecast of *Aida*. And Tucker's brother-in-law, Jan Peerce, whose real name was Jacob Pincus Perelmuth, Toscanini selected to record, "The Hymn of the Nations." I don't have to tell you the Maestro was the perfectionist of perfectionists, wouldn't have chosen anyone whose Italian or interpretation weren't up to par."

Diane was impressed with the knowledge Larry exhibited about the opera and about music in general. He had seen many times before *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, almost always presented

together on account of their themes and short length, and was comparing interpretations.

He became so involved in the explanation that he stopped suddenly, looked at his watch. "I've been carried away, it's almost time for *Pagliacci*. Let's go."

They turned to go back to their seats and...

Gulp.

Did he always have such thick hair, a chin with a cleft? Twenty million people in the greater New York area, and she has to run into him! Their faces couldn't have been more than six inches apart. "Why, Mr. Esposito, I didn't know you were an opera buff."

He appeared just as shocked to see her. He was holding a cocktail, and had just spilled a little of it on his hand. The ubiquitous Bruno, standing next to him, ran to get a napkin. He came back quickly and kept looking around nervously, urging Mr. Esposito to get back to his seat.

"I was brought up on it," Mr. Esposito said, "get crazy when I go a week without it."

Imagine, a scuz like him devoted to the ultimate art form. "I could go every night myself."

He looked at Larry, then at her. "Are you going to introduce us?"

She was so stunned seeing him that she had momentarily forgotten her manners. There was a proper way to introduce them but she just wanted to get it over with. "Sorry. Mr. Esposito, Dr. Cohen. Dr. Cohen, Mr. Esposito."

The two shook hands, followed by a moment of silence.

Then Mr. Esposito, looking at her, began the conversation. "Are you two enjoying the performance?"

"Very much, and so is Dr. Cohen. And you?"

"The aria, 'Voi lo sapete,' was too slow for my taste, and, and to put it...euphemistically, the Intermezzo too choppy so it lost some of its dynamic quality. But *Cavalleria*'s my favorite. Even when it's

bad, it's good. *Cavalleria* shows the romantic, passionate nature of the Italian people."

Euphemistically? Where did he learn that word? "You're right, the music does capture our emotions and passions." Couldn't resist saying, "But unfortunately, the story also portrays our vendetta mentality."

She found herself stuck on the topic. "But then the plot took place many years ago, when people took the law into their own hands. We're more sophisticated now and much better at controlling vengeful behavior."

After she blurted that out, she regretted it. Why did she always have a hankering to give him a dig? Should've pushed her tongue into her upper teeth instead. "Where are you sitting?"

"In one of the boxes."

"Is your wife here? I'd love to meet her, I missed her the last two times I saw you."

"No, she isn't. She's not feeling good, an early season cold, maybe a virus, but nothing serious."

Whenever was it that his wife wasn't sick?

"Where are you sitting? Why don't you both join me in my box?"

"We wouldn't want to intrude on your privacy. We're in the orchestra, a few rows in front of the boxes. We'll wave to you when we get back."

No sooner did she finish the sentence when the gong rang signaling that the performance was about to continue. Perfect timing. "Well, we can't be late or they won't let us back in once the doors are closed. Enjoy *Pagliacci*." She nodded to Bruno. "You, too."

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Esposito." Larry proffered a hand.

Mr. Esposito was quick to grab it. "Same here."

"Give my regards to Mrs. Esposito," she said.

"I will."

They proceeded to their respective seats.

Neither she nor Larry spoke for a while. Then he said, "You have fascinating friends, Diane. Do you know who he is?"

"I do, but how do you know who he is?"

"I saw his picture once, in a magazine. Never forgot his face. Handsome. And it's rare you get a picture of them, they know how to avoid publicity. Putting the face together with the name tonight was easy. I'm surprised that you seem to know him so well."

"What is this, guilt by association? Don't you start generalizing that all Italian-Americans are connected to organized crime. God, I can't stand the man." She shivered. "He gives me the creeps."

"How did you get to know him?"

"His daughter's one of my students, a brilliant, fantastic person. Worked with me on a research project. In fact, she's the one I told you about, the one who outperformed me in cooking this summer. The girl's really going places, definitely doctoral material. And Esposito's a common Italian name, I had her as a student for a year and only found out just before last Christmas that she was *that* Esposito. Not that it would've made a difference. Everyone on campus knew who she was except me. I'm always the last to know any gossip, maybe I'm just naive."

They were back in their seats. She was trying to decide whether or not to acknowledge Mr. Esposito's presence. After mustering up the strength to smile, she turned around and located his box, smack in the center. He was seated alone with Bruno, and was already looking in her direction. Still smiling, she waved to him. He waved back, but didn't smile.

The house lights began to dim and the applause crescendoed as the conductor made his way to the podium and bowed to the audience.



As far as Sal was concerned, the opera was over. He didn't hear or see a second of *Pagliacci*. With his opera glasses he examined Diane

and Dr. Cohen, looking for any sign of closeness in their relationship.

Were they holding hands? Did he have his arm around her? Was he kissing her cheek, her ear, her neck?

How he wanted to descend from his boxed throne and sit next to her! Dr. Cohen would disappear, and he would take her home. He even knew where she lived.

Who was this doctor? A friend? Was Diane his patient? And if so, had he ever touched her? Was he ever married, divorced?

What was she doing going out with a Jew anyway?

This was the first time that Sal had seen her dressed up. She was magnificent, regal with that hair on top of her head. He wanted to take her up into his private box and watch many different operas together, especially *Madama Butterfly*. He would keep her hand pressed to his lips during the duet at the end of the first act as the teasing, titillating, tension created by Puccini's foreplay repeatedly draws in the listener and releases, draws in and releases, slowly building and building, exploding in a climax with cymbals crashing.

And he would hire for any amount of money, Luciano Pavarotti, that charismatic tenor who was becoming so popular now, to give a private concert. Sal would select the arias and Italian love songs.

Lots of Italian love songs.

He had picked up that quick spark of surprise in her eye when he said "euphemistically" and even if he had to give himself a pat on the back, he'd used it rather well. He had already mastered the dictionary through R. Imagine what would come to her eyes when he got through Z.

Diane entered his box and sat close to him. He kissed her shoulders, loosened her hair, kissed her hair. He held her, tightly, very tightly, so that she would pass through him. She was already absorbed into all his organs. No way of removing her from his brain.

The abrupt interruption of the music brought his attention back to the opera. He looked down at the stage. Pagliaccio, the clown, was

standing in a blood-stained white satin costume with black pom-poms going up the center of his chest. He dropped his blood-drenched knife to the floor, and announced to the audience the pathetic closing line, *La commedia è finita*.

The comedy is over.

The roll of the timpani throbbed the words into Sal's head.

The comedy is over.

The gold curtain covered the cast of characters. Two were dead, two others miserable—all the result of jealousy and revenge. The comedy was over. Nobody won.

Now that the performance had ended and the audience began to leave, Diane once again turned to the center parterre box where he was seated, and waved goodbye. He was still watching her as he returned the wave.

She began to approach the aisle. Dr. Cohen placed her jacket around her shoulders. Sal also raised his arms to put the fur over her. If she were his, he'd smother her in sable from her head to her feet. He remained in his chair, watching them disappear under the boxes.



Diane and Larry drove up the West Side Highway to Tarrytown deep in discussion about the evening's performance and other operas they enjoyed. Larry put on a tape of excerpts from the same operas they had seen that evening. They compared the two performances, the one on the tape far superior.

Damn it, Diane thought. Mr. Esposito was right. The Intermezzo they heard that evening wasn't as dynamic as the one on the tape.

She commented on how lack of exposure to quality made people satisfied with mediocrity. She didn't know whether they were blessed or cursed. They could enjoy much more but what they were able to enjoy wasn't great.

They remained silent, passed several exits.

Diane leaned back on the seat and closed her eyes. As they approached her house, she yawned, apologized, and removed the house keys from her purse.

"You must be tired."

She answered that she was and would ask him in for a cup of coffee or a nightcap except for the fact that she had to rise early to be present at Open House the next morning.

"I'll let myself out of the car."

When the car stopped in front of her house he said, "I'll wait until you get in."

"Thank you, Larry, I really enjoyed myself this evening. Please do me a favor. Don't drive away until you see a light in my bedroom." She pointed to the window.

"Sure."

She walked on the path to her door, unlocked it, turned off the alarm, relocked the door, and punched in the alarm code. She went directly upstairs and turned on her bedroom light.



Sal and Bruno drove back to Brooklyn. Sal felt a deep sense of gratitude to Toni La Marca for exposing him to the music Diane loved. He couldn't speak. Too busy thinking about what Dr. Cohen and Diane might be doing after the opera.

Did they go somewhere else before going home? Maybe to some candlelit restaurant where the doctor could stare into her eyes while he ran his finger up and down her cheek and over her slightly parted, perfectly-shaped lips. He felt like amputating Dr. Cohen's finger, his hand, his mouth, anything that dared approach her.

Or maybe they went directly to her house. Did he come in? Did they eat or did he take her immediately up to her bedroom with the platform bed and the white satin and lace canopy? Did they make love on that plush comforter? Did he stay over and sleep on that soft pillow? How long did they know each other? Did he love her? Of

course he did, the son-of-a-bitch, who wouldn't? More important, did she love him, plan on marrying him? How did they meet? Naturally she'd date a doctor, or some professional man.

He finally broke the heaviness of the silence. "Bruno, do you think that Carmela, if she was with us tonight, would've found Dr. Cohen attractive?"

Bruno paused. "What kind of question is that?" He then did something Sal had never seen him do before—turn around while driving and look directly at him. "I don't know about Carmela. But if I was a dame. Nah, I wouldn't of went for him."

"You know what's wrong with you, Bruno? You're a past participle problem. And you don't know the difference between a regular and an irregular verb."

"What the hell's wrong with you? What does a verb got to do with Dr. Cohen?"

"Ah, you're hopeless, Bruno." Then he asked another question whose answer he was sure would be in his favor. "Do you think I could of...could have been a doctor?"

Without hesitating Bruno said, "Boss, you could of been anything you wanted, anything in the whole world."

CHAPTER 24



Hordes of prospective students and their parents deluged the college for Open House, trampling over the grass, traipsing from building to building. Cars were parked, and double-parked in every nook of the campus.

The event was tiring, and Diane was already exhausted from going to bed much later than usual the night before. The Drinking Song, the chilling shriek of the woman who reported, “Turridu is murdered,” and the brisk melody of Nedda’s Bird Song played over and over in her head. How would she have interpreted the role of the passionate Nedda? She would have rearranged the staging so that from where Nedda and Silvio were sitting, just two steps high, after they kissed, he would’ve rolled on top of her after the duet, leaving both of them on the ground. Too many things to think about before she had been able to fall asleep.

During Open House the visitors asked the usual questions. Can I go abroad? To what countries? What are the advantages of going to a women’s college? Where’s the swimming pool? How will I know which dorm or roommate I’ll get? What kinds of jobs are available for history majors?

She, assisted by Gina, took many of the visitors on a tour of the Teacher Education Department facilities. Gina kept telling her how

dejected she felt because, as a senior, this was the last Open House in which she would be participating.

After the event was over, Diane returned home, and Gina went to the library.

Diane was surprised to find Michael in the house. "Hey, big guy, how come you have time to visit your mother, and on a Sunday?" She gave him a kiss, which he returned, adding a hug.

She took a few steps backward, looked him up and down. "Did you eat?"

He ignored her question, and said with excitement, if not a modicum of panic, "Mom, I have great news. There's a good chance I may be able to get a high-paying job in international law with Parker and Fortini when I graduate. The company recruiter came to campus this week and seemed to be very impressed with my background.

"The company does a lot of business in Milan, and they're looking for someone fluent in Italian. They're going to interview me again the first week of January, but this time the interview will be conducted in Italian. I haven't studied the language in over six years."

"It's not even the end of October and they're coming to recruit already?"

"This company comes early because they want to compete for the top ten percent of the graduating class."

"And of course being the child of your father and me, that includes you." She ruffled his hair. "Though it still doesn't tell me why you're home, you could've told me this with a phone call. Usually when you come around it's to see Maureen, but she's not here, either."

"I've come to get your tapes, the ones you used before we went to Italy."

"Michael, those tapes are okay for travelers, but I think you need something more sophisticated. Besides, don't tell me that Harvard of all places doesn't have the best language tapes in the country."

"I checked already, they're nothing special. But I remembered reading in the newspaper that a Marymount alumna was supposed to have donated an excellent set of language tapes to the library, the same woman who donated the language lab."

"You're right, I remember now. It's not that I don't want to see you, I don't like your having to drive all that distance to come home just for tapes. You should've called me and I would've sent them to you."

"I'm here now so I'll get them myself. Do you want to come with me?"

"No, I just came back from campus, and I'm really tired. In fact, I came home to take a nap. Here," she fumbled through the cards in her wallet, "take my library card and go yourself. Come to think of it, Gina's in the library now. She's fluent in Italian and has done a lot of tutoring. She'll be able to advise you which tapes are the best."

"All right, Mom, you take a rest. I'll be home later."

"What time do you have to leave?"

"I don't have any classes until three tomorrow, so I'll stay overnight, leave in the morning."

"Good, let's eat out tonight, I don't feel like cooking."

"Wow, you're getting spoiled not having me around to cook for. I have to do something about that."

She messed up his hair again. "Go on, you brat, get your tapes. Maybe you can convince Gina to help you with the grammar."



Harvard did have excellent language tapes, but Michael couldn't allow himself to admit why he'd come home all those weekends during the summer, or why he really came home to get the Marymount tapes until his mother mentioned Gina's name.

He combed his hair, brushed it, combed it again, dabbed Aramis on his face, and headed for the library, the same library where he and

Maureen had spent so much time together, hoping that Gina would still be there.

After searching three floors, he finally found her swiveling in a chair in front of a microfiche. He sneaked up behind her. "I'm impressed."

She spun around. "Do you make it a habit of scaring people whenever you come into a room?"

"Always. First impressions are important, I want to make sure no one ever forgets me."

"Trust me, Michael, you're unforgettable. What are you doing home?"

He tried to appear unfazed by her presence. "There's a chance I'll get a job I really want if I can learn to speak Italian well enough to pass my second interview with an international law firm in January."

"That doesn't give you much time. Let's see. It's October now." She counted on her fingers. "A little over two months, and I'm sure you have other things to prepare for, finals and everything. Do you know any Italian at all?"

"Three years. High school, and it was over six years ago. Marymount's supposed to have an outstanding collection of language tapes."

"We do," she said, "and I know where they are." Gina got up, aimed toward the direction of the language laboratory.

He began to follow, but then moved ahead of her. "And my mother said that you speak Italian well and might be able to help me?"

"Actually you need more conversation than grammar. And after what your mother's done for me, how could I refuse to help you? Even if she wasn't who she is and didn't mean so much to me, I'd help you anyway, especially if it means a job." She looked aside. "I even worry if I'm going to get a job when I graduate."

She undulated her way around him and resumed her walk to the language laboratory.

He followed but was thinking less of the tapes than he was about the cleft on her chin, those dimples, her huge violet eyes, the fragrant soap she always used, and that curly black hair framing porcelain skin. He couldn't help grinning as he recalled the bewildered expression on her face when he shocked her in the kitchen of his own home, and how intent she was about her cooking.

Gina stopped her march so abruptly that he almost knocked her over. She grabbed onto him, balanced herself, then looked at him. "These are the last words I will speak to you in English. You need total immersion in a language to really learn it. So from now on we speak in Italian only."

"Si", he said, "and that's as far as I can go."

"Now, for your first assignment."

"Holy cow, you really mean business."

"In Italian, please."

He had difficulty repeating in Italian what he had just said and repeated it in English with an Italian accent instead.

"I can see I have my work cut out for me," she said. "Now this is what I want you to do. You're to find a student at Harvard from Italy. Preferably Siena or Florence, to converse with you for an hour a day. This will make you hear the correct pronunciation and inflection from a native."

"Okay, Teach."



The following weekend Michael began his studies with Gina, interrupted by only a short dinner break. They always spoke Italian. Gina corrected him, made him repeat what she'd said. She selected more tapes, and reviewed the grammar to reinforce what he was hearing. He was already beginning to feel more confident about the language.

The weekend after that their dinner break was longer.

"It must've been wonderful being brought up by your mother. She's such a warm, loving person, yet she doesn't stand for any nonsense."

"You have a lot of her warmth, Gina."

"You think so?"

"Sometimes you try to make believe that you're colder than you are, but I can see through it."

"What else can you see through?"

"I'm not going to tell you. It's a secret. And since we're talking about my mother and secrets, let me tell you something, something my mother doesn't know."

Gina leaned toward him.

"You know, it's a funny thing," he said, "I'm sure you've had this experience, too. But do you know how sometimes someone says something to you and it just sticks?"

"Sure I do."

"When I was giving my mother a hard time, going through a stage where I wanted to hang around kids who had fathers, I got into trouble a couple of times, nothing really serious like drugs or anything, just breaking street lights and taking hub caps. She doesn't know about the hubcaps, and don't you tell her."

"I won't."

"Did it only once, and when I was standing there with this thing in my hand I said to myself, what am I going to do with this stupid thing? It dawned on me that my life seemed to be spinning around just like that hubcap, just as aimlessly. I was only doing what some other kids were doing, wanting to belong. And my mother happened to say something her grandmother had said to her, that when you go along with the crowd, you don't stand out."

"Then I realized, and I was only about thirteen, fourteen at the time, that if you wanted to belong to something, it might as well be to something smart. I wanted to stand out. And just being aware of this made me stop doing destructive things."

"That's very personal, Michael. I'm glad you shared it with me, it makes me feel special."

"You are."

"How special?"

"Very."

"You're pretty special yourself." She looked at him with hazy eyes.

He was uncomfortable with the silence suddenly between them. "But my mother, she was quite a challenge. I tried to outsmart her so many times, as they say, 'pull the wool over her eyes', but she was always way ahead of me. Especially now that I'm older, I realize how hard it must've been for her to bring me up alone, without my father. I think about him a lot. I wanted to have a father so badly. Gina, you don't know how lucky you are to have a father."



Gina placed a plastic smile on her face. Should she say anything? He was an open person like his mother, and she felt at ease with him. And he was special, she'd just admitted it, so why not?

She glanced to the side. "Maybe yes, and maybe no."

"What does that mean?"

"Just what it says, that some people would be better off without parents."

"How can you say that?"

"I never thought I could say that until just recently. In fact, I've never admitted that to anyone, not even to myself, until just now."

"I don't get what you're trying to say."

She could stop now, change the subject, make believe she was just being philosophical.

But she had to clear the blank expression from his face. "Did you ever hear of Salvatore Esposito?"

His eyes floated for a few seconds. "You mean, the head of the Mafia guy?"

"Exactly, the head of the Mafia guy. See, even you've heard of him."

"What about him?"

Fish or cut bait, the expression went. She was already in too deep. "Salvatore Esposito. Gina Esposito. Now do you get it?"

"I don't..." His eyes exploded. "He's related to you?"

"As related as you can get. He's my father, the one I could've done without. Your mother knows."

"She never mentioned it to me."

"She'd have no reason to." Her vision was becoming cloudy. "So...so maybe you'd like to find a new tutor"

"Gina, you're the best tutor."

"Even now that you know how infected I am? Make sure you don't come too close, you may catch the disease. And wash your hands when you leave."

"You said before you couldn't say what you just did till recently."

"I didn't know, had no idea he was the same Salvatore Esposito. If you knew him, you couldn't believe it, either. A girl who hated me, always tried to get me in trouble in elementary school, ended up in my sociology class at the college, gave a report on organized crime. She put a chart on the overhead. And described the organization of the crime families. When she mentioned Salvatore Esposito, and his only child, Eugenia, my real name, she kept staring at me, a really cynical stare. It was awful. Even the others caught on. If it weren't for your mother, I don't, I don't know what I would've done."

"What did she have to do with it?"

"The usual. She helped me see that I could only be responsible for myself, that I knew the difference between right and wrong. And she's right, but I'm still battling with who I am, who he is, and how to deal with it. The problem is, Michael, I love him so much...and it hurts." Her lower lip was quivering so badly she jammed her teeth into it.

Michael's eyes were probing her face. "Hearing something like that has to be hard to take."

"Worse than hearing he was dead. At first I tried to add two and two together hoping to get five, eleven, thirty, infinity. Then I felt betrayed, like he was a Judas, and I couldn't stop hearing the words from the gospel that it would've been better if Judas had never been born. And if I had never been born. And when I confronted my mother with it, she avoided answering me directly. It took several hours for me to call the one person I knew would tell me the truth."

"Who's that?"

"My uncle Joey, my uncle the priest I told you about."

"And what did he say?"

"In the beginning he was flustered, didn't answer me directly, either. But I knew two and two was four when he resorted to scripture. Love thy enemies, do good to those who persecute you, if Jesus can forgive anything, so can you, stuff that sounds beautiful in the abstract, but hard to swallow when it hits you."

"Joe O'Brien always said to me that the toughest thing in the world is to be a good Christian."

"And he was on target." Gina stood up and walked to the far end of the room, keeping her back toward Michael. "I'm not going to think about it any more until after graduation, when I'll have to go home and live with him again. Right now I have to finish my classes, student teach, and think about graduate school. But after graduation, that's when I'll decide how to handle it."

She turned around, almost smiling. "I feel better now, now that I've spoken about it. Easier than telling one of my classmates, though God knows what the people in that class are saying about me on campus."

"You'll feel even better after you've had something to eat. And don't worry about what people say, it doesn't matter one iota. Let's go eat now, we can talk about it some more."

"Sure you don't want a new tutor?"

“Positive.”



During their dinner break the subsequent weekend, a girl in one of Gina’s field practice classes approached her in the restaurant. “Hi, Mrs. Esposito.”

“Evelina, what are you doing here?”

“Having dinner with my mother and father.”

“It’s good to see you again.”

“Mrs. Esposito, we like when you come to our class. Can you be our teacher instead of Mrs. Atkins?”

“Now, Evelina, Mrs. Atkins is a wonderful teacher. She works very hard and you third graders learn a lot.”

“We learn more with you, and we have fun doing it. We love you, Mrs. Esposito.”

“Well, I love you all, too.”

“I miss you, when are you coming to our class again?”

“I promise I’ll come just before the Christmas vacation, and bring you all something special.”

“You promise?”

She raised her right hand, putting up only her index and middle fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“Whoopie, I’ll tell the class.” Evelina tipped her head toward Michael. “And you can bring your husband, too.”

“He’s not my...” She winked at him. “Okay, if he’s home when I come to your classroom, I’ll bring my husband, too.”

The little girl skipped back to her parents’ table.

“Why do kids always call their female teachers Mrs. even if they’re not married?” Michael said.

She had been watching Evelina returning to her family, but now turned to Michael. “Probably because it’s easier to say than Miss, when you say the whole name, that is. And why are you looking at me with that silly grin?”

"I find it amusing to see how crazy that kid is about you."

"Do you now? I can imagine how crazy Maureen would be if she knew Evelina thought you were my husband."

The silly grin was still on his face, and his eyes were never before so much like his mother's. "Maureen who?"

Gina's metabolism began to change. It took every ounce of energy to hide the smile she felt inside.

That evening she returned to her room in the dorm. She closed her eyes and pretended to be in her bedroom at Dr. Pisani's house.

She could still smell the Aramis hovering about the room.



During the Thanksgiving vacation Gina researched Parker and Fortini, constructed simulated questions Michael's interviewer might ask, and intelligent questions Michael could ask to demonstrate his knowledge of the company, as well as his fluency in the language.

But seated at the library table the last weekend before the Christmas vacation, knowing that there would be no more need to see each other after this final session together, the "What is the earnings goal of your company for this year?" became too much for Michael. With both hands he kept sweeping sideways the books and papers on the library table, scattering them in all directions until every paper reached the floor. He picked up his textbook, slammed it on the table. The built-up emotion of pretending to work in such a casual way week after week, sneaking looks, made him resort to his mother tongue. "Enough is enough."

"What's wrong?"

"God damn it, Gina, I'm going to miss you."

Her face began to glow in the time she waited to say, "I'm going to miss you, too. More than you know."

Her response gave him the encouragement to continue, this time more romantically. "I can't bear being away from you ever again. Gina. Gina, I love you."

Speaking quietly but with passion she said, "Please say it again. In Italian."

He moved closer to her. "*Gina. Io t'amo.*"

"I've fantasized about your saying that to me so many times that I don't believe I really heard you. Tell me once more, Michael."

"Gina, I love you. I think I've loved you ever since I saw you in that, in that silly apron. I can't endure going back to school next semester and not see you, or take a job where I have to travel to a foreign country unless I know you'll be with me. Gina, will you marry me?"

She paused, her violet eyes now a deep purple. "You're asking the daughter of a *mafioso*, the king of all of them, to marry you?"

"Your father could be Jack the Ripper or Attila the Hun. It wouldn't make a damn bit of difference in the way I feel about you. Now tell me you're going to marry me or I'm not letting you out of the library, going to lock you in here as my prisoner."

Gina took his hand and whispered, "*Si.*"

In the silence that followed, they stared at each other. He realized they were now actually engaged, but had never kissed. Michael pulled Gina out of her chair into the aisle between the bookshelves. He pinned her shoulders to the bookcase, looking at the huge eyes that communicated anticipation of his next impetuous move. He leaned toward her, placed kisses along the outline of each eyebrow. As his lips first touched her brow she closed her eyes leaving her lids next to receive his lips. His mouth wandered to each cheek, her ears, neck, and then to the cleft on her chin. From there he could see his final destination, her mouth trembling impatience for his. As he kissed her lips, he released her shoulders freeing her arms to encircle him, and his hands to move behind her back forcing it toward his

chest. He couldn't stop kissing her, as if he were trying to make up for all the weekends he hadn't so much as touched her.

After several minutes Gina gently pushed him away, took his hand, and kissed it before pressing it against her cheek. She looked up at him. "Michael, I think we'd better go."

Leaving was the last thing he wanted to do. "Maybe you're right."

They picked up the mess of papers strewn on the floor around the table, and holding hands free of books, left the library to go to dinner.



Michael could hardly wait to tell his mother. He knew what she thought of Gina and wanted to make his engagement a special surprise. He waited for his mother's birthday, December twentieth, and took her to a local restaurant for dinner, just the two of them.

Red Christmas stockings hooked on tiny-bulbed trees surrounded the fireplace in the main dining room. Logs were piled neatly in a corner. Different-size packages wrapped with metallic gold paper and green or red satin bows filled the space under the trees. There was probably nothing in the packages, but the illusion that they were filled lifted the spirit. The fire was ablaze, crackling away.

His mother was unusually quiet all through dinner. Finally, while eating her birthday cake she said, "Michael, I know you better than you think. Ever since you were a little boy, you'd get that I've-got-something-up-my-sleeve look in your eye, and I never knew what I was in for. You've had that look all evening, so what's on your mind?"

He smiled broadly. "I guess I could never hide anything from you, though God knows I tried often enough. I could never put anything over on you."

"Mothers can sense things."

"Well, Mom, were you able to sense that I'm in love?"

"I think I knew that ever since you and Maureen played house together, you were always so protective of her."

"But, Mom, it's not Maureen that I love."

His mother's eyebrows rushed upward.

"Sure we're good friends, and she'll always remain an important part of my life. But I don't love her in that way."

"Well, who then, someone you met at Harvard? Don't tell me I'm going to have yet another lawyer in the family."

"Not another lawyer, but another teacher, one who may some day end up a professor like you. Mom, now get ready for the best birthday surprise you'll ever have. It's Gina. I've already asked her to marry me and she's accepted."

"Gina!" Her face exuded horror.

Shockwaves.

His chest contracted, his smile collapsed. He couldn't understand her reaction. "I thought you'd be thrilled."

"Thrilled?" She flung her cake fork so that it skipped along the table and knocked over a bud vase watering a red carnation. "I'm. I, I don't know what I am. There isn't a word in the English language to describe what I am."

For the first time that evening he heard other restaurant patrons' knives and forks clattering.

"Michael, you don't know what you're saying or doing. Do you know who her father is?" She asked the question so loud that she looked startled by it.

"As a matter of fact I do. Salvatore Esposito." He didn't mention how derailed he himself had been by the information. "Gina told me, even suggested I get another tutor."

"Well, isn't she magnanimous! You can't be serious, marrying a girl with him as a father."

"I don't care about her father."

His mother clenched her fist, moved it toward him. "Well, you damn well had better care. Those people have a way of getting you involved in their shenanigans. You'd better reconsider this situation very, very carefully."

“It has nothing to do with me and Gina, and if it was so important, why didn’t you tell me about her father?”

“It wasn’t relevant then. Now, listen, Michael, this situation isn’t that simple. Think about it. You’re going into law. Before you know it, her father’ll try to get you to work around the law. He’ll probably buy you expensive gifts like a house or a car and expect favors in return like defending the criminals he associates with, or maybe even defending him. There’s no amount of money, fame, gifts or the like that could ever have any of us connected with them or their kind.”

The speed with which his mother was speaking made it hard for him to concentrate and keep up with her.

“And besides,” she continued, “there was a woman in my class in graduate school, her daughter became engaged to one of them. She warned her to think about what she was getting into. After a few months the girl got smart and decided to break the engagement, but she had to ask permission, can you imagine, permission, from the guy’s father. And do you know what he told her? He told her it would be all right if she broke up with his son as long as the word would be out that his son broke up with her! Can you believe that moronic sense of pride?”

“Your imagination’s running wild. Besides, no one will ever force me to do anything against my will, anything like what you mentioned. It’s not going to change my mind, and besides, I don’t need them or their help.”

“Michael, you’re seeing what you want to see.”

“So are you, Mom. Aren’t you the one who told me how wonderful Gina was?”

“She is, but not for you.”

“You told me that she was bright, sensitive, kind, and caring and those are the qualities I love in her.”

“Maureen has those same qualities.”

"How can you say that to me? You wouldn't marry Uncle Cyril, someone you didn't love. And I like Maureen, very much, but don't love her. I love Gina."

His mother's fuchsia face clashed with her hair. "And when did all this happen?"

"I hadn't realized it, but it happened the first time we met. And I will never love anyone else."

"Michael, you're young, too young, you just feel that way now. There'll be other girls you'll meet."

"No there won't."

"You only know her about, what, six months? Not long enough to make a life's commitment."

"How long did you know my father when you were engaged?"

She didn't argue on that point anymore.

She pushed the cup with her untouched coffee to the side, sprang up, said loud enough to interrupt everyone's conversation in the restaurant, "This discussion is over. Thank you for the best birthday surprise I could ever have."

He watched her storm into the coat checkroom, pull her coat off the hanger, after almost knocking over the startled-looking attendant, and stomp out of the restaurant.

He had never seen his mother this way, couldn't believe her reaction, especially toward Gina. What happened to the ebullient glee she was capable of when she was excited about something, like her reaction when he was accepted into Harvard Law, the tears of joy that came to her when she told him how proud his father would've been?

He couldn't understand it. All he knew was her attitude couldn't change his intentions toward Gina. His mother would get over it in time. Everything passed with time. And he would never tell Gina of this night. She wouldn't understand it, either.

The fire was losing its punch, it crackle. Needed more logs. He ordered an after-dinner cordial, and remained seated sipping the

drink, biting the rim, gazing into his mother's full coffee cup, and plate with her partially eaten birthday cake.

Salvatore Esposito.

What did anyone really know about him? There was Al Capone, reruns of "The Untouchables". What was real, and what was hype? Mafia jokes were rampant at Harvard, but just who and what was the Mafia? What did they have to do with Gina? She was so devoted to any cause she undertook, and she had mentioned how influential her uncle was on her. What did this all mean? All he knew was that Gina was his oxygen, he loved her so much. Could her father in some way cut it off?

Michael slowly looked around to see if anyone in the restaurant was watching him. An elderly lady two tables away, eating by herself, seemed to be reading his predicament. She looked as lonely as he felt. For a brief moment he considered joining her, but didn't. And he didn't care that she was still watching him as he removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes.



Diane had to get out of there in a hurry. She had a crushing headache when she arrived home, a combination of the wind stirring up her sinuses again, and the news she had just heard. She was so cold she almost regretted not drinking her coffee. Without removing her coat she raced up the steps straight to her bedroom, slammed the door, opened drawers and kicked them shut, then threw herself prostrate on the bed.

She thought of the first time she had met Salvatore Esposito back in April, and how that night she had covered her head with her pillow fearing what he might do or have done to her. She had no idea then that she would now resume the same position thinking about how detestable he was, especially, not under these circumstances.

Why didn't she take her own advice and not get too friendly with her students? Every time she didn't take her own advice she got into

trouble. What an idiot she was, a naïve idiot. She had actually set them up, never thinking in her wildest thoughts that with the relationship she assumed he had with Maureen, going to concerts with Gina, or having her tutor him could ever come to this. And why did it have to be this summer, of all summers, that the dorms had to renovated?

Why did she ever suggest that Gina stay with her in the first place? Couldn't the girl find someone else to fall in love with, someone from Brooklyn? And for God's sake why wasn't it enough that the mob had taken her husband, did they also have to take her son?

She had heard that parents were always disappointed in the spouses their children selected, understood it better now. Even understood Maria Pisani's statement that she would never be able to forgive Carla for marrying Steve.

What was she saying? Of course she could forgive Michael if he married Gina.

Maybe.

And she was even annoyed with herself for insinuating that Michael should marry Maureen, someone he said he didn't love 'in that way'. The same words she herself had expressed to Cyril. But to be linked in any way with organized crime, a stigma she always shunned and fought against!

The McGrews. What would she, what could she tell them?

She was beyond anger. It was rage that was blocking her tear ducts. This was worse than her husband's death because this situation was avoidable. Her son's decision was no accident; it was deliberate.

When Michael realized what the whole thing meant to her, he might change his mind. She closed her eyes, her face still under the pillow, hoping to shut off the world, a paralysis overtaking her body.

The sound of Michael climbing the steps started her circulation again. She recalled the times he had come home a little later than expected, and tried to get into his room without being noticed. This

time he didn't go directly to his room, but knocked on her door. Without waiting for her to ask him to enter, he walked into the room. Her light was off. She heard no movement and guessed he was waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark.

"How come you're still wearing your coat?" he said.

She didn't answer.

He put his face on her pillow and spoke with a muffled voice. "Mom, the last thing I ever wanted to do was upset you. I always wanted you to be proud of me, and show how I appreciated what you did for me, especially without Dad."

The name, Dad, triggered the tears she was unable to shed all night. All those years since he had been taken from her, but the hurt was still there.

"I really thought you'd be happy with my news. But it would really make me happy if you would give me, give us, your blessing."

She remained silent.

"Suppose that someone had asked you to give Dad up. Would you have been able to do it?"

The analogy infuriated her. She finally muttered under the pillow, "I did give him up, Michael, but I had no choice. The choice was made for me. You have a choice."

"Well, about that we can agree, I have a choice. And tomorrow I'm going to Brooklyn to ask Mr. Esposito for his daughter's hand in marriage. Will you please, please give me your blessing?"

She laughed. So incredibly pathetic it was amusing. Imagine anyone, her son no less, the flesh and blood of Diane and Michael Pisani, the great grandson of Angelina, deliberately choosing to join in any way with the likes of Sal Esposito. She continued laughing to relieve her pain.

Michael ambled out of the room.

She laughed and cried herself to sleep.



When Diane awoke in the morning, she was at first shocked to find herself still fully clothed. Then she recalled the shocking news.

She got out of bed, ran into Michael's room.

Not there.

Nowhere to be found.

His car was gone.

All she could think of was the incident with the toy gun and Michael, who had insisted it opened even when Joe O'Brien showed her it couldn't. And she remembered what she had told Michael. "If you know you're right, don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

She was then sure that before the day was over, her headstrong son would be on his way to Brooklyn.

CHAPTER 25



Michael tried to connect with every one of his brain cells to come up with the best way to deal with a touchy situation. He kept coming up empty. The only way he could handle it was to select the easiest of the difficult. And he had no idea what that would be. Plan it carefully, or play it by ear? Use the opportunity offered by some conversation that would come up? Whatever, he couldn't postpone it a second longer.

He drove part of the way, parked, then walked the rest of the block up the hill. Walking relieved tension better than a foot on the accelerator.

Good. No car in front of the house. They were probably all out Christmas shopping, but he'd ring the bell anyway.

He was relieved, about to turn away, when Maureen opened the door. The smell of apple pie leaked out of the kitchen.

"Michael, when did you get back?" She kissed him before shoving her head into his armpit.

He didn't answer at first. Then he said, "What difference does it make, I'm here now."

He didn't mean to have sounded so callous.

She pulled him into the living room, stood in front of a naked tree. "Want to help me decorate?" The spruce's scent he had always looked forward to, but today it made him queasy. Covering the floor

were boxes of multi-colored Christmas balls, tinsel, and lights with tiny bulbs, like the ones in the restaurant he had taken his mother to. "I want to have the tree ready so we can start putting the presents under it in the event there's a surprise for me in one of the boxes. I want...Michael, why are your hands behind your back? Are you hiding it, do you have it in your hand, or maybe in your pocket? You knew I'd be alone and wanted to surprise me, give it to me before my parents came home. I even baked an apple pie for the occasion." She ran behind him, separated his wrenching hands, felt frantically first the pockets of the coat he was still wearing, then his jacket, and pants.

Jesus Christ, this was going to be harder than he thought.

"Where are you hiding it? I told my friends I might be coming back for my last semester with a sparkler on my finger."

Finger. Hand. Things were getting out of hand. He had to put a stop to it. Immediately.

He put his arm around her shoulder. "Let's sit on the sofa, we have to talk."

She puffed up the cushions. "Oh, Michael, you're so romantic. I should've known you'd want to propose first."

"Look, Maureen. You have to believe me when I tell you this is the hardest day of my life."

"What's the matter, sweetheart, didn't you do well this semester, fail a test? You don't look happy."

"I'm not, about what I have to discuss." He should get up now, go home. He was sure he'd just come down with a fever. But he picked up her hand. "Maureen, last summer something totally unplanned happened to me."

She opened her mouth quickly, then closed it slowly. He wished he could have gotten a glimpse of himself in the mirror to see what changed her face from exuberant to calculatingly calm.

"You'll always be my special girl, Maureen. Nothing could ever change that, but last summer. Last summer I met a girl, and I fell in

love with her. We're going to be married." No saliva was left in his mouth.

Why was it taking her so long to say something? She didn't even remove her hand from his.

"May I ask who the girl is?" she eventually slurred without varying her inflection.

"I don't think you know her. She's a senior here. Gina Esposito."

She yanked her hand from his, and jumped off the sofa. "Bad enough to have been dumped, especially before Christmas, but to be dumped for that Mafia girl, that's the biggest insult."

He was extremely upset with her, but he shouldn't be. Hers was a knee-jerk response, yet, he still couldn't believe what came out of her mouth. He retorted by yelling, "Just what do you mean by that Mafia girl?"

She ran both hands through her hair. "A lot of people talk about it behind her back. People know her father is a, if not *the*, Mafia kingpin. And you're going to be in their family?" She covered her mouth and laughed, a weird laugh, first whiny and shrill, then boisterous. "What did her father do, give her a big dowry and you a big job?"

So this was the fury of a woman scorned. Her reaction was worse than his mother's. He wanted to strike the vicious little vixen, didn't recognize her anymore. She was always fair-skinned and blonde, but now, with the background of the dark blue spruce, she was so white, her hair so disheveled, she looked like an angel ornament that had fallen from the top of the tree, and smashed.

She put her hands over her face. "Oh, Michael, I'm sorry. I'm so crushed, feel like such a fool, I was so presumptuous, I always thought. I don't know what I'm saying. I can't even cry."

He knew what it was like to be in love, and he knew how it would feel to lose the person you loved.

He stood up, approached her where she stood, shriveled in front of the tree.

She collapsed in his arms. "Hold me, Michael." They hugged each other and he kissed the top of her head.

She spoke into his neck. "I always wanted you to be proud of me, and, and the way I just acted, I don't see how you could be."

"It was hard for you, even harder for me. I knew you'd be shocked, and I wanted to tell you as soon as I was sure. I was shocked, too, never expected things to happen this way, but they did. I never, never wanted to hurt you."

"It's okay, Michael. It's really not okay, but it's okay. You know what I mean?"

"I understand. I really understand. And I'll always love you."

She buried her mouth into his shoulder and mumbled, "I'll always love you, too."



Gina went home for the Christmas vacation. This was going to be a memorable holiday with so much to look forward to. First she had to tell her parents about Michael. He, in the true Italian tradition, would ask permission from her father before they could tell anyone else. There'd be an engagement party. Graduation would be here before anyone knew it. And then there was the wedding.

She ran upstairs to see her mother to tell her the good news. Mom was in her bedroom sitting on a chaise lounge, smoking. As usual, her cigarettes were ready to be camouflaged by the breath and room sprays and plastic bags she kept next to her in case Daddy came home.

But Gina was so distressed by her mother's appearance that she didn't mention anything about the engagement. Even though it was less than four weeks since she'd been home for Thanksgiving, that time was enough to have produced a drastic change in her mother. She was thinner and very pale. The circles under her eyes made their color such a dark blue that they seemed to be receding into her head.

She hugged her, deliberately avoided discussing her appearance. Had to discuss it first with her father. "Where's Daddy?"

"He went with Bruno to visit Toni La Marca's grave. They've both been so depressed since she died, gave them such a love of the opera, not that I ever liked it myself."

"I know she was like a second mother to them."

She just about completed the sentence when she heard her father enter the house. Gina rushed down the steps, jumped on him, giving hugs and kisses much the same way she did when she was a child.

"Daddy, I thought you'd never get home. I'm starving, let's eat."

"Don't they feed you in that college you go to?"

"Nothing like home cooking."

"Your mother prepared a special dinner for us tonight to celebrate your homecoming."

"We're going to have lots to celebrate." She was trying to be coy, raise his curiosity so he'd ask her what she was being coy about, but he didn't pick up on her comment.

She held on to his arm. "But Daddy, before Mom comes down, I want to ask you about her. She doesn't look good."

"What do you mean?"

"She looks..."

Her mother appeared at the head of the steps.

Her father looked up, seemed to be examining her for the first time. She slowly descended, holding on to the rail.

"Mom made some of your favorite dishes," he said.

Gina tried to appear excited about the food. She ran up the steps. "What did you make, Mom? Tell me, tell me. What did you make?" She slowly helped her down.

"It's a surprise."

"Tonight will be the night for surprises," Gina said. Neither of her parents reacted.

They were now at the foot of the steps. Only a few more steps to the kitchen.

The table was already set with decorative plates, silverware, tablecloth and napkins. In her seat sat the soft, cuddly Santa Clause she always took to bed with her on Christmas Eve. Just seeing the Santa made her smile. Reminded her of all the nights she hugged the Santa in anticipation of what he would bring her. It all seemed so long ago.

The smile on her face seemed to have brought a smile to her mother's. "I'm so happy when you're home."

Her father carefully assisted her mother into the chair when she approached the table.

Gina took her cue to serve when her father also sat down.

She uncovered the pots on the stove and baking dishes in the oven absorbing all the aromas. She placed a sampling of food on the three dishes. Some escarole, stuffed eggplant, fried veal cutlets, and potato croquettes. She brought the dishes to the table. She and her father began their meal.

Her mother hardly touched the food. "You know how you lose your appetite when you cook."

"I think it's those cigarettes, the ones you make believe you don't smoke no more...anymore, that make you lose your appetite, Carmela," her father said.

She didn't answer him but kept pushing her food around with her fork as though she was getting ready to pick it up at any moment.

"I just love the holidays, especially Christmas," Gina said. "It reminds me of the time I was a little girl and you'd both let me stay up late, until maybe three or four in the morning. I was so tired but I wouldn't give in. It made me feel so grown up to stay up that late."

Her mother had a distant smile. "Those were good days." She continued rearranging her food.

When it was time for coffee and dessert, Gina put on a pixie face.

It was about time her father finally picked up the signal.

"Okay, precious baby daughter, now that you're grown up and we don't have to tell you what time to go to bed no...anymore, tell us what's on your mind."

She held the Santa in her lap, wrapped her arms around it. “Oh, Mom and Daddy, I’m so happy, I have such great news.”

“Don’t tell me you have a job already, so that now you can support your old man.”

“No, not yet.”

Her mother had hardly spoken during dinner. But now she managed to say, “Well, what is it?”

Had Michael told his mother already? Whether he did or didn’t, it wouldn’t affect her announcement. She compressed the Santa. “I’m...I’m engaged.”

Her parents looked at each other.

“We had no idea you were even dating anyone,” her father said. “You never mentioned having a boyfriend.”

“We arranged to tell our parents on the same day. But don’t worry, Daddy. I haven’t told anyone else yet because tomorrow he’s coming to ask your permission.”

Between tears, her mother said, “My...only...baby. Engaged.”

Gina got up from the table, and also wept. She placed the Santa back on the chair and put her arms around her mother.

Her father picked up his espresso cup. “And just who is he?”

“His name is Michael Pisani. He’s Dr. Pisani’s son.”



Was his blood rushing for or leaving his brain? Sal’s head felt topsy-turvy. It took a while before he could straighten it out, and even then all he could think of doing was picking up a demitasse spoon, and stirring his coffee vigorously as if he had added sugar to it. Some of the coffee splattered onto his white shirt. He pressed his teeth over the lip of the cup, sipped some liquid, drank more with the spoon, dropped it back into the cup. He felt stimulated by the rich coffee aroma. Then he picked up the cup, and with both hands rolled it back and forth between his palms, the spoon clicking with each shift of direction. He was sure his blood pressure had shot to

over two hundred he was in such a sweat. He wiped his brow, and his shirt with a napkin.

Crazy situation. He'd be part of Diane's family. And she'd be part of his. They'd be close forever. What would she think about that? Was he good enough to handle that role? Could he speak well enough, intelligently enough? Would she like Carmela, do things with her that in-laws often did with each other? He couldn't see how. Diane and his wife had nothing in common.

He drank some more coffee, then began to cough.

Gina quickly ran to him. "Daddy, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He tapped his chest with his fist several times. "Just went down the wrong pipe."

He had remained silent about the subject too long. Had to give Gina some reaction. Right now he'd be the inquisitive prospective father-in-law, deciding whether or not to confer approval, as though there were any part of Diane that he could ever reject.

Time to interrupt the women's resumed crying. "Tell me about this young man, is he as smart or as good looking as your father?"

"Why, Daddy, you're jealous. And actually, he is smarter and better looking than you. He's graduating from Harvard Law School in June, and he may be getting a wonderful job as an international lawyer."

She made a fist, moved it up and down over him as if she was examining him with a magnifying glass. "He's taller than you, has light skin, wavy brown hair. You remember Dr. Pisani? His eyes are just like hers, definitely better looking than you."

Did he remember Dr. Pisani? What a joke! His eyes are like hers. I love him already. "And what does Dr. Pisani think of this relationship?"

"Michael's telling her tonight. We planned to tell our parents on the same night so no one would get the news sooner than the other, that way it would be fair." She broadened her smile. "I'm sure Dr.

Pisani'll be very happy about it. She's done so much for me, I know she really likes me."

He wasn't so sure Diane would be happy about this marriage. "Well, who wouldn't like you? But I'll let you know what I think when I meet this Michael Pisani. Is that what you said his name was?" Gina nodded and he recalled impressing the spelling of that name to Mario Nigro when he was to investigate the death of the boy's father. "And when will I have the honor of his presence?"

"Tomorrow. And don't you go break my heart by saying no. But you won't, you won't be able to resist him."

Michael could've been an orangutan and he would've approved. But then, how could Diane's son or any part of her be anything less than perfect? "I'll give you my opinion and I'll decide whether I say yes or no."

"If you love him, Gina," Carmela said, "then I love him."



Michael spread out the map and planned his route. A choice between the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and the Brooklyn Bridge. Better to take the bridge. After crossing it he'd pick up the Brooklyn-Queen Expressway to the Gowanus to Prospect Parkway. He swiveled the map. It looked as though Prospect Parkway became Ocean Parkway, which led right to Gina's house on Avenue U.

The ride was long and the trip gave him some time to go over recent events. So much had happened so quickly. For a man who was engaged, he had never been to his fiancé's house, didn't know exactly where she lived, nor had he ever met her parents.

While he drove from Westchester to Brooklyn, he considered his discussion, better put, his argument with his mother.

Maybe she was right. Meeting Mr. Esposito was suddenly a reality.

He got off the highway, drove onto a smaller thoroughfare. He found a space, parked the car, and rested his head on the steering wheel. How would Gina's father receive him? Being who Mr.

Esposito was, would he expect anything out of the ordinary from a son-in-law?

Michael lifted his head, looked at himself in the rear view mirror, practiced shaping his eyes to appear austere. Salvatore Esposito might be formidable but Michael Pisani would make it clear that he was his own man.

But what if they threatened him?

God, the Mafia.

They were capable of anything.

Maybe he should wait longer before getting engaged, go steady for a while, find another girl.

Impossible.

How could he even look at another woman knowing Gina was alive? He loved her, wanted her always to be there when he came home from anywhere.

But could they compel him to do things he didn't want to? Absolutely not. He'd tell them the truth, tell them off. He had strong male role models. Phil McGrew could tell Joe O'Brien off, Joe O'Brien could tell the pope off, and Michael Pisani, Jr.? He could tell the Mafia off.

And maybe it wouldn't come to that. Drawing conclusions before he had a chance to size up the situation.

He began driving again. Soon he was at the Brooklyn Bridge.

But as he approached the street where Gina lived, he became more and more apprehensive.

Was this all too fast?

Should he make a sharp turn, drive around the block, go home? He needed his father. They'd have a man-to-man chat. No, a serious talk.

Something kept propelling him forward, and if he had any doubts, they vanished when he rang the bell and Gina opened the door. All he had to do was look at her and he was ready, rock in hand, for Goliath.

Without even giving him so much as a peck on the cheek, she took his coat. "Daddy's expecting you." She led him to a wood-paneled room. He stood under the doorframe, watching her go up the steps. She had left him alone, abandoned, and...

Face to face with Mr. Esposito. Never got a clear picture of him from magazines. Usually had his face covered. Great hair for his age, not puny. Rich blue eyes. A highly visible cleft. Gina had picked up a lot of his good looks.



Sal remained behind his desk shuffling papers. When Michael moved toward him, he got out of his chair but didn't offer the young man a hand. He couldn't help recall how he felt during his first meeting with Carmine Caputo. Keeping his face deliberately expressionless, he took a long look at his prospective son-in-law.

The kid in the picture. His mother's incredible eyes.

Michael interrupted him by advancing a hand. "I'm Michael Pisani, Mr. Esposito. It's a pleasure to meet you." He spoke with confidence and Sal liked that.

He gripped Michael's hand. "It's good to meet you, too. Please sit down."

Michael sat down, crossed his legs, and Sal resumed his position at the desk. On the desk were pictures of Gina, and pictures of him and Gina but no pictures of Carmela.

"Tell me about yourself."

Michael kept direct eye contact. "I'm not quite sure what you want to know but I'm almost twenty-five years old, in excellent health, and will be graduating from law school in June. I live in Tarrytown with my mother, I believe you've met her. Diane Pisani?" He uncrossed his legs.

"I do remember her."

"I met Gina last summer when she was staying with my mother. We got to know each other even better in the fall when your daugh-

ter was kind enough to help me improve my Italian so I could pass a fluency interview for a job I'm applying for in international law." He crossed his legs again.

"Yes, Gina speaks Italian, the real Italian very well, not the dialect we all use." He was most impressed by this young man. Attractive. Articulate. Diane had done a good job bringing him up. But he wasn't surprised. What kinds of children would've resulted from a union between them? After all, he'd brought up a wonderful child himself, though Joey would always want to take credit for that.

This young man was so polished that Sal wondered what manners, what speech he would have had if he'd received Michael's education instead of the one recommended by Spar, the night he drove him home in the Packard.

The conversation resumed when Sal asked a question he already knew the answer to. "And what about your father? What does he do?"

Michael lowered his eyes. "Sir."

Sal felt good being addressed this way. No one he knew ever used that word.

"My father died before I was born. He died in an accident, I never knew him. But my mother's a very strong person and quite a remarkable woman. She managed to raise me, and I would like to think successfully, without a husband."

At this moment he was more than pleased he had turned Michael's father's assassin into a stench. "That must've been very difficult."

"It was, and only now that I'm older do I realize just how hard it was."

"Didn't she ever get married again?"

"There was one man in particular who wanted to marry my mother, my father's uncle, a very wealthy man."

"Why didn't she marry him?"

"My mother didn't love him."

“But it might’ve been easier for her.”

“She could never marry someone just for money.”

“Was there, is there anyone else who could have helped her?”

“Not that I know of.”

Michael stopped talking.

Sal allowed the silence hoping that Michael would continue talking about Diane. Had to know all he could about her.

Then Michael said, “You’re probably concerned that I come from a family that isn’t wealthy. But we’re proud, my mother and I, we can hold our heads high and say that we worked hard for everything we have. And whatever we have, we’ve acquired honestly.”

He was Diane’s son all right. She had taught him well.

“However,” Michael said, “if I get this job, and I think I have a good chance, I’ll begin with about \$40,000 a year.”

“And if you don’t?”

“I’m really not worried about it. There are other companies that’ll hire me. I’m in the top ten percent of my graduating class at an Ivy League school.”

Sal understood very well why his daughter loved this boy.

Michael moved forward in his chair. “Is there anything else you’d like to know about me?”

“Gina tells me that you two are engaged.”

“Not until you give your approval. Do you need time to consider it?”

He pursued what he was most interested in. “Have you discussed this matter with your mother?”

Michael began jerking in his chair. “Well, my, my mother was taken by surprise.” His eyes swept the room, and he cleared his throat. “She’ll have to get used to the idea that she’ll be losing her son. After all, she has no one else.”

What a tragedy. And that doctor at the opera? Maybe there was nothing to it.

He rose, signaling Michael to do the same. "Let's go inside and get something to eat."

When they reached the kitchen he said, "I have good hunches about people. I have a good hunch about you. I'd be proud to have you in my family. Now I'll call the girls down and tell them of my decision. Congratulations, son."

He embraced his future son-in-law. With his arms around Diane's flesh and blood, he felt he was embracing their son.

CHAPTER 26



Three days before Christmas Father Joseph Esposito had appointments to receive two visitors.

Sal was his first.

“It couldn’t be the holiday, Sal. You must be in trouble. That’s the only time you ever come to visit your poor old brother, and your only brother.” He put his arm around Sal’s shoulder, and walked him to a comfortable chair.

Joseph sat behind his heavily carved desk, the size of a dining room table, in a room with dark wood-paneling and heavy damask gold draperies. An emaciated, life-sized Christ hung on a cross behind the desk. On the sparkling glass-covered desktop rested a copy of the New Testament, encased in a black leather binder etched over with a large red cross. The fact that this document was the only item on the table allowed the cross to be most conspicuous.

Sal looked at the New Testament. “That reminds me of the night I took my oath of *omerta*. Only my cross was made with a gun and sword.”

“Big difference.” He noted the despondent look on Sal’s face. “So how’s my niece? I understand she’s going to conquer the world when she graduates, and I might add, I hope it’s not going to be your world.”

"Now you know that Gina's more like you and has no use for my world. She's doing extremely well on her own, and I'm very proud of her."

Sal was squirming his chair, scratching his face. "But I'm not here to discuss Gina, Joey, I'm here to discuss myself."

"Are you here to confess and repent? I recall you once told me you wanted to create a lot of joy in heaven."

"In a way you could say that I'm here to confess, but not in the way you think."

Joseph had never seen his brother look so disturbed. He hoped Sal didn't have word that someone had put out a contract on him. He leaned forward. "What's troubling you? What's the matter?"

Sal grabbed him by the arm and shook it. "Something has been eating away at me for months. You're the only one I can talk to."

Joseph had seen his brother in some difficult situations before, in front of grand juries, pursued by the FBI, but he had never looked so distraught. What diabolical act had he committed now?

Joseph scowled, and Sal continued. "I know what you're going to say, Joey, and maybe that's what I've got to hear. If anybody ever told me what I'm going to tell you, I'd say, what a hard-on. Sorry, Joey. What a...jerk, moron, this guy is. He's acting like some teenage jack-ass. You see, Joey, for the first time in my life...I'm in love."

Sal sank in his chair. His initially tight face seemed purged, relaxed.

Joseph stood up, moved toward him. "Need I remind you that you are a married man and the father of my niece?"

"I know what you're thinking and it's not like that. This woman don't even know I exist. Well, she knows I exist and I'm sure she knows who and what I am. But she don't, doesn't have a clue about the way I feel about her and what effect she's had on me. But Joey, ever since I met her, things haven't been the same. I've tried to forget about her, but the more I try, the worse it is. I'm working harder than ever trying to keep busy, but it hasn't done no...any good. I can't

stop thinking about her. I know I'm acting like a moron, but I can't help it. I'm even brushing up on my vocabulary, memorized the goddam dictionary, give me a test, bet I'll get a hundred percent. Reading books, listening to grammar tapes, really learning how to speak English. Me, Joey, speaking English. All of a sudden that's important. I'm going crazy, and you've got to help me."

"English! And just who is this unforgettable woman?"

"She's Gina's professor at the college. Her name is," he yanked at the knot in his tie and opened the top button of his shirt, "Dr. Diane Pisani."

Why did that name sound familiar?

"Wait a minute. Isn't she the woman you called me about, the one you wanted to have fired?"

"She's the one all right. And every time I think about what I wanted to do to her, I want to...I want to punch myself right in the head." He mimicked the gesture.

Joseph dragged his chair next to Sal's and sat down. For a while he didn't speak. He closed his eyes, his left arm across his waist, his right hand holding his forehead. Finally, he turned toward his brother.

"People come to me all the time and tell me they're in love. Many times they wish they could get out of it because they know the relationship is destructive. But they can't help the way they feel. I can't tell them they have to stop the relationship because, if they could, and many of them want to, they wouldn't have come to me. They come to me for comfort, for understanding, maybe for approval. But in your case, especially since you're married, I must tell you to avoid seeing this woman. Maybe in time your feeling for her will diminish."

"That's not going to be easy, Joey, because another reason I came to see you today is to tell you that Gina's going to be married."

Joseph slid to the edge of the chair. "Married!"

"To her son. Gina insisted on telling you herself, but I told her I wanted the honor. Of course she doesn't know why, or how much I needed to discuss this situation with you."

Joseph closed his eyes, held his forehead again. "Let me see if I've heard this correctly. Gina, my niece, is going to marry the son of a woman you, my married brother, are in love with. And how does her husband figure in this?"

"She's a widow."

"How convenient."

"No, it's not convenient at all. You see, her husband was killed by a real low-life, an explosives nut the family used once in a while, and his stooge."

"So he's a low-life and you're royalty. Your hands are clean because you didn't pull the trigger. But good sweet Jesus, when does it end?"

"That was twenty-five years ago and I wasn't in control then. And let's set the record straight. It wasn't a gun, it was a bomb. Under his car. The low-life acted on his own, not with our backing. But it wasn't meant for her husband, just his friend."

"*Just* his friend?" Joseph smacked his forehead.

"Her husband wasn't supposed to be there. But I took care of the creep."

Was there any hope for this unconscionable bastard? Their mother was probably still not at peace on account of his not being able to fulfill the second promise he had made her on her deathbed. "You took care of the creep?" Joseph pushed down on the arms of the chair and stood up again. He realized how loud he had spoken so he whispered. "You took care of it. The great Sal Esposito has played God once again and has dispensed justice."

"I considered it a gift for her, for having to bring up her son without a father."

"Did it ever occur to you that you might've also made a widow out of the man you took care of, who might also be raising a son without a father?"

“A father like him the kid wouldn’t need, he was a crazy scum bag. Besides he wasn’t married, and I only had it done a couple of months ago.”

“And you, Sal, what are you?”

A long silence followed while Sal seemed to ponder the answer to this question.

“Did you ever stop to consider that this Dr. Pisano might not appreciate what you did for her?”

“Dr. Pisani,” he said emphasizing the ‘i’, “doesn’t know I took care of her husband’s killer.” At first Sal whimpered, then he moaned, and finally sobbed. His hand was shaking when he reached for his handkerchief. When Joseph looked at him, an old army expression came to him, one he picked up in northern Italy, near the Alps, before he was reassigned to Sicily. Sal’s eyes looked like two piss holes in a snow bank.

Joseph took his brother’s shoulders, then stroked them. “Look, Sal, you’ve come to me today with a lot of surprising information. Right now it’s too much for me to absorb. I want to think about it calmly, reflect on all the ramifications, and I’ll call you if I come up with something. There’s no use in letting two hotheads like us run away with our emotions. Give me some time, Sal, please, give me time.”

Sal nodded. “Call me, Joey. Call me.”

“You know I will. I’ve always been here for you. Besides, I’ll see you Monday for Christmas dinner.”



After watching Sal drive off in the Mercedes, Joseph left the rectory and went into the church. The usual number of people were there, randomly sitting in pews, praying. Some parishioners were lighting votive candles, or kneeling, heads bent, before statues. The aroma of Christmas yews stacked on the side of the altar almost raised his spirit.

Joseph sat in the last pew and prayed. "Dear God, please inspire me how to help my brother out of this situation. He didn't seem to have looked for this relationship in this case. Just a fluke. Help me reach him so there will be a way for him to compensate for his sins before it's too late, carry his cross, mend his ways, so that our mother, no, all of us can rest in peace."

He sat a few minutes before getting up. After he took a few steps, he stopped. A rush of pity went through him. He returned to the last pew.

This time he didn't sit, but dropped on his knees as he thought of Carmela. Didn't he hear Sal say, "...for the first time in my life, I'm in love?" What about Carmela? He'd suspected it all along but didn't want to believe it. Sal never loved Carmela. It was Carmine he loved, Carmine's power.

Joseph wept, then prayed for Carmela. He prayed very hard for Carmela.

The events of the day had drained him of energy. He was hungry. God only knew what the rest of the day would have in store for him.

He went back to the rectory for some lunch. All the other priests were out, busy with Christmas activities, so he ate alone, grateful for the solitude.



Joseph had just pulled out a book from a shelf in the small library at the rear of the rectory when his secretary, Mrs. Gillespie, called. "It's two o'clock and your next appointment has arrived, Father Joseph."

"Thank you, I'll be right there." He returned the book he had removed to its proper place and made his way into the reception room.

Dr. Pisani was sitting in the same chair Sal had occupied several hours before.

She rose when he entered, and when he looked at her, he had to give his brother a lot of credit, if for nothing else, superior taste. The woman was magnificent. What would've happened to Sal if he had met her sooner, before he had made his pact with the devil?

"Dr. Pisani, I'm Father Joseph." He pointed to the chair. She sat down again. "What can I do for you?"

"First of all, thank you for taking the time to see me."

He asked a question to ease her into the conversation. "Have we met before?"

"No, we haven't, but I'm not a stranger to your family. Your niece is a student of mine, one of the best I've ever had."

"Oh, we're all pleased with that girl. I'm sure that she's going to be something someday."

"Gina's spoken about you so often. She feels you've been an enormous influence on her life. That's why I came here today, Father Joseph. You see, what Gina's going to be is Mrs. Michael Pisani. She's going to marry my son."

"Congratulations, you must be very happy."

"On the contrary, I'm not happy about it at all. In fact I'm miserable." Dr. Pisani gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, I apologize, didn't mean to insult you. Gina's truly an incredible person. I've known her for several years now, and have watched her develop into a terrific young lady. But when I think of my son having anything to do with your brother, it upsets me to no end."

She stood up, walked to the window, moved the drapes over, and looked outside.

So much for reciprocal affection. "What does this have to do with my bro...?"

She turned around abruptly. "Father, let's not play games. You and I both know that he is the biggest mobster in the country, and he's going to be my son's father-in-law! I can't believe it, and I can't accept it."

"I'm ripping apart because I really love Gina. But I took such care raising my son so he would have the best. And Gina's family...present company excepted, is not the best. I could accept my son's marrying into a poor family, an uneducated family. Anything but a crime family." She pressed her lips together.

"Dr. Pisani. May I call you by your first name?"

"Of course, please do, it's Diane?"

"Diane, the last thing I want to do is defend my brother. You can see by the choice I have made," he swept his hand down his cassock, "what I think of his lifestyle. But he always wanted to do right by Gina. He would never do anything to harm her, and I'm sure never do anything to harm your son."

"Father, my son is graduating from law school. Suppose that your brother tries to encourage him to get involved in the organization."

"That will never happen unless your son wants it."

She looked indignant.

"And if you've raised your son the way I'm sure you have, he will have nothing to do with Sal. Now you're an intelligent woman and I'm sure that you've thought this situation through very carefully. You know that each person can only be responsible for his own behavior.

"You must also know that Gina could never have anything to do with her father's business, nor would she tolerate her husband's having anything to do with it. She's not a passive girl but one with definite opinions, extremely independent. I like to think that she's more like what my daughter might've been than Sal's. I have the feeling that you know this and that this is not the real reason you came to see me. Something else is bothering you."

Joseph waited for a moment. Then he said, "I suspect that your reaction to this marriage has more to do with your ego than it has to do with Gina, your son, or even Sal."

At first she appeared shocked. Slowly she took her seat again, placed her elbows on her knees, and held her chin in the palms of her hands.

After many seconds, she looked up at him with the most awesome eyes he had ever seen. "You're right, Father, I'm thinking about myself. I like to think that I'm concerned with my son, and believe me, I am. But this time I'm also thinking of me. I'm thinking how humiliated I'll be when the media make a circus out of this wedding and everyone will know that Diane Pisani's son is marrying a Mafia princess. They have their way of conjuring up headlines and captions. I can see the captions under the newspaper pictures of me and the Espositos already. Something like 'The Don and the Doc' or 'Diane and the Don'. What'll my friends and relatives say? Many of them will bask in it. They think I have too much already, and have to be knocked down a few pegs."

"What difference does it make what people say? Do you know what you'll say, Diane? You'll say, 'The hell with them.'"

Diane's eyes went from him to the crucifix behind his desk, then back to him. As they looked at each other, smiles matured to laughter.

He took her hand. "All you have to focus on is this. Two outstanding young people are in love. They're good people and will have a good life, making the right choices for themselves. And I promise you this. Sal and his kind will not influence their lives. And to give you my imprimatur on this promise, I will perform the ceremony myself."

"You're a tease, Uncle Joey." For the first time she appeared relaxed as she heard Gina's name for him slip out. "I knew all the while you were going to marry them. Who else would they want to do it?"

"To tell you the truth, I like performing the ceremonies but I really don't enjoy attending wedding receptions very much. I always end up sitting alone at the dais for a greater part of the time, or with some old maid or widowed aunt who can't stop talking."

"I promise you, give you my word, that if I see you sitting alone or with anyone who's bending your ear, I'll come up to the dais and sit with you. I know that this marriage is a *fait accompli*. It still doesn't please me, and it'll take a miracle for me to get over it, I have to be honest with you about that, but I'm not going to put any obstacles in the way. Young people have enough adjustments to make in their marriage without interfering in-laws, and I hope that goes for your sweetheart of a brother, too. If only I didn't have to see that man through all of this." She took a deep breath, exhaled so loud it came out as a grunt.

"Don't worry about Sal, I'll take care of him. Believe it or not, he listens to me about some things, and this will be one of them."

"I may be needing you more than Mr. Esposito does, to help me through this."

How wrong she was. His brother would need more help than she could ever have imagined. "Please feel free to call me or even visit me any time. It was a pleasure for me to have met you. I'm proud that my niece's going to marry your son, I know now why your son loves her. It's that she's so much like his mother. And if he's anything like his mother, Gina's made an outstanding choice, too."

"I wish I was worthy of your kind words. But I feel quite foolish about my behavior today."

"I wouldn't worry about that. Everyone is human."



Diane drove home feeling somewhat better but not at all convinced, grateful that the ride was a long one because she was thinking out loud the whole trip, hoping that no one was looking into her car to see her speaking to an empty passenger seat. Rambling her thoughts audibly helped clarify many of her feelings.

She thought of Father Joseph's remark about her ego. Time to eat some humble pie. The plaque on her office wall came to mind. "Know thyself." Amusing, she'd always thought she did know herself

but now discovered that she didn't know herself as well as she thought. After all, she was great at advising her students. "The true measure of what you are comes when things are not going well." Made this comment to Gina when she was distraught about her parents. Now things weren't going well for her, and she was behaving like a spoiled child.

And to think she'd suggested that Michael marry Maureen, someone he didn't love, because it was more convenient for her.

"Who are you to judge your father?" she'd remembered asking Gina. It was easier to say that when Sal Esposito was someone else's father, not her son's father-in-law.

And why should she care about what people said about the marriage? How many people would be jealous of Michael, thinking that his marrying into the Esposito family was a real coup? Imbeciles! Money, especially illegitimate money, could never give anyone class.

What was wrong with this car? The heat was on high with the fan at full speed and she was freezing.

The wedding had to be a circus. Maybe she'd be sick for the wedding. How could she even think of doing that to her son?

Where was her husband? What would he have thought of his son's marrying Carmine Caputo's granddaughter?

Whatever, she'd show everyone what she was really like. Measure up to the occasion, with dignity and style.

She felt weak, couldn't wait to go home, go to bed.

But first she had to take care of another matter. On the way home she had to stop at the bank. Open till six. She sat in her car a long time in front of the bank before getting the strength to enter.



By the time she arrived home, it was already dark, and fatigue was creeping over her.

Light was coming from under the door to Michael's room. They hadn't spoken in two days. Until now there was never a time they hadn't spoken to each other.

She went directly to her bedroom, closed the door. She sat on the bed for a while, finally getting up and removing from her pocket-book the small white box she had placed there after taking it from the safety deposit box.

Even though she felt dizzy, she carried the box to Michael's room. He opened the door after she gave it a gentle knock. She didn't ask whether or not he had gone to see Mr. Esposito. She knew he had, and would get, probably already had his approval.

She avoided looking at Michael, and continued to stare at the box in her hand.

A sudden flash.

Maria Pisani, the ashes from her partly burnt body reforming themselves like the phoenix, standing over her with disapproval, wrenching the box from her hand.

"Grandma Pisani gave me this to keep for your wife. She wanted the person who wore it to have a Pisani name. You'll have time tomorrow to have it cleaned and polished so you can give it to Gina for Christmas. Later, if necessary, you can have it sized."

Still with her eyes on the box, she handed it to him, then turned around hastily to return to her room, leaving him standing speechless in his doorway.



Michael would have preferred being slapped rather than being treated in this robotic way. He followed his mother, stood outside her closed door. "Mom, please open up."

"What do you want?"

"I have to talk to you."

"There's nothing to say."

"It's killing me, this attitude you're taking."

"It's killing me, this marriage."

"Please open your door. I can't believe you're treating me like this. It's never been like you not to be open, close me out, to not at least listen." That was sure to get to her.

She opened the door.

"Mom, please help me. I love you, and I love Gina. Why can't I have you both?"

"Because there's one thing that keeps getting in the way. Salvatore Esposito."

"I met him, Mom. He seems like a very warm guy."

"Don't you believe it for a second. The man is a snake. Corrupt. Evil. He's a murderer, a thief, and God knows what else."

"What does that have to do with Gina? You know how she is, she's different."

"Michael, our families are worlds apart."

"She's not like that, Mom."

"I can't believe you'd go into this with your eyes open. She's still his daughter."

He felt his heart straining, as if someone had added thickener to his blood. "Mom, you don't know what pain you're giving me."

"I never wanted to give you pain. All I ever wanted was the best for you."

"Please, Mom, help me."

She wrapped her arms around him. They both kept grasping each other and crying.

"I need time, Michael. Space. I need time."

CHAPTER 27



Immediately after consuming every morsel of their Christmas dinner, the Espositos and their guests moved from the dining to the living room to open their gifts. Gina watched with her usual anticipation as her father, dressed in a Santa Claus suit, bent down in front of the tree, piled presents in his arms, read the labels out loud, and handed each package to its owner.

Uncle Joey received three scarves. She was pleased they were at least different colors, all dark.

Her mother had one of the women in the neighborhood knit a white cardigan sweater with a pearl-beaded trim for Grandma Luisa. Grandma put on the sweater and paraded like a Conover model in front of the mirror. Then she examined the pearl trim more closely, nodding her approval. Several other relatives and guests ripped the paper off their gifts, tossed it on the floor. Within a few minutes the living room was strewn with ribbons, bows, and crumpled Christmas wrapping.

Gina was already estimating how many plastic garbage bags she'd need to clean up. When just a few gifts remained under the tree, Michael took her into the adjacent room and presented her with a large box he removed from the hall closet. She shook it, trying to guess what was in it. After a flood of guesses she opened it only to find another, smaller wrapped box. As the progression of even

smaller boxes continued, she tore the paper faster, skipping most of the ribbons. When she opened the last box, she gasped. "Michael, how did you ever get enough money to buy this?"

"It was my grandmother's. My mother's been saving it for me to give to my wife."

How had Dr. Pisani really accepted the news from Michael? He had assured Gina that all was well, but she was still disheartened not hearing even one congratulatory word from her future mother-in-law.

"I feel so bad she's alone today," she said. "There's nothing worse than being alone on Christmas."

"I didn't want to leave her alone, but she insisted I come. She has a full-blown case of the flu, 104 fever, arms and legs like four hunks of cement. All she needs is sleep. Besides, Dr. Cohen's going to look in on her, I dropped off our key at his house this morning."

Michael removed the ring from the box and placed the diamond on her finger.

She stared at her left hand for a long time. "Thank you, Michael, it's exquisite. But I want you to know that any ring you would've given me, or no ring at all would've been more than enough. And be sure to thank your mother for me."

"When she's better, you can thank her yourself." They kissed before going into the living room to rejoin her parents.

Gina stood in the middle of the room and held out her left hand. One by one the guests examined the ring, remarked about the size of the diamond, and conveyed congratulations.

Uncle Joey promptly blessed the ring. Then, placing his hands on her and Michael's foreheads, he closed his eyes and prayed just moving his lips.

They hadn't even set a date for the wedding, but her mother said, "Right after the holidays we have to go look for a wedding dress. And Brooklyn's the best place in the world to find a wedding gown."



Sal went into the kitchen and brought out several bottles of chilled champagne he'd been saving for this occasion. Since Carmela looked unusually drawn, he got the champagne glasses himself.

He filled the glasses, passed them out. "I'd like to propose a toast to Gina and Michael. And to the union of the Espositos and the Pisanis."

He raised his glass and could see only the face of Diane Pisani floating in the liquid. He swallowed the entire glass of champagne without stopping for a breath.



The next morning Sal couldn't stand it any longer. He picked up the phone, hung it up. Did it a few more times. Finally, he dialed Diane's number. He was dying to know why no one in the Esposito family had heard from her, not about the engagement, not even a good wish regarding Christmas.

Michael had told the Espositos his mother had the flu, but Sal didn't believe it. He let the phone ring ten times. Was just about to hang up when he heard a breathy voice whisper, "Hello."

"Oh my God, you do sound awful."

"Who's this?"

"Sal Esposito."

"Who?"

"Sal Esposito," he said louder. "Are you all right?"

Many seconds passed.

"Mr. Esposito, I'm not coherent. I...I have chills and a fever. And I'm...dizzy. Let me call you back when, when I feel better."

"Is there something you need, something I can do for you?"

"No, I, I'll be okay. Larry Cohen'll be here shortly. I just. Need sleep. Goodbye."

Diane all alone in a dark room. What a waste. He had the urge to run up to the linen closet, gather every blanket, drive to her house, smash the door in, and enter her room. He'd throw that doctor out, wrap Diane up in the blankets, pick her up and hold her close to him. He wanted the chills to pass from her body to his. Her virus, her illness, he would take anything that was hers. With Diane in his arms he now had the courage to tell her how much he loved her. It felt wonderful holding her like that.

"Daddy, I never saw you look so ecstatic." Gina was standing in the doorway.

He quickly altered his facial expression to appear more business-like.

"Mom wants to know when you'd like to have the engagement party," she said.

"I look so ec-, ecstatic because I was thinking about the engagement party myself. I just spoke briefly to Dr. Pisani, wanted to discuss the plans for the party with her. But she's so sick she could hardly talk, she's going to have to call me back. Looks as though we'll have to wait to make our plans."

"Oh, I knew she could never do this to me, not hearing from her, nothing about the engagement. Michael told me that she had the flu, but I guess I didn't realize just how sick she was."

"Well, she said she'd call."

"Her word is good enough for me."



Three days after Christmas Diane was beginning to feel a little better. She started for the telephone, stopped, stared at it several seconds, eventually forced herself to call the Espositos.

Gina answered.

Diane tried to be as diplomatic as she could. "Congratulations, Gina, I'm very happy for you. Sorry I couldn't call you sooner, but I could hardly get out of bed."

"I'm so excited to hear from you. For a while there, I thought I didn't because you were disappointed."

Diane closed her eyes. "Now what would make you think that, after all we've been through together?"

"I didn't want you to think that I was plotting to get your son. The whole thing came as a surprise to both of us."

As far as she was concerned, that still didn't change things. "I'd really like to speak to your mother, to congratulate her, also. Is she home?"

"Actually, Mom has a terrible cold, a bad cough. She's sleeping right now and I don't want to wake her up."

"I can certainly understand her having a cold. There's something going around, and it did hit me and..."

"But my father's here, I'll let you speak to him. Hold on, I'll get him."

Just what she was trying to avoid—contact, physical or verbal, with Mr. Esposito. But now, with her son engaged to his daughter, avoiding him would be impossible.

Within a few seconds he was on the wire. "Hello, Dr. Pisani."

"Hello, Mr. Esposito."

"We've all been worried about you. How do you feel?"

"Much better than when you called. I'm sorry I was so abrupt, it was just that I was so weak, hadn't eaten in three days, vertigo and everything, I could hardly speak."

"Don't concern yourself with that, we just wanted to know how you were. And we never had a kid engaged before, didn't know what to do. Were we supposed to contact you, or were you supposed to contact us?"

"Since I never had a kid engaged either, I don't know, but now that we're speaking, let me congratulate you and Mrs. Esposito."

"I must tell you that you have a marvelous son, you did a great job bringing him up."

She wanted to say, "But not for you," but said instead, "Well you've known from the first time we met what I think about your daughter."

"Mrs. Esposito and I appreciate everything you did for her. The reason I called was that we're planning an engagement party for the kids, and we wanted to know when it would be good for you."

"We have a vacation now, through the third week of January. I was planning to go to Florida for a while, to get out of the cold weather. My parents live down there and Larry Cohen suggested I rest in a warmer climate as long as I have the time."

His first name was Larry

He could meet with a tragic accident. Sal could arrange it, get him out of the picture. But then, it might upset Diane.

Maybe Larry Cohen was planning on joining Diane in Florida. Wouldn't be so bad if her parents were there to chaperon them.

"But if you want to have the party soon, I don't have to go away."

"Wouldn't hear of it. Besides, since you've been so sick, a little sunshine couldn't hurt."

"If you let me know what date you'd like, any time after the third week of January, I'll arrange to be free. And in the meantime, make sure you congratulate Mrs. Esposito for me. I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"And she's looking forward to meeting you."

"Call me when you decide on a date."

"I will, and if I don't see you before you leave for Florida, have a good trip. And if you need anything, anything at all, call me."

"All right."

He waited because he didn't want to stop talking, didn't want to break contact. Just speaking to her dulled his senses, so he couldn't think of anything else to say. "Goodbye, Dr. Pisani."

"Goodbye, Mr. Esposito."

After he hung up, he remembered he had wanted to mention something about the ring—about how beautiful it was and how generous he thought it was of her to give it to Gina.

He considered calling her back, use any excuse to hear her voice again. But their conversation was over and he would bring the matter up at another time. It was something he would save to discuss when, numbed by her presence, he couldn't think of anything else.



One part of her conversation was true. Diane did want to meet Mrs. Esposito. What kind of woman was she? What type of person could look the other way? Or was she a co-conspirator, perhaps a motivator for his crimes, the power behind the man?

Diane had always said to her students, "If you want to know what your boyfriend will be like when he's older, look at his father."

She could give the same advice to men. Look at the girl's mother to see what your wife might turn out to be in the future. She wanted to meet Mrs. Esposito to get some hint regarding what the Gina of the future might be like.



On New Year's Eve, Carmela and Sal were getting dressed to attend a party at the home of one of his associates. Just as they were about to leave, Carmela became faint.

Sal called Dr. Petrino. He rushed over, examined Carmela very carefully. He removed his stethoscope from her chest. "How long has she had this dry cough?"

"Ever since I can remember. You know she could never stop smoking, it's probably only a smoker's cough."

"And how long has she been like this? Her color's not good. She's very weak, and her lungs are filled with fluid."

"What does that mean, pneumonia?"

"We'll have to see, I hope it is pneumonia."

"What else could it be?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions just yet, I'm very cautious before making a final diagnosis. Right now I'm going to call the hospital to make sure one of the technicians is there. It's New Year's Eve and if nobody's there, I'll make it my business to get someone. As soon as I contact someone, we'll bring her to the hospital for a chest X-ray. I have to see just how much fluid she has, is your wife allergic to penicillin?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then I'm going to prescribe Keflex, a very potent antibiotic. We'll pick up the pills tonight, if necessary we'll get them at the hospital. She has to take a double dosage the first two days and continue with the regular dosage eight more days, and I want her to begin immediately. After that we'll take another chest X-ray."

"I'll do whatever you say, Doc."

After ten days of treatment, Carmela's chest X-rays showed even more fluid.

Dr. Petrino put her in the hospital. "I'm going to give her a bronchoscopy and biopsy. Have to check the tissue in the corner of the lung."

When all the tests were completed, Dr. Petrino took him aside. "Mr. Esposito, there's no easy way to tell you this." He put his hands on Sal's shoulders. "Your wife has lung cancer."

"Cancer!"

"I'm afraid so. Suspected a tumor from the beginning, but wanted to make sure first. Didn't want to worry you unnecessarily. And it's at a very advanced stage. The prognosis isn't good."

"You mean, you mean she's...not going to make it?"

"I don't think so. The odds are against her."

"How much time does she got...I mean, have?"

"I don't like answering that question because I can be wrong. But from my experience with this disease, and in her condition, you'll be lucky if she lasts three months."

"Three months!"

"And I don't want to appear callous, Mr. Esposito, but there's so much pain with this disease she'll be even luckier if she goes much sooner."

Sal covered his face.

Three months to freedom.

But Carmela was his wife, his daughter's mother. How would Gina feel losing her?

He could wait three months. But then he'd be alone after being married twenty-five years.

He removed his hands from his face, let his eyelids drop. "As long as she doesn't suffer."

"We'll give her drugs to control the pain, and we'll keep draining the lungs, make her more comfortable." Dr. Petrino placed his hand behind Sal's neck, and massaged it. "You look like you're suffering with her, Mr. Esposito. Don't you worry. I'll do whatever is necessary to reduce the pain."

"Do what you have to. I can't stand her suffering."



When Gina heard of her mother's illness, she was ridden with guilt. The day she came home from school for Christmas, she should've pursued her first impressions of her mother's appearance. Should've realized how weak her mother was the evening all the food was prepared, but didn't attempt to serve or eat. Should've paid more attention to those dry coughs instead of constantly blaming them on the cigarettes.

It must have been the excitement of the engagement and the holidays that gave her mother almost a fortnight of resurgent health that had made Gina's initial concern less pressing. She was worried that

she'd been so preoccupied with herself, that she'd allowed her mother's condition to go untreated. And she could never forgive herself for the way she spoke to her the day she came to campus.

Only Dr. Petrino's constant reassurance to her, and to her father, who appeared so shocked by his wife's condition, that a malignant tumor had been there, hidden and undetectable for a long time, helped her deal with the reality. Even if the tumor had been diagnosed sooner, the most that could have been expected was prolonging life several more months. According to the doctor, the type of lung cancer her mother had was incurable. An insidious disease whose symptoms appear too late.



Sal and Gina spent many hours sitting with Carmela in the hospital. They remained silent, listening to her breathe like a windshield wiper scraping over a dry surface.

The first evening Sal was alone with her, Carmela murmured his name. He approached her bed, pushing aside the rolling stand with her uneaten food. It gave him a vivid recollection of his mother's hospital room.

Carmela spoke through her wheezing. "Sal, Michael and Gina really love each other."

"Yeah, it shows."

"It's wonderful, love like that. Whenever I'm awake lying here, all I think about is that I'm sorry that you never loved me. Down deep I always knew it, but didn't want to believe it. I thought I could handle our marriage alone, that I had enough love for both of us, but I was wrong."

He picked her head off the pillow. "What do you mean, I never loved you? Stop talking like that, the medicine they're giving you is making you say crazy things."

She struggled to breathe. "Enough lies. I'm sorry for you, you gave up the most wonderful experience of your life to marry someone you didn't love."

"The mother of my daughter, the best mother anyone could have, I didn't love? I don't want to hear you say that again."

She coughed violently, so much so that he pressed her head against his chest. "Please, Carmela, don't talk. You're too weak, you need to rest. Talking wastes your strength."

"I'm not too weak, Sal. I'm so weak I'm dying, and do you know what? I'm glad. I want to die. In fact I'm already dead. I died the second I admitted to myself that you never loved me. I can take the pain of my disease more than suffering the pain of loving someone who didn't love me. There's nothing in life worse than that. Nothing worse. The worst cross anyone could carry."

"You're not dying, sweetheart, you're just sick. I know you won't die, won't leave me alone. They're giving you strong medicine that makes you feel weak, but you're going to get better."

"Gina's leaving now. I have nothing to live for. I don't, don't even want a cigarette."

"Gina's not leaving, she's only getting married. She'll be around all the time. And when she has children, we'll have them, too."

"No, Sal, Gina's not going to stay, I can feel it, she's not going to be around."

He propped Carmela against the pillow again, pressed the button to adjust the top of the bed. He felt weak himself, fell into the chair next to her bed. Had to talk to the doctors. They were giving her medication that made her say things he didn't want to hear. "Carmela, please stop talking. You're not making sense. It's the drugs. You have to sleep."

"I'm happy I'm dying. Happy. I feel sorry for you, still love you. I hope some day you can find someone you love who'll love you back. It's wonderful my daughter has that kind of love. Without that kind you have...nothing. The worst cross. Nothing. Noth..."

Her head slumped over, eyes partly open.

Her chest wasn't moving.

He leaped out of the chair. Dare he touch her?

He ran out into the hall, called the nurse. She phoned the house physician. He came quickly, put his hand on Carmela's neck. Then he closed her eyelids.

Sal picked up his coat, threw a scarf over his shoulders. He had always wanted to be rid of Carmela, but still he felt weird about her dying. Maybe they had lived together too long. She was someone who catered to his every need, and he was a creature of habit.

He strolled out of the hospital room without looking back at her. Their life together was over. He was free.

His brother could no longer remind him he was a married man, and had to avoid Diane Pisani.



Sal sat in the funeral parlor that had facilitated his many cremations, staring at his dead wife. He thanked her for dying. Most generous of her.

All the time he was watching Carmela, he kept thinking about Diane. He had asked Gina when the spring semester would begin, and had marked the date on his calendar, the date he knew Diane would be back from Florida. And that date had already passed. It would be unthinkable for his daughter's future mother-in-law not to show up at the wake. Never a question of whether or not she'd appear, but when, and how.

What would she be wearing?

Would she kiss him as she offered condolences? Embrace him?

She had to sit next to him, at least for a little while. Suddenly, he became worried by how she might react to his associates, who would be present throughout the entire proceedings, "those people" to whom she had carefully alluded that unforgettable day in April when he stood transfixed before her.

How skillfully she had managed to disassociate him from them for her own purposes.

How cleverly she had manipulated him into giving his consent.

And how willingly and joyfully he had accepted the manipulation.

He now realized how embarrassed he would be by those people, gave some thought to how he would handle her, and them. He did have one solution, his usual and dependable backup, his rock.

His brother would help him through this.



After procrastinating as long as she could, Diane finally went to the funeral home. Michael had been unavoidably detained in Washington for several days but would return late in the evening so that he could attend Mrs. Esposito's funeral the next day.

The last night of the wake. Prospective clients must have been channeled to other funeral homes since the remaining rooms for laying out the dead were taken over by the Esposito family to accommodate the crowds and the long cortege of flowers still being delivered.

Diane always hated the oppressive odor of flowers at wakes and this night the aroma was overbearing, stunting her breathing. And she didn't want to be present at all.

She tried to slip in unnoticed through the throngs toward the half-open coffin, at first looking above it, ignoring its occupant.

A line of people waited to approach the kneeler.

Finally, her turn to offer a prayer. For the first time she confronted Mrs. Esposito. An eerie feeling crept over her—that the formaldehyde-infested body was mustering up the energy to turn and confront her, too.

She didn't pray for Mrs. Esposito but spent prayer time studying her. What color eyes hid behind the closed lids? And the porcelain skin. Was it natural or one created by the makeup of the undertaker? In the coffin, the heart-shaped bouquet of red rosebuds ribboned with the label, 'Beloved Wife', the bottom of the roses bleeding with

long, thin red streamers. She felt Mr. Esposito's sadness because she could identify with losing a spouse.

When she realized how long she was concentrating on the dead woman, she rose and turned around to find Gina's arms.

Gina broke out into sobs. "I'm so happy to see you. I thought you might not come, it means so much to me for you to be here."



Sal didn't know that Diane was present until he saw the back of her hair hanging over the collar of her black coat. She was clutching his daughter. He dismissed his associates and posed rigid-faced in his front row center seat.

Gina stopped sobbing, took Diane by the hand, and led her to him. He tried to appear brokenhearted.

The fact that Gina was already holding Diane's hand made it easily transferable to his. He squeezed her hand, confident that she would interpret the firmness of his grip as sorrow.

"Mr. Esposito, I'm so sorry."

He kept shaking his head. "It's awful." He felt anesthetized just hearing her voice, staring at that slightly tanned, slightly freckled face. All he could think of that moment was how pleased he was she was back from Florida when Carmela died.

Diane sat next to him.

He kept her hand in his. "It was a terrible shock."

"It must've been. And I wanted so much to meet her."

"Carmela was a good woman, the best mother, and the best wife."

He lowered his head, kept his eyes closed.

Diane sat silently.

While he was plotting his next move, Gina brought Joseph to him.

Sal looked up at his brother, then turned to Diane. "Dr. Pisani, I would like you to meet my brother, Father Joseph Esposito."

He enjoyed introducing them. Joey represented legitimacy by association.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Pisani, even under these sad circumstances. I've already had the pleasure of meeting your son last Christmas."

Diane shook his hand. "I've heard so many things about you from Gina, Father Joseph, all positive incidentally, that I feel as though I've already met you."

Some additional mourners stopped by, and as Sal turned his attention to them, Joey and Diane moved over to give them room. Sal noted that they seemed to be getting along quite well.



"So, how did I do?" Joseph whispered.

Diane whispered back. "Well enough to pass a screen test, and come to think of it, well enough to warrant a trip to your confessor."

They shared smiles.

"I told you I'd never reveal your secret," he said.

"I didn't doubt it for a moment, but I must ask you something. I never had the opportunity of meeting Mrs. Esposito, what kind of woman was she?"

"Believe me when I tell you, she was a saint."

"In what way?"

"In every way. If there was ever anyone with patience and devotion, it was Carmela. Pray for her, Diane. But I believe she's already in heaven."



The next morning Diane and Michael arrived late for the Mass of the Resurrection. The traffic going to Brooklyn delayed them for at least an hour. They didn't have a chance to stop first at the funeral parlor for final prayers and the closing of the coffin, but headed straight for the church.

An overbearing number of flower cars jammed the street in front of the church. Cars double and triple parked everywhere. Police patrolled the area on horseback, diverting traffic, finally allowing her and Michael to park. If this was a precursor of what the wedding would be like, Diane was ready to leave now. It seemed as though Brooklyn had stopped rotating for the day, letting the rest of the earth pass it by.



The family pew was filled and the church packed. Sal instructed Bruno to sit at the end of the pew and inform him immediately when his future son-in-law and Dr. Pisani arrived.

His eyes wandered around the altar, fixed on a blue and white statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, standing with outstretched arms, her exposed foot on the head of a serpent. From his Catholic school education, the little he remembered of it, he reflected upon the symbolism conveyed by that statue.

He'd hoped to find peace in the church, peace from his obsession with Diane Pisani. He thought about how much his father was obsessed with gambling, his mother with saving money, his brother with the church.

No peace was meant for him. For as he sat facing the wooden pulpit, Diane's face kept emerging from the patterns made by the knots and grain in the wood. He looked up at the marble altar for relief from her, but she once again appeared in the designs formed by the colored veins in the stone.

And it wasn't necessary for Bruno to advise him of her presence. Without looking around he knew when she had arrived.

He could feel a different chemistry in the church.



Just after the reading of the gospel, Diane and Michael managed to squeeze into a pew on the opposite side of the aisle from Gina and her father.

Joseph gave a sermon about the deceased, something about people who always gave, and expected nothing in return. Diane regretted not knowing Mrs. Esposito well enough to fully relate to the sermon.

During the communion the family received the host. Diane couldn't help thinking how Mr. Esposito, fumbling up at the altar, not seeming to know what to do with his hands or mouth, had the gall to partake in the Eucharist. Had he first confessed his sins, made up his mind to repent and change before receiving absolution? She was curious about what he was saying, if anything, in thanksgiving after he swallowed the body and blood of Christ.

Then she felt guilty about how she was once again judging him. That was to be left to God.



When it was finally their turn to approach the altar, Michael and Diane received communion. Sal watched her return to her seat across the church, the casket containing Carmela a buffer between them.

After Mass, Diane and Michael joined the family. Sal insisted they all ride together to the cemetery. He assigned Bruno to drive Michael's car.

Diane kept her eyes bolted to the floor during the funeral procession. Sal was pleased she wasn't looking up. It gave him a better opportunity to absorb her.

Gina held onto Michael's arm with her right hand. With her free hand she held his. "Daddy, what are you thinking?"

He slipped his hand from hers to put his palm on his forehead. "I'm thinking how lonely I'll be without your mother."

Gina caressed his cheek.

Did Diane find the cleft on his chin attractive? Why shouldn't she? Theresa and Carmela flipped over it. He started massaging his cleft with his thumb, hoping that his action would attract Diane's attention. He wanted her to look at him so she could notice how handsome he was. All she did was keep her eyes on the floor, or out the window.

They arrived at the cemetery. The procession came to a stop. Joseph said some more prayers, and sprinkled holy water over the coffin. So many people placed roses and carnations on the coffin that the flowers completely buried it.

Sal stood in front of the sea of flowers. He watched Carmela being laid to rest in the Carrara marble family mausoleum. A most elegant resting place. She was getting the attention suitable for the wife of the boss of bosses.

The incense was making his head woozy, his eyes blurry. But not blurry enough to note the space next to Carmela's.

For him.

CHAPTER 28



Larry Cohen drove the BMW into the garage, then stepped into his kitchen from the garage door. He opened the refrigerator, looked in, closed it. Why did he open the refrigerator? He wasn't hungry. Just a habit he had gotten into.

A light was blinking on his answering machine, but he ignored it. He'd play back the messages in the morning. Right now he couldn't face whatever the messages were.

When he got up to the bedroom, he removed his suit, tie, and shirt. Before taking a shower, he rested on his bed and stared at the ceiling. It had been a frustrating, if not disappointing evening, and he needed some rest. His bedroom seemed more lonely than ever this particular night, a night he had anticipated for a long time, one where he would return overjoyed, but it didn't turn out that way.

He played over in his head the first time Diane came into his office. Now, three months later he was still wondering why his ophthalmoscope didn't short circuit when her bronze irises reflected back into it, and why when he checked her mouth, his tongue depressor didn't ignite as he passed it over those slightly protruding front teeth that only made her mouth, like Gene Tierney's, more alluring.

How he had studied her history after she left! Practically memorized her questionnaire. He had the results of her blood tests earlier, but it had taken him an extra day to get the courage to ask her out.

After his wife died three years ago, he never thought he would date again until he met this woman, a shiksa no less. And he felt like an adolescent, a real shmuck, the way he was behaving the hours before he had picked her up—having his hair styled to cover his receding hairline, finding a suit that would minimize his paunch, cursing himself for not enrolling in an exercise program, showering profusely while careful not to get his hair wet. He had immersed himself in deodorant, mouthwash, and after-shave lotion, had used so much after-shave he had to get back into the shower to wash some of it off. As he Q-tipped his ears after all the ablutions, he thought of her ears, pinnas perfectly designed by the Creator Himself, carved and chiseled by His own hand before He rested them gently, gently against her head. And she must have appreciated His work of art, since she left them as He intended. Unpierced.

Since their first evening together at the opera, he and Diane had seen each other every week until she developed the flu. In the time they dated he was constantly looking for some reaction from her regarding how she felt about him—a certain kind of smile, a look, a touch—anything that might indicate hope.

He didn't mind checking in on her and staying with her when she had the flu. She'd been hit with a very severe case. Besides, it felt good just to be near her. While he watched her sleep, looking for signs the fever had passed, he had asked himself if there was any future for them. Things were different for him since he'd met her. Life wouldn't return to normal without her.

He almost regretted recommending she go to Florida. Missed her so much when she was away. But during that time he'd made up his mind to ask her upon her return for some sort of commitment.

For a moment, and just a fleeting moment, he had considered asking Diane to go on vacation with him. But that idea left him as

soon as it entered. A woman like her would be insulted by the implications of that request. And the last thing he wanted to do was insult her, or run the risk of showing disrespect for her in any way.

This was the first night they saw each other since she returned from Florida, and in the three weeks she was away, he had planned all the wonderful things he would say.

When he arrived at her house and she opened the door, he had all to do not to take her in his arms. Her tanned skin contrasted with the winter-white wool dress. She looked so rested.

He could tell something was wrong the minute Diane got into his car. She was unusually quiet, an ominous kind of quiet. He'd felt a certain weakness, similar to the one he experienced when he had read the results of his wife's tests, and he knew the end was near.

He couldn't stand it any longer, rather hear the news immediately than suffer the wait. "Diane, you're not yourself. What's wrong?"

"Oh, Larry, I know I'm behaving abominably, and I've been doing so for a month now. But something's happened that's turned me into an irrational, crazy person."

He pulled the car over to the side. They had theater tickets, but he sensed that she wasn't in the mood to go. "Do you want to go somewhere else instead of the theater?"

"Would you mind? I have to talk to someone. I'll make it up to you."

Hearing those words soothed his nerves. What was bothering her, then, was outside of their relationship. "Don't be silly. I'm so happy you're back and looking so much better. Let's go to that French restaurant where we had dinner the first night we went out. We can request a private table."

"That sounds wonderful." She closed her eyes and slumped down into the leather seat.

He wanted to stop the car, put his hand on her face. He just wanted to touch her as though he was examining her. But touching

her could no longer be clinical. Instead of doing as he desired, he kept driving.

Diane didn't speak until they were seated in a remote section of the restaurant and had already placed their order. She looked into her empty dish. "Larry, my son's getting married. In August."

He was confused. "Why is that so upsetting? Don't you like the girl?"

"That's not it. That's the hard part, I love the girl. And that's my dilemma and it's driving me crazy. I can handle the marriage intellectually but not emotionally.

"Larry, do you remember the night we went to the opera and ran into Salvatore Esposito?"

"How could I forget?"

"Well, just listen to this." She took a deep breath and opened her eyes wide. "The girl my son's going to marry is Salvatore Esposito's daughter."

He wasn't listening to her as much as he was looking at her, so for a moment her words didn't register. When he finally understood what she was telling him, he couldn't think of anything to say. He just took her hand and pressed it against his lips.

She was searching his face as if she was looking for a brilliant response, but he couldn't give any. All he could think of was how he'd feel if he were in the same position, if one of his children was going to marry into the Mafia.

He held her hand tightly. "Diane, Diane, Diane."

Though he didn't say anything but her name, nothing that could console her, he felt she interpreted his reaction as sympathy which was what she seemed to need more than anything else.

"I knew you'd understand. My son told me on my birthday, just before Christmas. It was supposed to be a surprise because he knew how much I liked Gina. Well it's been over a month already, and I still haven't gotten over the shock." Diane started stacking her silverware, having trouble balancing the knives. "I haven't told anyone,

not even my parents all the time I was with them in Florida. That's all they would've had to hear. I couldn't discuss it with anyone on campus because they all know Gina, and I wouldn't want the word to get out how I feel about this marriage, and the last thing I want to do is hurt Gina. And I was so weak when I was sick that I let it fester, kept it in, and didn't even tell you."

That made him feel good. Telling him was something special.

"I did, however, discuss it with Mr. Esposito's brother."

"Why his brother?"

"He's a priest and made me understand my attitude better. I know I shouldn't feel this way, but I can't help how I feel. I mean, can you believe that after what I've done all my life, how I've always tried to be a model for my son, that he could marry into that family? That my son, all I have left of my husband, is going to Salvatore Esposito?"

She closed her eyes and spoke very softly. "This morning I went to Brooklyn to Gina's mother's funeral. It was such a farce. Twenty-eight flower cars, mobs of people, the mausoleum. I couldn't stop giggling inside on the way to the cemetery when we were all riding in the same car together, the most motley crew you've ever seen—my son, Gina, Father Esposito, Mr. Esposito, and me. If this was a preview of the wedding, I may not show up."

Larry was still speechless but listened intently. She was in such an emotional state, she had to get it out of her system, and until she did, she wouldn't be in a receptive mood to hear what he wanted to discuss with her—their relationship, and their future.

Diane continued to intermittently speak and cry. He would have to wait for a more appropriate time to bring up the subject.

When he took her home she said, "I feel so much better. I've made up my mind to go through with being the mother-of-the-groom in the most pleasant way possible."

He kissed her cheek. "If you want to talk some more, call me even if it's in the middle of the night."

She thanked him, then he left.

But now he lay in bed mulling over the events of the evening. He'd have to wait until the wedding to ask her to marry him. August. More than six months away. She'd then be more vulnerable to facing the fact that she was alone, permanently, and might welcome some companionship.

He'd have to discuss the matter with his children. They would be concerned with their inheritance should he remarry. He'd make some kind of arrangement.

But what if she would reject him, refuse to marry him? He couldn't think of that. He'd be miserable without her, and miserable if they continued as they were. Friends.

He wished she'd call. Needed more contact with her that evening, even if just on the phone.

Then he remembered. There was a message on his answering machine. Maybe Diane had called while he was driving home.

He got up, went into the kitchen, and played his messages back. None of them revealed her voice, and he was so preoccupied thinking about her he didn't even hear what the tapes said. He'd play them again in the morning.

He took a shower. Later, he worked hard at falling asleep.



Theresa watched Sal, on his back, in bed, gazing at the wall. She had tried every trick in the book—some not recorded, some not yet concocted. Was it going to be another of those nights?

No, she was determined. Tonight it was going to happen.

That article she read in one of those women's magazines. Ninety-nine percent between the ears and only one percent between the legs. What was going on his head?

She wanted his intimacy, especially tonight. It would give her the feeling of remaining connected.

She was about to give up.

Maybe she would try...No, he was too used to it.

What could be different? Ah, ha! She ran her nipple gently up and down his penis, pushing back the foreskin so that she could stimulate the head.

Success.

That would do it. She was pleased, overjoyed.

Then limp again.

She was frustrated from his lack of response, her strength drained from rolling on top of him, and from all her manipulations and acrobatics. She wasn't getting any younger.

She put her head up against his arm and rested.

After all her hard work, what was the result? He was snoring. She smiled. Maybe she was expecting too much from herself, from him. He wasn't getting any younger, either.

He mumbled something, something she couldn't make out. In his line of work he had problems, pressures. She had to be understanding.

She kept looking at him while he slept. He was still a good-looking son-of-a-gun, with a full head of hair. Who could ever believe that such an innocent-looking cherubic face was head of the mob?

She was just about to play with his ear when he turned on his stomach, hugged the pillow, and sighed, "Diane."

She froze.

Diane.

That name. Where did she see it? She kept thinking, waiting before slipping out of bed and going into the kitchen. Should she dare look again at the engagement announcement she'd cut out of the newspaper and attached to the refrigerator with a strawberry magnet? She read the announcement again.

She went back into the bedroom and watched him. His dreamy expression goaded her to jump on the bed and bounce on it. Just as he awoke, she took a jerky leap off the bed, put her hands on her hips. "Okay, Sal, what's going on?"

He was still rubbing his eyes. "Wha-, what's going on?"

"We know each other a long time. Something's happening. You've changed in the past months, I haven't said anything but I can't take it anymore."

"What's this, an ultimatum?"

"I didn't know you knew such fancy words. Maybe it's the company you're keeping lately."

He threw a shoe across the room with such force it made a sole-print on the wall. "What's with you, Theresa, you know I have business problems."

"This is not a business problem, I know what those are. This is a Sal and Theresa problem. What's the matter, have you found someone else to screw, and you feel guilty?"

"What are you, a psychologist? Guilty, over what? Don't be ridiculous, and watch your crude language. I don't have sex with anyone else."

"Who's Diane? Is she the one you're having sex with?"

"Diane?"

"You heard me, you were moaning that name in your sleep."

"Well, for your information I don't know no...any Diane. You're hearing things. Maybe I said, 'dynamite.'"

"Do you always sigh and smile such a heavenly smile when you say 'dynamite'?"

"No, but I'm, I'm worried about one of my men who's got dynamite on his truck. And you got to understand if I don't meet your expectations, I'm getting older. You can't expect a man who's getting close to fifty to be the same lover he was at twenty."

The innocence with which he spoke reassured her for a moment. "Sometimes you seem very distant, Sal. You're here, but you're not. It's as though you're thinking about something, or someone else."

She felt enough courage rising in her to say, "I thought that maybe, now that Carmela's gone, we could be together more. You know. Maybe, get married."



Sal tried not to show his revulsion. He might've entertained that idea several years ago, but that was before Diane Pisani. Now, Theresa didn't fit into his marriage plans.

He didn't know what to say but had to come up with something. Anything.

"Theresa, you know I didn't love Carmela, but had to stay with her for the family's sake. Now that she's gone I have a lot of thinking to do. My daughter's getting married and..."

"I read about it in the newspaper. She's marrying some guy who's going to be a lawyer, you already told me that part. But you didn't tell me about her future mother-in-law. I also read about her. Dr. *Diane* something, you know, like the name you just said, someone who probably doesn't use crude language like me. I know she's a widow because it said that the prospective groom was the son of that woman and the late somebody-or-other."

She could've been wearing a black pointed hat and riding a broom.

"Let me tell you, Sal. If I wasn't absolutely sure a woman like her wouldn't go for a guy like you, I'd be one jealous bitch."

The veins on his forehead were pulsing. He had to quickly control the reflex of wanting to smack her. Her comment forced him to confront something he didn't want to think about.

He didn't speak until his breathing returned to normal. "Look, Theresa, first of all Dr. Pisani's a fat, ugly professor who looks like she should be hired for a pizza commercial. Her husband probably had to die because he was sick to death of looking at her. Now enough of her, there are a lot of changes going on in my life, I need time to sort'em all out."

It wasn't like Theresa to harp, but now that she had the momentum going she appeared unable to control herself. Her face became twisted, her brows came together. "I could just see you and this Dr.

Diane What's-Her-Face together at the wedding. She's going to fit in very well with your...business associates."

She heaved with laughter.

Sal got up and chased about the room in no particular pattern to collect his clothes. He dressed so quickly that he put on his boxer shorts backwards, not bothering to fix them, missed half the buttons on his shirt, jumped into his pants, and shoved his arm into his coat sleeve before he realized he'd forgotten to zip his fly.

"There's no point in talking to you when you're in this mood. You don't make no sense."

He nearly took the door with him as he stormed out, the sound of Theresa's laughter still swirling around in his head.

He started down the steps, then stopped. He rushed back up to the apartment, opened the door with the assistance of his knee, and stuck his head through the opening.

"Forgive me, I was wrong. You don't make *any* sense."

He banged the door closed.



After he left, Theresa continued laughing for a while. The laughter slowly turned to tears. For the first time in their relationship she felt her nakedness, rushed into the closet to find a robe.

She'd been good in math, but no one had ever expected her to do anything with it. Maybe if she had an education, she would've become something, too. Instead of being Sal's kept woman, she could've been a doctor like that lady whose son was marrying his daughter. Now, besides not being an accountant, or a professor, she was never even to be the mother-of-the-bride, the mother-of-the-groom, or anyone else's mother for that matter.

She walked around her apartment. Plush. Marble bathroom, mirrors, gold fixtures, expensive rugs and furnishings, all the luxury money could buy. Yet, it was empty. No wedding pictures, no nicks

in the furniture from toys, no family pictures, no prospective grandchildren.

She didn't know when or if Sal would come back. The day she knew would one day come had arrived.

With both hands she punched and punched the door he had just slammed shut. "Sal, I hate you, I hate you, you bastard," she screamed.

Her hands slipped down the door as she slid to the floor. She stayed on the floor well after she stopped shrieking.

No one was around to hear.



Diane couldn't postpone the inevitable. After the funeral, when Gina returned to campus, Diane invited her to dinner.

Gina arrived with a box of Baci. "I feel as though I'm home here."

"You are, I've missed you. Tell me, how's everything in Brooklyn?"

"I can't get over the guilt of being so rotten to my mother the day she came up to see me. And I was so concerned with myself, graduation, Michael, marriage, and how you'd feel about the marriage, that I didn't do anything about my mother's condition when I went home and saw how terrible she looked."

"Gina, you know how lung cancer is, especially the type your mother had. It's already too late when they discover it."

"I know, but I still feel I could've done something, even something to make her feel that I loved her after the nasty things I said to her, and I feel so bad. My mother was looking forward to shopping with me for a wedding dress. You may not know this but Brooklyn is a great place to find wedding gowns."

"Well, I know I'm not your mother, and could never replace her. But would you like me to come with you to find a dress?"

"Oh, Dr. Pisani." Gina hesitated. "I'll call you Mom after graduation. I couldn't call you that now in front of the other students, it

might be embarrassing for you.” She bent her head, lifted her eyes. “Would you really come with me? I’d love it.”

“We’d better do it soon. You have about six months until August, and it may take a while to find the right one, order it, have it fitted, and if need be, have it altered.”

“Can you go this weekend? I’ll tell my father and he’ll take us out to dinner, he seems at loose ends now that Mom’s not around.”

That man again, the one she couldn’t avoid. “Whatever you want, but your father’s probably too busy to go out with us.”

As Diane was hoping for agreement, Gina said, instead, “No, I think it would be good for him to have some company. He’s very lonely, would you mind if I called him now?”

“Be my guest.” She handed her the phone.

Gina dialed, stared into the air. She was just about to hang up when she said, “Hi, Daddy, how are you?”

Diane could only guess from half of the conversation what was going on. Suppose that Mr. Esposito didn’t want her interfering with selecting the wedding dress. After all, that was up to the bride’s family.

“I’m at Dr. Pisani’s house. She volunteered to help me find a wedding dress now that,” her voice choked, “Mom can’t do it.”

A pause for the response.

“Daddy, if we come there on Saturday will you take us out to dinner?”

Another long pause.

“Okay, I’ll call you, let you know the time. Make the reservations for six o’clock anyway. Bye, Daddy.”

She hung up. “Daddy’s taking us to a fancy restaurant.”

And Diane couldn’t help thinking that Bruno would probably make them a happy foursome, and was wishing that she and Gina could shop in Brooklyn, then come back to Westchester, bypassing the whole restaurant scene.

“How are you and your father getting on?”

"Right now, I don't want to rock the boat, want to keep the *status quo*, leave everything the way it is, give him a chance to adjust to Mom's passing. But a day doesn't go by that I don't think, really think about what I'm going to do about him, and me. After graduation, that's when I'll decide."

Gina had a far-away look. Slowly she snapped back. "Daddy thinks it's wonderfully kind of you to take the trouble to..." The phone rang. "I hope that's not my father calling back and changing his mind."

"We'll soon find out." Diane braced herself to pick up the phone. "Hello."

"Hi, Mom."

"Oh, so good to hear from you. What's new?"

"I called to give my favorite girl some good news."

"Your favorite girl just happens to be here with me, would you like to speak to her?"

"You're still my number one girl. So first I want to tell you, then Gina. Mom, I got the job with Parker and Fortini. And guess how much my salary'll be?"

"Tell me, I can't stand it."

"Forty-five thousand. To start. Can you believe it, and I was expecting forty."

"That's wonderful, I'm so proud of you. Now I'll let you tell Gina."



Gina took the phone. "Hi."

"Hi. Can my mother hear me?"

"No."

"I love you, miss you, can't wait to see you. Let me give you the good news. I got the job with Parker and Fortini beginning at forty-five thousand, I start in June right after graduation, I told them I'm getting married in August, and they're giving me a week for the honeymoon with pay."

“Michael, I’m so happy for you. Congratulations.” She squeezed Dr. Pisani’s hand. “Your mother and I are both proud of you.”

“Gina, don’t be happy for me, be happy for us, for our life together. I couldn’t’ve done it without you. I’ll call you at the dorm later when we can speak privately. Take care of my mother. I love her, and I love you.”

“Same here. Good-bye.” Tears were pinching her eyes. “He sounds so happy, so excited.”

“You should both be happy, don’t forget it was you who worked so hard helping him with the language that made this possible.”

“I am happy.” Gina looked aside. “But I’m worried. There are so many things to do that I’m afraid I won’t be able to do them all. I worry that I won’t be a good enough wife. I worry that Michael will stop loving me. I...”

“Now, Gina, you’re getting pre-wedding jitters. Everyone does, it’s perfectly normal.”

“Did you have them, too?”

“Of course I did, it’s such an important step, and I knew my husband less than three months when we became engaged. And I was so young to make a life’s commitment.”

“Three months? And I thought the six months I know Michael is short.”

“Some people know from the start that the person is the right one. Some know each other for years and after all that time then realize they’re in love.”

“You must’ve been the most beautiful bride. Do you have any wedding pictures? I never noticed any during the summer.”

“It’s been years since I looked at my wedding pictures, not since I moved into this house. Maybe it would be fun to look at them again with you. Now where did I put them?” She looked up at the ceiling, then snapped her fingers. “Oh, yes. They’re on the top shelf of the hall closet.”

Dr. Pisani went upstairs. She brought down the wedding album along with snapshots and a framed portrait of her and her husband. She took Gina through the pictures with anecdotes about some of the people and events.

Gina loved the wedding portrait. Michael looked so much like his father in that portrait she was touched. "Why don't you keep this picture where everybody can see it?"

"It still hurts me to look at it because we're together in it. We had a wonderful marriage, the little we had of it. I've never met anyone else in all these years who could make me feel the way my husband did."

"Dr. Pisani, I love this picture. If you're not going to keep it out, may I have it?"

"That's very sweet of you, Gina, of course you may. I know how much Michael looks like his dad in this picture and that must mean something to you."

"If you're sure that's what you want, you have my promise. And by the way, I wanted to tell you from the first picture I saw that you looked like a real queen the day you got married. Very royal. And your wedding gown was magnificent."

"If I say so myself, it was really gorgeous...I just remembered. My husband insisted I have it preserved so I could put it on every anniversary to make sure it would still fit. He didn't want me to become a fat old lady. It's somewhere up in the attic, would you like to see it?"

"I'd love to see it. And you in it."

"I doubt that it would still fit me, I wouldn't dare try it on. I'll go get it."

"Do you want me to help you?"

"No, I have to look for the box. May take a while."

She went upstairs. A short time later Gina stopped hearing the intermittent footsteps from the ceiling, heard steady ones instead. Soon Dr. Pisani came down the steps with a huge box in her arms.

Gina rushed to help. "Here, let me have it."

"Actually it's not heavy, just clumsy."

They untied the box together. The dress appeared under layers of wrapping paper.

“Oh my God,” Gina said. “It’s so elegant.”

Dr. Pisani looked at the dress. Slowly a smile appeared on her face. “You know what? I’m going to try it on and see how much weight I’ve gained in the past twenty-seven years.”

She unbuttoned her dress, let it drop to the floor, stood in her slip examining the wedding gown. “It was so well sealed there doesn’t appear to be any damage.”

Gina helped put her head through the bottom of the skirt, her arms into the sleeves. When it came time to close the twenty-four fabric-covered buttons in the back, Dr. Pisani filled the dress a little over two inches from making it fit properly.

She held the back closed with her hand, looked at herself in the mirror. “Not bad for an old lady and twenty-seven years. Michael would’ve been proud of me.”

“The gown is exquisite and you look absolutely magnificent.”

Dr. Pisani turned around. “I must agree with you, on the dress part. I’m glad I had it preserved. I always thought that some day my daughter might want to wear it, to keep the family tradition. But girls today seem to want their own dresses, want to make sure they keep up with the style.”

“Your dress has a classic design. It’ll always be in style.” She stared at Dr. Pisani for a while. Then she spoke in a soft voice. “Would you mind if I tried it on?”

“Of course not. Maybe it’ll give you some idea of what style you’d like.”



Diane let go of the back of the dress, removed her arms from the sleeves, wiggled out of the gown. She surrounded Gina, who had already removed her jeans and blouse, first with the bouffant slip

that she in her haste had neglected to put on, and then with the silk taffeta and lace.

When she stepped back to look at the result of her effort, she was in awe of the appearance of the future bride.

Gina looked in the mirror. Except for the fact that Gina was slightly shorter, the dress was a perfect fit. The neckline complemented her breasts and shoulders and the skirt, puffed out by the underslip, flattered her waist.

Diane fluffed the train, buttoned the two dozen buttons in the back. "These days they're smarter, they sew all these buttons over a zipper. Gives the same effect."

Gina continued to gaze into the mirror. She pressed her lips together.

"What's the matter, Gina?"

"Nothing. I'm just..."

"Now I know you better than that."

When Gina didn't speak, Diane knew why. But she just couldn't eke out the words Gina was expecting. She wouldn't say them.

The nerve of the girl! Where did she get...who did she think...how dare she...

But the dress had been sitting in a box, dormant, for over twenty-five years. Just because she loathed Salvatore Esposito didn't mean she had to take it out on his daughter. The words spurted reluctantly from her lips. "Do you want to wear it?"

A flood of tears burst out of Gina. So many that Diane handed her some tissues. Didn't want her to stain the dress.

Gina blew her nose, then looked at her with most grateful eyes. "I would be thrilled, honored, to wear your dress."

"Well, I never did have a daughter. But if I had one, I would've wanted her to be just like you." She kissed Gina's forehead. "So let's have it shortened about an inch or so in the front and we'll wrap it up and you can take it home. You'll have to find a headpiece to go

with it. My tiara has turned yellow and the tulle that makes up the veil has disintegrated in some spots.”

“That’s the least. We’ll get one on Saturday, one that’ll go with the dress. I can’t wait to tell Michael. And my father.”

Diane was once again reminded that Gina was Salvatore Esposito’s daughter. Could she ever have dreamed that her wedding gown, preserved for her daughter who was not to be, would cover the child conceived by the top gangster in the country?



Why did Mr. Esposito drive all the way up to Westchester just to take them out to dinner Saturday? Gina no longer needed a wedding gown, had no reason to go to Brooklyn, have dinner with him there, so why did he come up? And why did he come alone, without Bruno? And what the hell was she doing sitting in the middle of the restaurant at the Ryetown Hilton with Gina and Mr. Esposito? Suppose someone she knew saw her there, with him.

During dinner Diane observed Gina holding her father’s hand, and Mr. Esposito kissing her fingertips. He occasionally caressed her cheek. He smelled of the kind of men’s cologne they sold in Bloomingdale’s. Diane couldn’t help noticing how well-groomed Mr. Esposito’s hands were, as if he had his nails manicured. Larry Cohen’s hands were always clean, too, but Larry’s hands were both literally and figuratively clean.

She found it mind-boggling how a man like Mr. Esposito, so kind, devoted, and tender to his daughter could be so ruthless and notorious in his business dealings, whatever they were. His affection for Gina was incredible. No wonder the girl couldn’t think him capable of being who he was. If Diane didn’t know better, she would’ve had difficulty believing it herself.

What made a man like Salvatore Esposito choose the life he had? She had been taught not to judge a person unless in the same position. In what position had Salvatore Esposito found himself? How

was he treated as a child, in school, by his friends, neighbors? Didn't Father Joseph grow up in the same environment? Why didn't he turn out the same way?



Sal had just placed their dessert order. Two chocolate parfaits for the ladies and a piece of lemon meringue pie for him.

Gina bent down, pulled a magazine from under her chair. She held the shiny crisp cover page in front of him, keeping her finger in one of the inside pages. "Hot off the press."

He read silently, *The Journal of Educational Research*.

She opened the page her finger had saved, and let him read that, too.

He read the title also without speaking. "The effect of using learning style as the first mode of instruction in developing division concepts." Pisani, Diane P., and Esposito, Eugenia L. He flipped through the article. Charts, tables and graphs dispersed within the text. His eyes filled up. He wanted to hide his embarrassment in front of Diane so he leaned toward Gina, and kissed her face until he felt he had gained his composure.

"Gina, this is wonderful, the first time I ever saw your name in a magazine."

"It's not a magazine, Daddy, it's a professional journal, much more scholarly than a magazine. And," she took the journal from him and aimed it at Diane, "she's the one you should be kissing, not me."

Blood rushed for his lips.

"If it weren't for her," Gina said, "I would never have had this opportunity."

"Let's compliment and congratulate each other," Diane said, "Gina for doing an outstanding job as my assistant, me for having the good judgment to select her, and you, Mr. Esposito, for allowing her to stay with me last summer to help with the research."

She raised her wine glass. "To us."

He looked at Diane. "To us."

They clicked glasses.

Then Gina bent down again, took a package from under her seat. She began to unwrap it. "Daddy, I waited until now to show you a picture of the wedding gown I'm going to wear."

Even though Gina had told him she would wear Diane's gown, Sal was expecting a picture from a magazine, and was caught off-guard when she handed him the portrait.

Gina kept rattling on, apparently insensitive to how boring the details of a dress were to men. "See, Daddy, it has a beautiful neckline and is made of the finest material. The bodice is covered with lace and the dress was preserved so it looks brand new. And did you notice how Michael looks like his father?"

Sal, whose eyes never left the face of the bride in the picture, managed to say, "The resemblance is amazing."

"Daddy, don't you think Dr. Pisani was a beautiful bride?"

For the first time in Diane's presence he became audacious. "Why Gina, what do you mean *was*? Dr. Pisani is still a beautiful woman." He couldn't stop now. "And as I look at this picture I find it hard to believe she never got married again. I know how lonely I am without your mother." He shifted his eyes from the picture to Diane. "You must be lonely, too."

Her eyes flickered. She grasped her throat. "I, I never met anyone I loved like my husband."

Gina, with the same pixie face she had when announcing her engagement, said to Diane, "Michael told me he thinks Larry Cohen is in love with you."

Sal was just kicked in the gut, about to give up his dinner.

Diane looked flustered. "Just because my son is in love, he now thinks he's an expert on the subject."

"Michael says he can tell by the way Dr. Cohen looks at you," Gina said. "I'm surprised you were free to come to dinner with us tonight, I thought you might be going out with him."

Diane blushed. She had the same color on her face she had the first time he formally met her, standing in the doorway to her office, with the red sunrays making her glow. "He's at a medical convention. And besides, Gina, Larry and I know each other a very short time. In fact, the first time we ever went out together was the time we met your father at the opera."

He was pleased to hear that. Maybe the doctor took her straight home after the performance, left without going into her house or taking her to a candlelit restaurant. He sensed that Diane would like to change the subject. "Gina, you've had almost two glasses of wine, you're forgetting your manners. Dr. Pisani's personal life is none of your business."

"After Michael and I are married, I just don't want Dr. Pisani to be lonely. I want her to be happy."

"Gina, enough!"

Diane looked grateful to him for controlling her.

Shortly afterwards they left the hotel. Sal returned them to Diane's house where Gina was spending the night. He kissed his daughter, shook Diane's hand, careful to avoid her eyes. If he had looked into them, he would not have had the strength to leave.

He got into the car, drove away, sorry that Gina wasn't sleeping in the dorm that night. He could've returned her there first, then taken Diane home.

She was polite enough to have asked him in for a drink.

He would've said, "No, thank you, I have a long ride home."

When she asked, "Are you sure?" he would've hesitated, then said, "Well, maybe just a cordial, something sweet. Or a strong cup of coffee for the trip."

They would've entered the house together. He would've sealed the door to the outside world and they would be alone.

With her back toward him he would've helped her off with her coat. As his hands lifted the coat, his knuckles would've touched her shoulders. His brain would've commanded that his hands open, let the coat drop to the floor. His hands would now be free to grab her shoulders, spin her around, the coat tangled between their feet, and crush her in his arms, collapse her lungs so that she would have to beg him for air that only he could allow her to have.

He would keep her against him with his left arm, lift her chin with his right hand, support her head so he could explore her face with his lips, gently at first, gradually consuming her, eroding her face. He would...

The whizzing of a car on his left, and the unremitting honking of the horn of a car now passing made him aware that he had veered from the middle lane onto the shoulder. Both hands that were crushing Diane were off the wheel and he slammed on the brakes just in time to avoid crashing into an overpass.

The Mercedes stalled.

Damn the Germans.

Damn foreign cars.

He reattached both hands to the steering wheel and shook it. What the hell was wrong? The most powerful man in the country, yet a eunuch, a coward in front of her. Could always finagle, manipulate to get what he wanted, so why couldn't he pull this one off? He couldn't do it being tough, threatening; he couldn't do it being gentle and kind. Why was it that he could always have any woman he wanted, but not even get to first base with Diane? Didn't even know where to begin.

He stared motionless through the windshield. All he could see was Diane Pisani dressed as a bride.

The constant swish of passing cars brought him back in gear. He slowly got a grip on himself, turned the key in the ignition.

The car wouldn't start.

He tried again.

No luck.

Then he looked down. The car was still in drive. He shifted to park. Too used to not driving. Out of practice. The curse of having a chauffeur.

He restarted the engine, backed up, then returned to the highway. He couldn't figure out how he got back to Brooklyn that night, sorry he hadn't heeded Bruno's dire warnings not to drive up to Westchester by himself. For he didn't see the signs, the traffic lights.

He was guided home by radar.

CHAPTER 29



Sal couldn't wait for the wedding. This would be the wedding of all weddings. He'd make sure of it. As much as he himself had avoided a flashy lifestyle, for this event there'd be no expense spared. Not only was it a celebration of his daughter's marriage, but more important, a celebration of the union of his family with Diane's. He'd use the affair as an excuse to have as much contact with her as possible.



Diane couldn't wait for the wedding to be over. Every time she thought about having to appear in public or even in private for that matter with Mr. Esposito or anyone associated with him, she'd get a kink in her stomach.

On her desk was a copy of a letter the president of the college had written to Mr. Esposito thanking him for establishing the Carmela Esposito Memorial Scholarship for Teacher Education. Since the eight thousand dollar scholarship was to be awarded annually to a student who wished to be a member of the department she chaired, Diane thought she should write him a thank-you letter, too.

What should she do? To thank, or not to thank, that was the question. She sat at the word processor. She was just learning how to use it but that wasn't the reason the words wouldn't come. Her brain was

in neutral. Couldn't stop wondering which of Mr. Esposito's illegitimate operations or dummy corporations was funding that scholarship.

Maybe she could rid herself of her frustration by at least teasing him for a moment. So she decided to call.



Sal was holding a critical planning meeting. His calls were always carefully screened, but when he heard Diane was on the line, he decided to take the call in the kitchen. He excused himself. "Wedding plans."

The members of his crew smiled and congratulated him once again on the coming event.

Sal picked up the receiver, caressed it. The thought that Diane was at the other end made him feel as though he was on a plane that had just dropped ten thousand feet. He admitted he was a silly, middle-aged jerk, but couldn't help it.

He leaned his back on the refrigerator. "How are you, Diane?"

This was the first time he had addressed her by her first name, and after he said it, he pressed his lips to the transmitter.

She didn't respond for a few seconds.

"F-fine, how are you?"

Always so full of questions, answers, and suggestions for every occasion, he now became tongue-tied. He wanted to impress her with all those new vocabulary words he had mastered, but he couldn't think, searched his brain for some comment. "Busy with the wedding plans, but the experience is at least a happy one."

"It must be very difficult for you to force yourself to go through with this celebration, especially since it's so short a time after losing your wife."

"It's too bad Carmela couldn't share in this joyous occasion. She was so happy for Gina, and looking forward to doing all the things that mother-of-the-brides do."



Instinctively, as Diane always did with her students, she almost corrected him by saying, ‘mothers-of-the-bride,’ but caught herself in time. “That’s the reason I’m calling, Mr. Espo...” then choked out, “S-Sal.”

She’d gotten his message. He expected her to call him by his first name, also. He had asked her to call him Sal the day he first drove Gina to her house. When she said she’d do so after graduation, little did she know she wouldn’t be rid of him then. Not ever.

“I know how hard it is for you to be doing all the wedding preparations by yourself, and I really can’t help much with that part because I’m so far away and leaving for California shortly to present a research paper at a conference. But I’d like to do my share and help with the finances.”

Suppose she was wrong, suppose he’d accept. With all the pretentious nonsense Gina had told her he was planning for the wedding, even paying a small part of the expenses would cost her a fortune.

“Diane, I appreciate your offer. It gives me great pleasure to provide this wedding for the kids. I’m so...eh, they’re so in love, so happy, I couldn’t hear of taking anything from you. I won’t have you pay for anything, everything’s been taken care of. All I want you to do is have the best time of your life.”

How she dreaded the whole affair! “Well, I can at least pay for the rehearsal dinner.”

“Not even that, it’s already been arranged.”

What a control freak! “There must be something.”

“Please, Diane. Just be there and help me get through this alone.”

For a moment she almost pitied him, considering how difficult it was to have lost his companion at this particular time in his life. “Sal, if there’s anything you want me to do to help, please tell me.”

“I will. And, Diane, thanks for asking. And for calling.”

“Goodbye, Sal.”

She hung up first feeling guilty about wanting to needle him. Then her guilt disappeared as it occurred to her that Mr. Esposito was actually not paying for the wedding at all. The people who were paying for it included anyone who had ever placed an illegal bet; visited a house of prostitution; paid dues to unions controlled by organized crime; bought anything transported by the trucking businesses the mob owned; used illegal drugs; and consumers who had passed on to them the extortion money demanded by the mob on legitimate businesses. All Americans in one way or another, maybe most people in the world paid the hidden tax inflicted by organized crime and were, therefore, paying for the wedding. Mr. Esposito probably even owned or had part interest in the hotel that would cater the wedding and the restaurant where the rehearsal dinner would be held.

What was it that Sal Esposito didn't own?



A few days before the wedding there were a few matters Sal had to take care of personally. He went through his files and pulled out a business card. The Royals. He dialed the number printed on the card and asked for Richie.

A young-sounding voice came on. "The Royals, Richie speakin'."

"Hello, Richie, this is Sal Esposito."

"Oh, uh, h-how are you Mr. Esposito? W-what can I do for you?"

"You've been hired to play for my daughter's wedding."

"Y-yes, I know, and it's a great honor."

"How much am I paying you for your services?"

"T-twelve hundred, Mr. Esposito. But if that's too much, w-we could work out a deal."

"No, it's fine, but how'd you like to double that amount?"

"Uh. Why sure. W-what do you want me to do?"

"Now listen very careful Richie. Carefully, Richie. I don't want you to make any mistakes."

"S-sure, Mr. Esposito, just spill it. I won't make no mistakes."

“Any mistakes, Richie.”

“That’s what I said. I won’t make no mistakes.”

“Eh, what’s the use?” He scratched his forehead. “Do you know the part where the bridal party is introduced and they all dance, and then the parents of the newlyweds dance? I don’t know exactly how it goes, but do you know what I mean about the parents?”

“Hold on a sec, Mr. Esposito, I-let me get your file.”

Sal examined his reflection in the glass cover of his bookcase while he waited.

“Mr. Esposito, accordin’ to my papers won’t you and the mother-of-the-groom be the only parents dancin’?”

“You’re on top of it, Richie. Now listen carefully. Are you listening?”

“I’m listenin’.”

“There’s double money in it for you if you make sure that when I dance with the mother-of-the-groom, nobody else is dancing and you make that dance lasts at least five minutes. At least five minutes and not a second less. Now you make sure you arrange that. Got it?”

“I, I got it.” Richie paused. “Is there any particular song you’d like us to play?”

He didn’t answer right away. “Yeah, good question. Something from the thirties or forties or...something nice and slow and romantic. Let me think. How about, ‘I Only Have Eyes for You’. Do you know that song?”

“Sure do, and if I didn’t, I’d find it for you.”

“And at least five minutes. And if you know what’s good for you, you won’t forget it. I don’t like being disappointed.”

“I won’t for...”

Sal hung up. With that matter taken care of, there was one more thing he had to do. He had to dial the number on the second business card. “Visions,” it said, “where our pictures make your wedding a dream.” He’d tell the owner, Carl Nicoletti, to hire extra people to take triple the amount of pictures, triple the movies, whatever the

cost, and lots of pictures of the mother-of-the-groom alone, and with him. And to put whoever he had to on Sunday after the wedding to develop the pictures so they'd be ready on Monday. No later.

He was in a hurry to get the wedding pictures. The one picture he had cut out of the newspaper, of Diane at her husband's funeral, was too small, and by now it was tattered at the edges. Once he had the wedding pictures, he would set up his movie projector and screen, arrange the stills in collages all over the house. No one would think it odd for him to have pictures of his daughter's wedding displayed. And no one would think anything of having pictures of her mother-in-law at the wedding, either.

Before he picked up the phone, he re-read the wedding invitation already framed and placed on his desk.

Mr. Salvatore Esposito

requests the honour of your presence

at the marriage of his daughter

Eugenia Louise

to

Mr. Michael Paul Pisani, Jr.

son of

Dr. Diane Pisani...

He stopped reading at that point. The rest didn't matter. His eyes darted back and forth several times to the first and last lines.

Salvatore Esposito and Diane Pisani.

Salvatore Esposito and Diane Pisani.



The morning of the wedding Sal woke up exhilarated. His big day, the one he'd been planning so long. Before leaving his bedroom, he held his tuxedo up against him and looked in the mirror. Good-looking guy, if he had to say so himself. His hair was still thick and curly even if it was getting gray at the temples. He might take a cue from his late father-in-law, try Grecian Formula.

He tilted his head a bit. That cleft made him look like a Cary Grant-type leading man.

He was still thinking about how good he looked when he went downstairs for breakfast. Gina hadn't come down yet, and it was almost lunchtime. She'd been looking a little disturbed over the past month, and he was worried about her. She was probably anxious about the wedding, a perfectly natural reaction, so he decided to check on her. He went upstairs and knocked on her door.

Many seconds passed with no response.

He knocked again.

When she told him to come in, her voice was flat. He entered her room. The blinds were drawn so tightly that even though it was a sunny day where light could seep through, the room remained dark, somber.

He couldn't believe what she looked like. Never saw her look grim before. Still in her nightgown, sitting in the middle of her bed, her arms around a pillow which pushed her knees against her chest.

"Do you want to change your mind and stay with your Daddy? It's still not too late." He plopped into a green velvet tub chair.

"The marriage isn't what's upsetting me, I'm not going to change my mind about that. It's the wedding and a lot of other things."

"The wedding?"

"Yes, I'm only going along with this wedding reception because Mom would've wanted it. You know I always wanted a small, inti-

mate affair, especially that it hasn't even been a year since Mom died. You're the one who wanted this big extravaganza."

"You're my only daughter, I wanted it for you."

"No, you didn't, you wanted it for you. It's what *you* wanted."

"Gina, everything I ever did, I did for you."

"For me? Well, that shows how little you know me."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Daddy, I love you, and don't want to hurt you, promised myself I'd never abandon you. But I have to tell you, your lifestyle, ever since I heard about it, offends me."

"What do...?"

"Let me finish. It's supposed to be my day, so let me talk."

He was about to get up, but what he could see of her stare in that dark room forced him to remain in the chair.

"It's taken me months to sort this all out. I'm a classic example from my psychology textbook. I've gone through denial, anger, frustration, the attempt at understanding, but no matter how I try to rationalize, I can't accept what you do. Maybe some girls would be proud of it, shove it under the carpet, enjoy the financial benefits, but not me.

"Michael and I have our own jobs now and we'll live within our means. I don't want to seem ungrateful because I know that even with my scholarship you gave me the extra support for my education which made the job I have possible. In the past year I've been too busy to think, suppressed my thoughts, refused to believe any of this nightmare could be true. I felt sorry for you since Mom died because I knew how much you missed her. But since graduation, I've been home, away from all my distractions, and had the time to mull everything over clearly and objectively.

"I finally realized that it was you who abandoned me. You abandoned everything that means something to me, all my principles, my values, and for what? For power. To be in control. That's what you

always wanted, you'd do anything for it. And because you'd do anything for it, it's controlled you.

"I'm embarrassed, and frankly disgusted. I'm not going to judge you, only God can do that. He's the One who could never leave you. But I can't condone anything you do or are associated with.

"I know you mean well, but good intentions aren't enough. I didn't tell Michael about your wedding present." She got out of bed, took the thick, sealed white envelope out of her drawer. "I'm going to give it back to you because no matter what you do, how you may try to force it on me, I, and I'm sure Michael, will never accept it. Keep it in a place you pass often to remind yourself why you still have it." She twisted the envelope, crumpled it, and shoved it in his hand.

Why had his hands suddenly turned to ice?

"I don't want my children having to go through the same shock I went through when I found out that you, their grandfather, is a Mafia don, the *capo di capi*." She threw herself back into the bed and cried into the pillow. She lifted her head. "This hurts me more than it hurts you, Daddy, because I really love you. But after today, I'm not going to see you anymore. Being with you all the time gives the appearance that I approve your behavior. If and when you decide to give it all up, then things can be different between us."

Wasn't this what Carmela had warned him would happen? Ridiculous. She had too many drugs swimming around in her when she said it. Even Gina wasn't serious, just had too much nerves over the wedding. Maybe she also had taken something that didn't make her know what she was talking about.

Gina's howling cry was now a wail.

The wrinkled envelope tingled in his hand. But he wouldn't bother trying to get her to change her mind because she was talking from the top of her head, didn't mean it.

Sal returned to his bedroom. He'd think about their conversation at another time. The subject would never come up again anyway. He

didn't want his day ruined more than it had already been. Needed to take a rest before preparing for the wedding.



Theresa Petrillo had managed to enter the church early to get a good view of the entire ceremony. Flowers were everywhere, and so were people, just about everybody in the neighborhood. With that crowd she was sure Sal wouldn't notice her. Only the first two pews on both sides of the center aisle were empty and ribboned off. People were lining up in the side aisles for the spectacle, the smiles of the curiosity-seekers contrasting with the serious, searching faces of men in dark suits who she was sure were from the FBI.

As printed on the program before the Proper of the Mass, the organist was performing Bach's "Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor." The music sounded very complicated.

One of the ushers escorted a striking redhead, who flowed down the aisle in a peach chiffon dress, to a seat in the front row on the right side, the side traditionally reserved for the groom's family. The congregation became silenced, then whispered among themselves. If the woman had a husband, he would have escorted her there. Her misgivings were confirmed by the fact that Sal needed to lie to her. The mother-of-the-groom was not the ugly, fat professor that Sal tried to explain away but an elegant lady, extremely attractive and dignified, and Theresa couldn't imagine Sal not being completely captivated by her.

Theresa faced the altar. Hadn't done so since her Confirmation, when she swore to be a soldier of Christ. She experienced a sense of peace, the first time in her life she felt really free.

She was forty-seven years old, in the throes of hot flashes, too late to have a family of her own. Now it was the end of the Seventies. Many women her age and older were going back to school, making new lives and opportunities for themselves. Not too late for her to do it, too, and on her own, continue to work in the beauty shop and

take college courses at night until she became the accountant she always knew she could be, defined by her brains instead of her breasts. Time to give up dead-end living.

She stood up, turned around, and looked straight ahead, eyes on the door. She edged her way to the side aisle, amused by the number of women pushing for her seat, and was out of the church before Sal and his daughter began to proceed to the altar.



The sound of the organ playing the wedding march made Sal choke up. Gina was calming him instead of the other way around.

Sal tried to smile as he and Gina proceeded slowly down the aisle. They were applauded by the crowd, the usual custom for the exit of the newlyweds, not the entrance of the bride and her father. Then, he had to admit he was no ordinary father.

Gina's dress rustled and rustled. It must have sounded the same the day Diane was married. Did she smell of Joi, the way Gina did? How did Diane's father feel when he gave her away? Was he insanely in love with her future mother-in-law?

When they reached the altar, he lifted and folded back Gina's veil, kissed her, and handed his daughter to Diane's son. He entered the pew on the left side of the center aisle, occupied only by his mother-in-law, and greeted Diane with a smile. She returned his smile, then faced the altar.

His eyes roamed around the church settling once again, as at Carmela's funeral, on the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her bare foot crushing the head of a serpent. After staring at the statue for a while, he looked again at Diane. How he worshipped her, wanted to sit next to her. But there she was, once more, on the other side of the aisle.

He didn't pay much attention to the ceremony, the vows, the nuptial Mass, Joey's brief homily. So many flash bulbs going off, lights for the movie cameras shining on everyone. All very distracting.

After the bridal party received Holy Communion, he approached Diane. With her hand interlocked with his, he led her to the altar. They knelt down together. Sweet Jesus, this is the way it would be if they were having their nuptial Mass.

Joey came toward them. He raised the host first in front of Diane. "The body of Christ." She answered, "Amen," took the Eucharist in her extended hands, one over the other, then took the upper hand to place the host in her mouth. When did they start doing that? He was as confused as he was at Carmela's funeral. Then Joey raised the host in front of him. "The body of Christ." What was he supposed to answer? When he didn't say anything, Joey whispered, "Amen," and Sal promptly repeated it. He opened his mouth and Joey rested the host on his tongue.

He and Diane stood up and faced each other. All they needed were the vows and they'd be married. His destiny. Together. For life! He returned her to the pew, looking forward to riding with her to the wedding reception, alone in their limousine.

When that time arrived, they didn't say much to each other. They congratulated each other, agreed that the bride and groom made a handsome couple and would be happy. He tried to think of excuses to see her after tonight. He complimented her on her appearance, and she did tell him that he looked quite charming in his tuxedo.

So many guests filled the reception that he and Diane had to keep circulating. He, somewhat upset by the scene with Gina, took some encouragement and comfort in the fact that Dr. Cohen was not at the reception.

After over an hour of picture taking, the bridal party finally arrived. Richie cut off the band, approached the microphone, and requested that the guests move from the cocktail reception to the dining room.

The doors to the main ballroom slid open. The guests gasped. Flowers covered every inch of wall space. Pink lace tablecloths, matching silk napkins fanned out for the occasion, fine china and sil-

ver, candelabra and floral centerpieces on every table. Engraved menus with a variety of choices. Dozens of crystal chandeliers suspended from high-arched, frescoed ceilings. Two white doves were let out of their cages to fly around the room several times before being captured and re-caged.

The guests drifted to their assigned tables.

Sal watched the ballroom from the side room where the bridal party and immediate family members gathered.

Richie had removed his jacket, revealing The Royals sequined in royal blue across the top of his puffy long-sleeved, white satin shirt. He pulled the mike boom. First he announced the entrance of the ninety-eight-year-old great grandmother of the groom, Angelina, who, escorted into the room by the maitre d', was wearing an elegant mint green dress with matching gloves, shoes, and handbag. Her silver hair had been meticulously prepared for the affair.

Angelina, the matriarch, received a tumultuous round of applause. Her broad smile and regal nods told everyone how much she enjoyed the adulation.

Diane's parents came up north for the wedding of their only grandchild. Richie introduced them to receive their share of applause.

Diane entered on Sal's arm. The room shook as the crowd welcomed them.

Richie introduced the members of the wedding party, and finally, the newlyweds.

He put his mouth close to the mike. "Now, for their first dance as Mr. and Mrs. Pisani, Gina and Michael have chosen the song, 'Feelings'."

They danced for a while. Then he and Gina danced to "Daddy's Little Girl". While the groom's relatives and guests applauded, the bride's side went wild. Cheered, whistled, yelled.

Michael and Diane were invited to dance with each other, and soon the wedding party joined them.

Richie caught Sal's eye, kept looking at him while nodding. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, we request that the bridal party clear the dance floor so that on this happy occasion, the father of the bride may dance with the mother of the groom."

His moment had arrived. His heart skipped a beat, then a few more as he approached Diane, took her hand, and led her to the center of the dance floor.

The music started. He pulled her toward him. He encircled his right arm around her waist, moved her even closer, staring into those bronze eyes.

At first she appeared stiff, but as they started to dance, she blended with him.

He couldn't even think.

Diane was in his arms. He was going to have his full five minutes.

He didn't care who was watching, could hardly hear the music. The Royals could've played a Sousa march, and he wouldn't have cared. All he knew was how wonderful it felt to have Diane's body against his. His lips touched her hair, and he kept them there.

After what had to be the fastest five minutes ever, Richie requested that the guests all join in the dancing. The lights were dimmed as Sal and Diane continued to dance. With her pressed so tightly against him, it was easy to forget he always had to be so careful in her presence not to reveal his true feelings. His lips moved from her hair to her temple, then to her cheek. Her perfume was making him light-headed. She kept moving slowly under his lead, still with his mouth on her cheek, his breath pulsing down her neck. When the music stopped, he didn't let go of her. Instead, he succumbed to his desire to slide his lips from her cheek to her mouth. They were almost there when the lights came on again.

Richie's announcement that Father Joseph Esposito, uncle of the bride, was about to give the benediction forced Sal, clinging to Diane's hand, to lead her back to her table. He looked at her once again, released her hand, and returned to his side of the room.



Joseph's words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." brought Diane back into the evening.

As the best man proposed the toast, Diane was grateful for being able to clutch her champagne glass, squeezing it to take her mind off Sal Esposito's behavior.

Maybe he was thinking of his wife as they danced. Of course. That was the dance he should've shared with his wife. Mrs. Esposito was the one he was seeing and dancing with, the target of that ardent, amorous stare.

During the meal, Diane visited all her guests' tables, careful to greet everyone.

So many relatives and friends. Among them the never divorced but now widowed Carla and her children, Linda and Paul with their families.

The presence of Diane's three college chemistry classmates made it a nostalgic reunion. Fiona had recently married for the first time, a surgeon like herself but ten years her senior, Dr. Seth Goldstein. She had told Diane that she didn't want to accelerate her mother's death by the union, so she waited until after Mrs. O'Leary died to marry.

Patty Collins, a research chemist, and Dr. Philomena Garofalo came with their spouses. Several people associated one way or another with the college including Ruth Finkelstein, Helen Ferguson, and Francesca O'Brien seemed to be having a pleasurable evening.

Absent were Eileen and Phil McGrew, who were traveling throughout the United States touring the national parks.

Diane made a special point of visiting with her grandmother. "Are you enjoying yourself, Grandma?"

Grandma Angelina kept looking over to the other side of the room. "Those men over there. How come they're all sitting alone with no women?"

Diane couldn't believe how shrewd the almost centenarian was. Always complaining about her eyesight, she was able to see more than most.

"I don't know Grandma, maybe they're all priests."

Her grandmother was still examining them. "They're not priests. They're very strange."

Diane looked across the room at those men who, one by one, brought their chairs over to sit with Sal to show their respect. She looked at her watch. It read 9:55. Thank God, only a few hours more.



Sal was in a dancing mood. Since Diane was occupied, he went up to Gina. "Let's dance, sweetheart." He kept snapping his fingers and swaying.

She gave him a look with someone else's eyes. "Maybe you don't get it or don't want to get it, Daddy, so let me say it again. This is for real, not your make-believe world. I'm going through the ritual, I'm being polite to our guests. But this farce is your last hurrah. Go dance with the wife of one of your charming buddies." She showed her teeth, turned around, and moved to the next table.

Jesus Christ, she was serious. He blew it off earlier, but she was really leaving him.

Something was wrong with his nervous system, and his heart was straining but his blood wouldn't budge. He was never a wine drinker, or much of a drinker at all, but he needed a glass. Right now.

He finally understood why his father drank.



The Royals played a disco number. The entire bridal party got up to dance, and Diane noted that Father Joseph was alone at the dais, and her promise to him. She excused herself from her grandmother to join him. "I always keep my word."

“Well, even if you don’t, it’s really good to have a chance to speak with you, Diane, especially now that we’re related. Tell me, how are you surviving?”

She considered his question. The whole affair had only been a few hours, not much in a lifetime. She glanced at Michael and Gina making their rounds visiting guests’ tables. They were a marvelous couple but that didn’t change what she felt about her presence. “I look around this room and all I can think of as the saying goes is, ‘Nothing succeeds like excess’. And I’m sure you know I’d rather be somewhere else.”

“For a woman who’d rather be somewhere else, you have a special glow tonight.”

She didn’t bother covering her smile. “That’s because I have a secret.”

“Well, as you know, I’m good at keeping secrets.”

Should she tell him or make up something? It would be difficult for someone with her upbringing to lie to a member of the clergy. Besides, she had to tell somebody. “This morning Larry Cohen asked me to marry him.”

Joseph put his open hand on his chest and opened his eyes wide. “And?”

“Uncle Joey, I’m really going to have to think about it.”

“By the way, where is he?”

“I asked him to stay home, had so many social obligations today I didn’t want to spend the whole day ignoring him. Besides, this was something I wanted to deal with by myself.”

“I never met him so I can’t give you my opinion, whatever it’s worth, but marriage is such an important step. I know that when you think about it, Diane, you’ll make the right decision.”

“All I know right now is if I decide to marry him, I’ll want you to perform the ceremony. With a rabbi, of course.”

“A sign of the times.” He took her hand and kissed it. “If you say yes to him, he’ll be the luckiest son-of-a-bitch. And if you want a

jealous man to perform the ceremony, with Larry Cohen or whomever you want to marry, wherever I am, I'll be there for you."

She hugged him. "Thank you, Uncle Joey, thank you."



Sal was approaching euphoria. His dictionary might say he was intoxicated, inebriated. Maybe he'd be better off without all those new words in his head. But he couldn't be in too bad a state yet because his memory was still sharp, and so was his vision.

He watched his brother and Diane chatting and embracing. Why was it that she always seemed so comfortable talking to Joey? When she was at ease, she radiated a spontaneity that made her even more beautiful. He envied his brother for being able to elicit such a wonderful response. With him she was just pleasant and gracious.

His eyes followed her from the dais to her guests' tables. The lingering imprint of her body against his gave him a gush of energy. He rose from his chair, bored with the gibberish he was hardly listening to, and went after her.

She was chatting with a balding, middle-aged man on the groom's side of the ballroom.

Sal interrupted by whisking her hand, her small beaded peach evening bag landing on the floor, and pulling her to the dance floor. He whirled her across the room, with several couples ducking their furious advance. He stopped in front of the band.

He kept twirling her around while he shouted to Richie. "Play my kind of music."

The musicians shuffled several sheets. They began playing not together at first but eventually catching up with each other, "My Funny Valentine," and he had Diane firmly in his grip once more. She was soft, delicious. She seemed so willing to move compatibly with him.

First he hummed the song in her ear, then sang the words he could remember and improvised the rest. Finally, he said, "What're you going to do now that Michael's married?"

She hesitated. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I have plans for us."

"Us?" She stopped dancing.

He moved her along with him again.

"Yes, Diane, you're going to be by yourself now. You're going to need someone."

She stood still. He took her up against him. She remained rigid.

"As it says in the song, how'd you like each day to be Valentine's Day?"

"What are you rambling about?" Her face picked up the peach from the dress; her eyes blazed a lustrous henna.

"Valentine's Day's a day for romance. It's a day for diamonds, chocolates, giving women what they want. The opera. I could take you to the opera anywhere in the world, every night. Diane, I'm the one who can give you what you want."

He continued reading her face, sure the music had shifted downward several keys and become flat.

She was emitting a passion he had never seen in a woman before. "Mr. Esposito, you've had too much to drink. On those grounds I'll excuse you. And you don't know me, because if you did, you'd realize you don't have what I want."

She shoved him so hard he lost his balance, just about stayed on his feet, his momentary off-center position giving him a crimp in his back. Then she headed toward her table in a huff.

He straightened himself out. How stupid of him. She probably thought he just wanted sex, not marriage, traveling with her to show her off. He had stopped short of telling her what was really on his mind. Didn't actually come out with it, tell her he loved her.

He'd screwed up again. What could he do now? A few of his capos and soldiers came up to him. He rushed right past them, pushed aside some of the dancers.

He needed his brother.

Sal angled his way up the dais.

Joey took a sip of his drink. "What's the matter with you, Sal? I know how to read you and you're not looking so great."

He slipped into a chair next to Joey, and didn't speak. His brother didn't speak, either.

A waiter approached them to pour some wine but Sal shooed him away, poured a glass himself. He offered to refill Joey's drink, but Joey indicated no with his finger.

"I had a bad blow just now." He put his hand over his mouth hoping that if he'd muffle what he was going to say, it wouldn't sound so bad. "Gina told me she doesn't want to have anything to do with me. Can't accept my lifestyle."

"That doesn't come as a surprise."

"I don't understand how she could do this."

"I can. And Sal, as long as we're on the subject, I have something to tell you, too. Didn't want to tell you until after the wedding." He paused. "Why do you think I've been around here so long? You think it was an accident?"

"What accident?"

"I made an arrangement with the head of my province to be assigned to a parish near Gina where I could spend time with her. I've been there for over twenty-one years, but now that she's married, I feel my obligation to oversee her moral and educational development is over. And as I look at her, I know I did a good job."

"What are you trying to tell me, Joey?"

"That I'm being transferred."

"Transferred. Where?"

"To a retreat house run by the order in Oakland, just outside of San Francisco, but it's part of the Denver province."

“Oakland! You’re talking about California, three thousand miles away? And...and they have earthquakes there.”

“Yes, Sal. Three thousand miles away. And after dealing with this family, earthquakes would be a welcome relief.”

“Jesus Christ, why don’t they stretch the country six, ten thousand miles, build a retreat house at the end, send you there?” He supported his chin with his middle and index fingers. “When are you going?”

“In about six weeks.”

“That’s just great. Six weeks. What the hell is this, beat up on Sal day? Can’t you get out of it? I’ll give a large donation to the province to keep you here, who am I going to talk over my problems with?”

“Who are you going to talk over your problems with?” Joey scratched his head. “I tried this a long time ago and many times since. I’ll try it again.” Joseph’s serious blue eyes met his. “How about talking over your problems with your Creator?”

Sal could hardly move. He gathered just enough strength to signal the waiter to replace his empty wine bottle. He poured himself another glass but began drinking water instead.

“Let me ask your opinion about something.” He checked around to make sure no one could hear. “Tell me, Joey, your real impression of what kind of couple you think we made.”

“Undoubtedly the best-looking couple I’ve ever seen marching down the aisle, and I’ve seen many,” he responded instantly.

“I don’t mean me and Gina, I mean me and Diane, when we were dancing. I thought she really liked it, didn’t it look that way to you? When I first told you about her, you reminded me that I was a married man, but I’m not no...anymore, Joey.” His arteries started to fill up again. “I’m free and so’s she. Just now I told her I know what she wants but didn’t explain it to her, and do you know what she said? That I don’t have what she wants. Me. Sal Esposito. In a pig’s eye I don’t have it! Don’t you think if I explain to her that I love her, want to marry her, she’ll understand what I mean?”

Joey turned his head away.

Several bars of disco music stretched the length of a symphony, then another one, as Sal waited for his brother to answer.

After an endless wait, Joey turned toward him. His eyes lit up and his face followed. "I'm not a failure as a Redemptorist priest after all. Supposed to redeem people. I finally, how do you people say it, made my bones."

"Oh, no, Joey," he placed his hands over Joey's cheeks, "you're not a failure, you're a good priest."

Joey took his hands away from his cheeks but didn't let go. "It's always been said that the Lord works in strange ways, and I've witnessed much of this myself. But I've been so dense that it never occurred to me until this very moment that Diane Pisani, that woman, would be the one to make me keep my promise to Mama."

"Mama? What does she have to do with this?"

"Never mind. How can I put this? Give me a second." Joey took his time glancing around the room. "You and Diane have so much in common. You're both bright, attractive, Italian-American, have good senses of humor, even, I heard, like the same kind of music. Could've had everything going for you."

"Could've?"

"I know you want me to tell you something encouraging, but all I can say is the truth. The comedy is over, Sal, it's really over. It's been a real ride, but now it's payback time. First of all, you're not free. You'll never be free as long as you're wedded to the *omerta*. And look, Sal, we're sitting up here at the dais, get a good view from here. I want you to look down for a moment."

"At what?"

"If you look at this room, you can see your family and Diane's." Joseph finally let go of his hands, and in doing so, extended his arms to point to the opposite sides. "There's a wide dance floor in between."

Sal turned his head toward the dance floor.

“Take a good look at the people on the left, those who give you respect—would-be save-for-you drug dealers, murderers, the bosses of major crime families, your business associates. You know the story. You got what you wanted, to be head of all of them. On the right are ordinary, law-abiding people—Diane’s colleagues from the college, other professionals, people with culture.

“Those on the left made certain choices in life, and those on the right made theirs. They had reasons for their choices, reasons that are complicated, but don’t matter now. What matters is that they represent different values.”

Joey looked at him much the same way he did many years ago, when he warned him not to join the mob. Then with a knife, Joey made a long indentation in the tablecloth. It brought Sal back to the line his brother had drawn with his finger on the red chenille bedspread in the room they shared so many years ago.

“You chose the left, Sal. Just like the dance floor, that choice placed a chasm between you and Diane. It will always keep you apart because your choice has created a situation where she could never choose you.”

Never.

The word was violent, striking him more fatally than a bullet from a mob hit. Never to have dinner alone, walk on the beach holding hands. Never to be able to caress her, tell her how much he loved her. Never to share worries, dreams, grow old together.

How would he be able to tolerate those inevitable family gatherings where she would be present—baptisms, birthdays, Christmas, communions, graduations? She’d be polite but aloof and he would be forced to behave the same way, except that his guts would have more twists in them than nature had already provided.

And what if, God forbid, she ever got married again! He’d have to attend the wedding and suffer watching her and another man take their vows, smile at each other, and kiss. And could he tolerate or

even survive their honeymoon? His throat was already closing up as he began to feel what it was like to be crucified, to suffocate.

Why was something he didn't think he was paying attention to at the time now coming into his head? When Carmela was speaking her last words, didn't she say that for her the worst cross was suffering the pain of loving someone who didn't love her? He could hear those words as though she had just said them. Was she in the room?

His eyes drooped to the dance floor again, at that ever-present line, the chasm Joey called it. He was the bird all right, dethroned, fallen from power, eclipsed by a bird of a different breed. For now it was Diane Mary Pinto Pisani who was head of organized crime, in control of his entire being, with the power to ask and receive anything from him. She had told him the first time they met that all "those people" had to look forward to was death or prison.

She was wrong.

It was both.

Without her he was doomed to suffering a living death like Carmela's, and an eternity next to her in the ice-cold mausoleum. With nothing.

Nothing.

And he was already imprisoned by his oath.

Then from the dais his eyes drifted toward Gina and Michael. He watched them visiting their guests at the tables. They were already on Diane's side of the chasm, with Gina sheltered by Diane's dress.

"Talk to your Creator," Joey had said. What did he have to lose? Even Gina told him his Creator couldn't leave him.

It had been many years since he'd prayed, so many he couldn't recall the last time. But now he found himself praying once again.

As his eyes continued to trail his daughter and son-in-law, he prayed for a child from this marriage. And he desperately wanted a girl. She would have her father's eyes, and as tradition dictated, be named after her paternal grandmother. Then he'd be able to say pub-

licly, "Diane, I love you. Come to me, let me hug you. Give me a kiss, tell me how much you love me."

He would spoil her, cuddle her, take her to the playground, the zoo, the movies. Even to the opera.

With an upbeat rhythm The Royals relentlessly poured out their music. Guests were dining, dancing, laughing, the joy of the celebration chipping away at his heart.

The drummer played a roll.

An announcement was forthcoming.

The throbbing drum transported Sal from the dais back to his parterre box at the opera.

He looked down at the stage, viewing Pagliaccio with vision that had now become translucent. The clown was standing in a blood-stained, white satin costume. He dropped his blood-drenched knife to the floor, and announced to the audience, "*La commedia è finita.*"

The comedy is over.